



Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

Fictionwise

www.Fictionwise.com

Copyright ©2007 by Jonathan Lowe

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

A HELPING HAND

(originally published in *Easyrider* magazine)

It happened fast. Josh Alford's new Heritage Softtail had just topped 60 MPH on the Old Sonoita Highway south of Tucson when a stray cow decided to cross the road fifty yards ahead. Hearing the intermittent slide of wheels on dirt, the huge spotted heifer stopped in the middle of the narrow span and turned toward the approaching motorcycle. With a look of terror it tried to bolt forward, but not fast enough to prevent the left crash bar of the Harley from swiping its rear flank. Braying in pain, its muscle pulled and gashed, the animal hobbled headlong into the low thickets of creosote which had been its destination.

For the motorcycle's part, the encounter had destroyed any final attempt at tracking, causing a total loss of stability. So at the end of a forty yard stretch of tire tracks—and after two distinct slidings and corrections—the tracks became a swath of dirt, as if a plow had gone through. A furrow dug by the protruding chrome along the center of the disturbance pointed like an arrow toward the wreck at the base of a palo verde tree beyond. There, beside the twisted front end of the bike, lay Josh, face down, unmoving. The Harley's engine grunted twice more and died as silence returned to the desert.

After a moment there was a twitch in Josh's left hand. Fingers fingered the air. Finally his head turned and his eyes opened to stare back at the place where the cow had vanished.

Not a sign of movement, or even a solitary moo of protest or pain. The only clue to the incident was that fishtailing track he'd made in braking down to thirty, and the sick wobble and slide as he went down after contact. The damned beast had appeared suddenly, and just as suddenly disappeared, probably to lick its leg wound or chew its cud. Maybe Josh was already forgotten.

He sat up, and felt himself. Nothing seemed broken. Yet if he'd gone forward another five feet, and hadn't braked, the story might have been different. The palo verde might have ended him. As it was, he was lucky. A sandy side wash balanced a ledger that his foolhardy recklessness weighted on the other side.

He cursed and stood to his feet, surveying his downed bike at last. Only four hours ago it had been in the showroom as pretty as a magazine layout. Now, with just under a hundred miles on the odometer, and heaps of dirt glutting its once shiny engine fins, it had a twisted fender, a collapsed crash bar, and a bent clutch lever. *What would Alison say?* he wondered. Probably the same things she already had, except this time she'd have her mother join in the chorus ... a dirge or ditty of I-told-you-sos. What a fool to ride it down a dirt road at such speed.

He knelt beside the bike and tried to lift it, but couldn't. He strained, this time succeeding in lifting it two inches off the ground. Suddenly he remembered something the salesman had muttered about its weight versus his own: "One thing, partner," the man had almost whispered after the deal was done. "You ain't big, and this bike, it's, well, heavy. So if God

forbid you drop it out in the yard or somethin', you may need some help gettin' it up."

Heavy? He had sensed that, especially at low speed. It was, after all, a big bike for a little guy. But it was a beauty, and could hit a hundred twenty on the highway with a ride that bellowed freedom like an iron stallion. Enough power to stay ahead of those tailgaters who'd ridden the bumper of his smoking Honda all the way to his retail job selling evaporative coolers while his wife pecked and his mother-in-law plain old henpecked. Enough power to weave around those Zeros, as he called them ... those impatient fools with zero tolerance on their way to some single's bar or ball game.

The enemy.

He looked both ways along Old Sonoita highway, and frowned. This old dirt road was good for nothing since they'd paved Highway 83 somewhere to the west. No reason for traffic to use it anymore. People in a hurry to get to Sonoita, and the cooler temps there, would use 83. It was a straighter shot. No curves and dips, and no gravel to chip your windshield. What made this a great motorcycling road for, say, a BMW GS, also made it damn foolish for his dream machine, just as it was for retirees in their lumbering Winneabagos.

A rancher, that was his best bet. He spotted a side road ahead, like a driveway beside a sign which read OPEN RANGE. After setting the gas pet cock to Off, he took his Harley's keys and set off at a brisk pace.

The narrow driveway rose up and over a hill as he walked quickly along it. Near the summit he glanced back, already

half-expecting someone to be hoisting his Hog into a pickup truck with a block and tackle. Would it be stolen before he could make the first payment? He'd already had his first wreck, and Alison and her mother hadn't even figured out his can't-afford-a-baby-now excuse yet. They were still busy learning the old Honda's quirks ... like that sudden pull to the left when the brakes were applied sharply. Or how the odometer made a foreboding clicking sound now that it had turned over the big numbers ... with all those zeros staring like eyes.

He noticed the dirt drive was cleared in places at the top of the hill to reveal a paved surface beneath. Odd, he thought, a paved driveway leading from a dirt main road. He stopped and looked down at a strange round building half hidden beside a sloping hill of sand. Not a ranch house, certainly, but what? He couldn't see any doors or windows in the edifice, which was like a circular ball rising from a mound of dirt. The top half of a rectangular building was just visible beyond it. So here were two house-sized structures, covered in some kind of dull metal, half buried in the middle of nowhere.

Spaceships?

He moved closer. Metal, yes. But with holes in a few places, with concrete showing in the holes. Marks like scrapes indented the metal too, in places. So only the surface was metal. Beneath was concrete, as whoever had tried to get inside had discovered. And beneath the concrete, *what?*

He climbed up on top of the round building from the back, where the sloping earth gave access. It was a perfect ball,

half buried, and still no indication of any door or hatch. What could it—

He laughed at himself as it came to him. He even remembered reading about these sites in the paper a few years back. Sure! It was an old Titan missile base, abandoned by the military back in the mid 70's when it became obsolete. There were a dozen sites like this out in the desert surrounding Tucson, and they'd been sealed in concrete for years, their warheads long removed and dismembered at Davis-Monthan Air Force base just south of town.

He climbed down and paused, thinking he heard something. Like a click. He cocked his head, listening.

Now what?

There it was again. Distinct but distant. Was it coming from the silo?

He put his ear against the rough metallic surface.

Nothing. His imagination, most likely. He looked up and saw the frayed end of a broken cable protruding from a hole in the metal hide above him.

Then suddenly another click.

He tried to imagine what might cause such a sound. Heat expanding the metal? A fissure in the concrete? Or a ratchet pulley lifting a Heritage onto a flatbed truck?

He ran up the hill. At the summit, breathless, he looked down at the lifeless stretch of dirt road beyond. In the ditch along it he could see his beloved Hog stretched out on its side as if in pain, a still life of candy red against the gray dirt.

"Like one'a them damned Hell's Angels ride," Alison's mother had said at seeing the photo layout in Cycle World. He'd

laughed at that, and not just because she didn't know her Harleys. Also because she didn't see the nursery which wouldn't be built until well after his payments were completed.

He walked back down for his jacket he's dropped, feeling easier now, and for good measure he put his ear once more to the metal hide of the unearthed control room. The clicking was louder this time, and followed by a humming sound as deep and resonant as a radial arm saw.

* * * *

From the top of the hill he did a slow 360 degrees, looking for ranch houses. Only sagebrush, barrel cacti, more low hills, and the distant peaks of the Santa Rita range stretched in front of him, no doubt crawling with tarantulas, Gila monsters, and Western diamondbacks. He guesstimated thirteen miles back to the nearest service station on the other side of I-10. A two or three hour hike in the approaching heat of noon, unless he could get over to 83 and hitch. Or maybe a driver would help him? *Hey buddy, can you help me lift my bike—it's out by an old Titan missile site where I just heard what sounds like a missile fueling itself.*

No. Better not to mention the sound in the silos. Just the cow. If he stuck with the cow, maybe the driver of that third or fourth car who saw him waving his arms like a maniac would stop, roll down the window a crack, and take pity. Otherwise, fat chance.

He thought he could see it, too ... 83 like a thin ribbon of asphalt two miles beyond the dull gray behemoth rising from the sand.

As he passed the thing he threw a rock which clanged off the top and skidded into the sand on the other side. Then he cursed when he came to the edge of the clearing, meeting a low barbed wire fence. It was almost low enough to step over and seemed long rusted, but it had enough jagged curlicues to tear into his new leather chaps. He found another rock and was in the middle of trying to separate a strand of wire from one of the posts when he heard another kind of click behind him. And he jerked round to see the muzzle of a .45 automatic staring him in the face.

"Can't read signs?" the old geezer behind the gun said.

"Signs?" he replied, his voice cracking.

The old man was in his mid-seventies, had a pained look about his permanently wrinkled forehead. He wore baggy jeans, patched in places, and a Wrangler shirt rolled up above the elbow. A stain of sweat smiled at the armpit of the arm that held the automatic.

"You heard me. Signs, like the one back there at—" The old man had turned to point back at the hill, and stopped. "Well, I'll be damned, they did it again."

"Did what?" Josh asked, casually dropping his rock.

"Or maybe it was you did it." The .45 lifted up from the vicinity of his crotch to his face again. "You take down the chain with my sign on it?"

"What sign? Didn't see no damn sign."

The old man's crow's feet became folds of prickly skin. "Keep out sign," he said. "Means—"

"Yeah, I know what it means," Josh told him, feeling some anger amid his frustration. "But there was no sign, and I wrecked my bike over there, and I need help lifting it. Damn it."

The old man looked him over for five long seconds, then lowered his pistol. "Nice jacket," he said. He stuck out his other hand, and held it out. "Name's Kyle Sommers. This is my place, now."

They shook hands. "Your place?"

"Bought it for a retirement home three years ago. Went on vacation to see my son in Florida a month ago an' when I got back somebody had stolen my sand." He pointed with the barrel of the .45. "Used a dump truck, the bastards, and uncovered the top of the control room. It's high grade stuff, that sand. Air Force trucked it in here back in the late sixties when they built this place. Kept the place cool as a rabbit's burrow, see."

Or a rattlesnake's, thought Josh.

"What about water and electricity?"

"Got a storage tank underground, fed by a well. And a generator too. I burn candles mostly, though. Make my own. Actually I bought two sites, and use the other one for spare parts. One's a museum, you know, and a fourth was bought by some guy from New Jersey plans to turn it into a cafe. 'The Lame Duck,' he's gonna call it."

"So where do you get in? There's no windows or doors."

Kyle Sommers laughed. "There's a reinforced tunnel on the other side of that hillock. My pickup's over there too."

Josh cleared his throat. "Doesn't it get ... I mean ... *boring?*"

"No, not really. It's a kick fixing things up. Got me a TV, books. Plenty of peace and quiet ... and security, a' course. No chance of some punk comin' in and holdin' a knife to my throat. No chance at all. And if somebody like Osama drops the Big One, I guess I'll live through it, won't I? Will *you?*"

The old man's laugh was big and booming, and it meant he knew he'd be dying a peaceful death in his bed below tons of concrete and steel while those in Tucson and around the Air Base worried about crime and nuclear terror.

"So you're alone here, then."

It was more of a statement than a question, but Kyle nodded anyway. "Wife's in Florida with the kid. 'Cept he's no kid anymore."

"They ever been here?"

The old man looked up from his boot. "We're not on speaking terms anymore," he said evenly.

Josh shifted stance. "You reckon you could give me a hand with my bike? I ran off the road to miss a cow, and I can't lift it 'cause it's pretty heavy."

Old man Sommers flexed a muscle. "Sure, I reckon I could do that. I keep fit. You wanna have a look-see at my setup first? I don't get many visitors."

The tunnel from the iron outer doorway fifty yards behind the sand hill was darker than roof tar. "Nothing to bump your

head on," Kyle reassured him. "I removed the rusted ends of the reinforcement bars, and the unnecessary fixtures."

"What did you do?" Josh asked.

"I just told you, I—"

"No, I mean what did you retire from."

"I was an engineer," the old man explained. "A mechanical engineer." They continued walking in the dark. "You?"

"I ... ah ... I repair air conditioners for a living."

"Oh really? Well, maybe you can help me with mine, then."

Josh's voice faltered, his white lie echoing hugely in the close dark space. "What I mean is those small units. Window units. I don't know much about industrial models. When did you put it in?"

"Recently. Didn't need it before. You'll have a look anyway, won't you?"

He said nothing as the old man opened the inner lock. A sliver of light shot out the crack and widened as the two foot-thick steel door was pushed open.

"Watch your feet," Kyle warned.

He looked down at a metal plate which served as a bridge over the threshold. A deep crack ran along the wall all the way around the circular room. Giant springs were mounted at four points connecting the floor-platform of the room to the surrounding walls. On the platform sat an array of control consoles, two of which had operating monitors and blinking lights.

"Hey, you got it running. I expected..."

Josh paused, not knowing what he'd expected. Layers of dust twenty years old? Piles of Playboy magazines dating back

to the beginning of the Cold War? He certainly hadn't expected a fully functional control room set up like the Star Trek bridge, complete with assorted buzzing and clicking sounds. He half expected Spock to enter and proclaim it fascinating.

"Amazing," he concluded. "But that sound in the background, what is that?"

"That's the generator," Kyle replied. "Don't like to run it too much. Uses fuel. Mostly I use the candles, like when I get up to take a piss and need to aim." He walked around his mock bridge like Kirk giving a tour to a visiting Klingon emissary. "Those springs keep this room safe from shock waves—handle anything but a direct hit. The monitors give readouts of system functions. Temperature, humidity, that kind of thing. And silo observation."

Josh touched one of the monitor's screens. "But there ... there's a missile in there *now*."

"Just a tape for effect." The old man flipped a switch. "See, it's a television set this time. The Price is Right ... and it was." He laughed and flipped it again. An image of the clearing outside appeared. "Here's how I knew you were out there. Got a camera hidden, ran a cable through a fissure in the concrete below ground. It wasn't easy, believe me."

"I'll bet."

"Now, about that air conditioner ... you wanna lend me a hand? Then I'll help you with your bike." "Great. Can I use your bathroom first, though? Have to, well, take a leak."

Old man Sommers grinned and pointed to another opening on the far side of the control room. "Watch your feet, then straight ahead twenty yards or so."

Josh stepped onto another metal plate, and over the threshold into a second tunnel. "Will I need a candle?" he called back.

Sommers didn't answer, already engrossed at his monitors.

* * * *

He made his way up the narrow tunnel toward a glimmer of light at the end. *The other building*, he realized. The tunnel led to the rectangular structure he'd seen half buried in sand outside. And sure enough it opened up into a bedroom of sorts, with a single bare bulb in the center of a low stone ceiling supported by heavy iron pylons running vertically every six feet or so.

The walls looked thick. Maybe they were twenty feet thick. It certainly felt cooler in here than in the control room, and the sound of the generator was almost completely absent. He walked around the bed, which was really no more than a cot, with its thin soiled mattress visible beneath a mussed sheet. On the far side of the room was the toilet, open to the room, its lid up. *Not married, for sure*. Beside the toilet was a shower stall, then a bookcase, a dresser with a toy gyroscope on it, and what looked like a closet. A framed 8X10 glossy photo of a shirtless young man on a Galion crawler-tractor hung on the wall over the dresser. Behind the tractor in the photo were two large cement trucks with military insignia on

them, and behind these stretched the familiar sawtooth shapes of the Santa Rita mountains. He leaned closer for a better look. The man in the tractor held up one thumb and grinned. A bumper sticker atop the tractor's cowl read LIVE FAST, DIE YOUNG.

As he dribbled into the toilet bowl, careful of his aim, he stared back at the other door, hoping something in there might lend cheer to these otherwise bleak living quarters. Obviously the old man spent most of his time elsewhere in the complex, or he would have put up wallpaper, added some silk flowers, anything. But maybe he just wanted to keep it looking like the military installation it once was, though. It was, after all, a time-consuming hobby. Or obsession. He tried to imagine having such a place himself. What would Mother Starke say about that? He chuckled at the thought of telling her. *Hey, Edna, guess what? I bought me a missile bunker, and when the Big One hits you gonna be outside without a key. No grandson for you to poison against me, no ma'am. 'Cause I got the power now. Damn if I don't.*

He zipped up and reached down to drop the toilet seat, but stopped and smiled instead. It wasn't right, of course, to be thinking such thoughts. Alison deserved a baby if she wanted one so bad. It was true the world was becoming an overcrowded hellhole, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad if they pulled together. *Give Peace a Chance*. Wasn't that the slogan back in '68? What was he afraid of? A second motorcycle wreck might decapitate him—was a baby really so horrible?

Before flushing, he decided to take a peek in that other door ... the closet.

Looking up the tunnel he could see old Kyle busy at his consoles, maybe switching between Jeopardy, Oprah, and the Home Shopping Network in hopes of a newscast predicting Russia's conquest of Israel within forty-eight hours.

He slid the door open carefully, surprised by the size of what he thought was a closet. Beside the bent metal clothes rack was a sink, a table with a hot plate on it, and a larder stocked to the ceiling with canned goods. Cases of Hormel Chili (No Beans), Del Monte Fruit Cocktail, Campbell's Split Pea & Ham soup, and generic creamed corn. Next to the canned goods were cases of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese dinners, powdered milk, and a row of Hamburger Helper—the little helping hand with a smile across its palm as if to say *Have a Nice Day*. All in all, enough to feed a platoon for a month.

Beyond was a smaller card table with a battered game of solitaire laid out, half played. Klondike, from the looks of it. Something was framed on the wall over the card table, but he couldn't see it clearly so he turned on the overhead light and went in.

It was a newspaper clipping. **Lawsuit Unsuccessful**, the big print read, then: **Dr. Kyle Sommers, an engineer for Davis/Monthan's Systems Compliance unit, failed in his attempt to sue the Veteran's Administration over its refusal to take his son Patrick's case. Patrick Sommers, Dr. Sommers' only son, died of heart failure resulting from complications connected to Agent Orange disbursement during the Vietnam War, and it was thought at the time that**

The article continued, but he didn't. He ran back to the toilet, flushed it, and returned for only a moment longer.

the time that the defoliant would not have future toxic effects, and the VA in Tucson has so far failed to accept such cases from area veterans.

The article was dated August 11, 1973, The Arizona Daily Star.

* * * *

"Well, ya piss poor now?" Dr. Sommers asked, giving a laugh as he looked up from his flashing consoles.

"Yeah, I guess so. Always have been, though. My bike, it's about the nicest thing I've ever owned."

"That right?"

He watched the old man flipping toggles and throwing levers, and then he wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his own forehead. "Yup, I never had a son to play with. Not like you had. Never had a place as nice as this to play in, either. What exactly are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just firing up that new air conditioner I installed. Give me a hand?"

"Sure, what can I do?" A thin Buddhists smile. "Just go over to that console near the wall over there, see it?"

"Yeah."

"You, well, turn that red key that's—"

"This one?"

"That's the one, but wait a sec. At the count of three, okay?"

"You gonna help me lift my bike afterward, right?"

"Your bike? Oh sure. You think I can't? Think your old man's too old, do ya?"

"I didn't say—"

"Steady now. Cross your fingers. One..."

He gripped the red key. The heat felt oppressive. *Poor old geezer, he thought. Pretending his son's still alive too, locking himself up like this.*

"Two..."

Plenty of bastards out there to hide from, but if people only pulled together, helped each other out, it'd be all right.

"Three!"

After all, didn't one good turn deserve another?

GHOST RIDER

(originally published in *Tucson Guide* magazine)

Cutting through the motionless heat, a breeze. The temperature drops five degrees, breath by breath, to a hundred. Cactus spines whistle, slicing the silence. I wait now, trying to decide. Not yet the how or even the where, but the why.

Gold. It was enough of a reason for grandfather. Enough for him and his kind, chasing that promised gleam of the metal deep into Apache land. Enough for thousands of young men to "go west" into this desert to stake claims on the imagined life that might be theirs. Enough even to trade the only life they had for one which might or might not be.

Years later now, I ride through the heat of traffic out past the city lights, grandfather's map etched on my soul. As the smog thins the gleaming chrome bumpers no longer chase each other, racing from stoplight to stoplight. Cars and trucks and busses give way now to jeeps and the occasional Winneabago like a lost buffalo in search of its herd. I've come to take up the quest ... but why? Is it because I too half believe the dream? Or because of the mystery and the map—a clue to another metal?

Silver. Grandmother had never mentioned anything of it. Although she must have read the letter, she never told father before she died what was there, or mentioned the vanished town referenced by those cryptic words I found in an attic trunk. Grandmother, in fact, had long forgotten grandad. Perhaps it was the life he led, leaving her for months on end

in Tucson, alone. The document, wrapped in wax paper, was only partly legible, and soiled by a Century of mildew and neglect. But the date survived: 1889. And also part of a paragraph which told of a lost claim—a potential motherlode of high grade ore grandad was staking just before the Indians took him.

I'm telling myself it's only to end this mystery that I chronicle my thoughts and actions in this diary. And the question which haunts me now is: With only clues to the terrain, which ghost town might be the one whose name is only a smudge of ink on this withered and oily paper? There's only one way to find out, to make sure. And although there might be nothing left of what was, I must ride to see.

This, my best transport across the wastes: a BMW GS Enduro. Enduro ... endure. Will I? Time will tell. And I have plenty of time. The towns I ride to see have waited a Century already. Will there be anything left of them? And what about inhabitants? Perhaps only rattlesnakes, scorpions, tarantulas, Gila monsters. If my map cannot locate the remains of the towns, I may be forced to ask directions of a passing coyote.

Now that'll be a howl.

Like a silent sentinel, a solitary saguaro cactus is witness to my departure. Perhaps the same saguaro as witnessed granddad descend toward his fate, his hat slanted against the summer sun, a trusty water bag slung over his burrow. 'They live 200 years, some of them,' I remember the curator at the Arizona Historical Society say.

Among these survivors, I ride, looking for clues to the past among what's all but vanished...

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

* * * *

Sept. 17, 1 P.M.

First stop, Tombstone. Still the most famous mining town in the West. 1881. Back then there were as many as 15,000 people frequenting the taverns, the schools, the churches. An iron foundry. Two banks. A bottling works. And a paper: the Epitaph. A city that survived two fires only to get bigger. And all because a Calvary man named Ed Schieffelin, while exploring the San Pedro valley, discovered high grade silver ore and staked the Lucky Cuss and Toughnut deposits after being warned he would only uncover his tombstone in the Apaches' domain. The history is rich here. I can feel it, despite the tourists milling about the old Birdcage Theater and the Crystal Palace saloon with their camcorders.

October 26, 1881. Marshal Virgil Earp, Wyatt, and Morgan, and Doc Holliday attempt to disarm Billy and Ike Clanton and the McLowery brothers. A gunfight, at the OK Corral, leaves Tom and Frank McLowery dead—and Billy Clanton soon dead of wounds.

March 1884. A robbery in Bisbee which left four dead spurs a posse to ride out and capture the outlaws and jail them in Tombstone. But one of the posse members, John Heath, tries to lead the posse away from the obvious trail, and is jailed also. When Heath is sentenced to life imprisonment, the townspeople riot and break into the jail. They lynch Heath, hanging him from a telegraph pole. The other outlaws are hanged soon after, with one enterprising citizen building a scaffold in an attempt to sell seats for the public viewing.

1886. Fire destroys a pumping works, and all the mines are flooded, ending the prosperity and turning nearby processing towns to ghost towns. But in the Boot Hill Cemetery still remains a tombstone with the poem:

Here lies Lester Moore,
2 slugs of a 44.
No Les, No More.

From my photocopy of what's left of granddad's letter I read:

and on the promontory there's this big rock, like an anvil, and below that three smaller boulders. Under the center of the smaller three there's the ledge where I found some rich ore. Dug a hole there, an' guess what? There's more down there. Lotsa silver, I smell it! Maybe a vein. Maybe a mountain of it, all under this here hill! Soon as I stake it, I'm filing my claim in town, and then I'll come for you in Tucson quicker than a rattler can strike. So don't you worry none, now. We be rich soon, sugar pie. You'll see!

I look out across a hilly desert pockmarked by more recent mine tailings. No hill with a rock like that in sight. But it could be out there somewhere, near the towns that supported the mines. The towns are gone now, but maybe...

It's time to move on. Vanished towns out here which were never rebuilt have mostly succumbed to time and the elements. But I must be sure. I must mark off all possibilities.

* * * *

3 PM

Nine miles southwest of Tombstone now, at the site of Charleston, a city which for most of the 1880s served the Tombstone mines by milling their ore. Once there were livery stables here, and restaurants, hotels, a church and school. Once, over four hundred residents. Could one of them have been grandfather? Through my binoculars I scan the barren hills nearby, hoping to spot three distinctive boulders.

There was a rumor of Apache raids once, but what killed the remains was probably WWII, when soldiers from Fort Huachuca used the place as a battleground for war games.

I'd liked to have seen that church where that bandit Curley Bill Brocius and his drunken gang broke up a service and then demanded a sermon from the preacher, who got the biggest collection ever when they passed the hat among the ruffians.

I lower my binoculars in disappointment. I'd also liked to have seen the saloon where a man named Durkee threw a party for the miners when his profits from freighting ore exceeded his wildest dreams. Seems Durkee ordered all kinds of liquor, an orchestra, and female entertainment. But when everyone got drunk, a fight broke out. Like in the movies. Plate glass shattered, tables and chairs overturned, bloodied noses. It turned into a riot. Luckily, all guns had been collected prior to the party, or it would have been worse. Still, Durkee vowed never to throw another party.

I pick up a shard of adobe brick. All that's left besides the foundation remains of the old mill up on the hill. There's a cemetery here somewhere too, supposedly. Should I have looked for grandfather's grave? Studying the slowly flowing

San Pedro river, I realize it was time to move on. The grave wasn't at Boot Hill, and it won't be here, either.

* * * *

4:30

Again, no. Fairbank's hills are low, barren. But at least it's no ghost town. It's the site of the San Pedro Reparian Conservancy, and I'm in need of a cold one.

I stop into the office, and talk to a visiting rancher named George. As I follow George's lead and we sip our RCs, he tells me about the Stiles/Alvord gang attempting to rob the Wells Fargo box from the Southern Pacific Railroad here in 1900.

"Oh yeah, they tried, all right," George says. "Stiles, the Owen brothers, and Three-Fingered Jack Dunlap. But they didn't expect a lawman to be waitin' inside the express car! So when Jeff Milton refused to open up, a gunfight broke out, leavin' both Dunlap and Milton injured. And when more shots were a-fired Milton opens the far door of the car to throw out the payroll box key, but then some townsfolk come to the rescue. Oh yeah! The Stiles gang carts off ole' Three Fingered Jack and makes their getaway empty handed. Later abandon him to a posse nine mile from here. And Milton? He's taken to a hospital in San Francisco and told his arm needs ta be amputated. Ol' Jeff, he says whoever does it dies."

"And?"

"And so they don't amputate. And he recovers. End of that story." Undaunted, George shares others, and then tells me to take a hike.

* * * *

Evening

Roadless, I hike north along the muddy San Pedro for five miles until I come to the adobe ruins of a building, the foundations of a mill, and a tiny cemetery.

I lift my hand against the setting sun, doubtfully.

Here? Must be. And I remembered what George said:

"Contention City. Place reduced ore for the Tombstone mines, had over a hundred folks, served by two stage lines. John McDermott's saloon was here. The Western Hotel. An' a diary, a blacksmith's shop, a meat market, and a Chinese laundry."

"Really?"

"Really. But the city lived and died in one decade."

"And which decade was that?" I'd asked.

"The 1880's."

I scan the low hills now, looking out across the San Pedro to the distant Whetstone mountains. Right time, but wrong place. That was my contention, anyway.

In the morning I'll leave these Century-old ghosts behind to bake yet another Century.

* * * *

Sept. 18

I'm riding back out into the surrounding territory east of Tombstone, now, down a long dirt road.

Idling on a hill, I consult my map, looking out across a shallow valley. This town used to be called Turquoise when the Indians mined the mineral, and even after the white man

moved in and found silver, copper, and lead in the area. George Hearst, a millionaire from San Francisco, visited the mines that were here in 1882.

Then a man named John Gleason came from Ireland and discovered the Leonard, sometimes called the Copper Belle, and they renamed the town after him. Biggest find in the area, and overlooked by anyone in Turquoise. Still some people here. Turquoise is gone, but Gleason hangs on—barely. World War One and the demand for copper then may have helped keep it incorporated until 1940. It would have still be called Turquoise if my grandfather was here, though. A rugged mining camp with your typical rough types and saloons. Still, there's no sight of any anvil-shaped rocks, and it doesn't feel right, either.

* * * *

11 A.M.

Nineteen miles east, crossing off the still-inhabited town of Gleeson, I arrive at a site which was, and isn't. I recheck my map and yes, this is it. A booming copper town of 2000 souls now reduced to the foundations of one building and the overgrown hulk of a jail.

Dubiously, I scan the wastes and the hills.

"Courtland," I announce aloud, as if grandfather were somehow listening. "Once there was a telegraph service here. An ice cream parlor. A way station for the Southern Pacific railroad. And four mining companies—the Copper Queen, Calumet & Arizona, Leadville, the Great Western. Even a

horse race and a baseball game on the Fourth of July. Families came here from as far away as Georgia."

As if on cue a pair of jackrabbits darted out of a thicket, leaping high over a barrel cactus, their zigzags haphazard but purposeful.

I check the date in my book, shake my head. Established March 13, 1909. But it's okay. As I restart the engine, I smile into the distance. I just wanted to see.

* * * *

High Noon

Interesting discovery at lunchtime, talking to some locals. In 1894 Jimmy Pearce got off his horse near his ranch in Sulphur Springs Valley south of present day Willcox. He picked up a rock, tapped it with a hammer, and discovered gold. Quickly staking out his claims, he named his find the Commonwealth—five claims for five members of his family. The Pearces worked the claims until an outsider from New Mexico offered to buy Jimmy out for a quarter million dollars if he could take that much out of the mine in 90 days. It took only 60. The mine was sold. But Mrs. Pearce finagled rights to operate the only boarding house in the area. Later the town grew to 1500. Then in the 30's the mine closed, and people drifted away. There's a museum left, and a country store and school.

Beautiful area. No anvil-shaped rock, though.

* * * *

Late Afternoon

Endlessly riding, my trusty iron horse heads fourteen miles southeast of Willcox into Dos Cabasas, once home to the Casey brothers mines. In the 1880s there were three stamp mills here to process ore the old way—by pulverizing. A brewery, school, hotel, brickyard, barber shop, grocery store, and over three hundred souls.

As I twisted the throttle, my enduro climbs up to the ridge above what's left of the town now—only adobe ruins.

Nope, not these rocks either. I've got an image in my mind now of what I'm looking for. I just hope it's the right image.

Impatiently, I circle, semi-knobby tires kicking up dust. And I think about the Casey brothers, two prospectors who staked their claims here and then turned down \$40,000 from a Tombstone lawyer because they'd made a home here.

Home ... a mere dugout in the side of a slanting hill of dirt and rock.

Home ... with a smelter to melt and separate the ore adding heat to heat, and all of it attended by mules, with sweat, dust, and stench as ever-present companions.

Where was grandfather's final home? Was it worth it to him? Will it be for me? Or is all gold fool's gold?

* * * *

Sept 19

As I move into the Chiricahua mountains I see a rocky topography. Giant monoliths of stone towering a hundred feet or more, some house-sized boulders perched precariously on ledges. Rocks and boulders strewn everywhere—fractured, upright, or fallen—the result of ancient upheavals. I'm

reminded of a Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Clint's character knew it was the grave with no name which held the treasure, but his partner only knew which cemetery. Amid so many rocks, now, I know neither.

Galeyville this time.

I roar over the crest of a hill, the hot wind drying the moisture of my eyes, making me blink against the glare off all that granite.

Galeyville ... is there anything left? The book says no. Only a sign. Nothing left of a dozen saloons, restaurants, lumberyards, mercantile stores. No trace of the dairy, the jeweler, the shoemaker, the Wells Fargo office, the assayer, the newspaper. Nothing to tell the story of the rustlers who came here to divide their stolen Mexican cattle. Johnny Ringo, and even Curly Bill with his crisscrossed 44s and wide-brimmed sombrero. No legacy of John H. Galey, that oilman and financier from Pennsylvania who was attracted by the high price of silver here, bought a claim, and founded the boom camp of Galeyville in 1881. A broken dream. Galey left in debt, and the wooden buildings of the town were later carted away to the nearby town of Paradise, which was established in 1901.

I'm too far east now for any two day ride, even by stagecoach, so I've decided to head back west.

* * * *

Sept 20

After much more riding comes another night filled with stars, thoughts of time, infinity, and the possibility of

someone finding my bleached bones out here. I arise at dawn to cook breakfast over a glowing fire inside a tight ring of stones. Canned corned beef hash, instant coffee. Gathering up my bed roll, I try to forget nightmares of a tarantula crawling across my face. Of scorpions and rattlers crawling into my tent. I listen to the Silence and realize how far civilization seems from this place now. Is it even there? From horizon to horizon nothing but desert and deserted hills.

I touch the engine of my BMW, wanting to feel its brief and unnatural coolness. I check my gas tank, then crank up, throttling open the carbs like lungs, feeling the machines breathe, alive for the quest. I touch the engine again. Already the coolness is gone, the result of multiple explosions of hydrocarbons deep within the metallic pulsing heart of the machine. Scrubbing camp, I ride out.

First stop, Sunnyside.

Fifteen miles southwest of Fort Huachuca I arrive at Arizona's most unusual mining camp. It was here that Sam Donnelly preached to the Donnellites, as they were called. Once the site of the Copper Glance mine, a community formed around listening to Brother Donnelly read the Bible. And after working the ore, instead of getting drunk and gambling, the people here would sing hymns and pray. Laying up treasures in heaven while they mined them down below?

"Imagine that," I remember telling George. "And you say there weren't any gunfights or robberies, or any saloons to bust up?"

"Nope. Was a communal kitchen, an outreach ministry to help other miners, and music lessons instead a cussin'. Rumor

had it before Donnelly rediscovered the mine here in 1887 and got saved, he was big at the bars in Frisco. But after that sure enough—he was a changed man! Donated cash to help students, and always gave to people in need who visited."

"So what happened to the people?"

"After he died the mine closed, gradually they left."

After circling the remains of this serene mountain meadow, so did I.

* * * *

Mid Morning

I've ridden into a deserted settlement, an oasis of green ten miles southeast of the tree-shaded town of Patagonia. A creek crosses the road here in Harshaw, which before 1873 was known as Durasno. Along Harshaw's solitary street were once stores, corrals, blacksmith shops, saloons, hotels, and offices of the Arizona Bullion, the local paper. Only one condemned house remains below the cemetery on the hill.

At the cemetery I met a 76 year old man named Ernesto, doing some work with his grandson on the crumbling mortar of several graves. He said his mother and father were buried here, and told me where to find the old Hermosa mine, discovered by David Harshaw in 1877 and later bought by the Hermosa Mining Company, which erected a 20 stamp mill. Following a primitive road which forked off further south, I arrive at the site. Old photographs show the Hermosa mill, workmen standing on top of a massive A-frame proudly, others lowering long planks which bend under their weight. Now there is only rubble, rusted bolts, and foundation pilings

poking up through heaps of stone. Below the mill the jagged hole of the mine itself is partially hidden among the thickets.

There must have been much noise and activity here a hundred years ago, but when I kill the engine to rest, I immediately notice the silence. It's only a peaceful meadow surrounded by steep mountains now, no matter how hard the work must have been here then. Experiencing this quiet, it's hard for me to interpret the unsmiling faces on the children standing outside the Harshaw school. Did they guess their future in the mine? Or was it merely awe at the idea of a black box which could preserve their images forever? I look at the spot where they stood, and at the surrounding hills, and finally shake my head. Another town bites the dust. Although the post office persisted here until 1903, when the value of silver declined most of the residents deserted.

And now so would I.

* * * *

Noon

Am I too far from Tucson for my grandfather to have made a two-day trek back to grandmother on horseback? Despite my growing frustration, brother, I can't think of giving up yet. A process of elimination, like sifting tons of ore to come up with the nugget you hope is there.

Five miles further south of Patagonia now, in Santa Cruz county. On May 7, 1866, a post office was established here in a place named by Sylvester Mowry, a Lieutenant in the Union army. Mowry had purchased the Patagonia mine, and erected a smelter. Then, after being arrested for selling lead to the

Confederate Army for ammunition, he was jailed at the infamous Yuma Territorial prison. So during the Civil War the Apaches raided the area and reduced both the smelter and Mowry's town to rubble. It didn't come back until 1905, although there was a huge Fourth of July celebration there in 1891, with fireworks, dancing, and speeches. Since 1913 only a small cluster of deteriorating abode buildings remained. And a cemetery. Mowry's grave is not there, though. He died in England after being released from Yuma.

After dropping a stone down a mineshaft and counting off six seconds before it hit bottom, I ride out.

* * * *

About 3 P.M.

I'm about 17 miles east of Nogales now. This was known as Washington camp in 1880, then as Duquesne in 1890. Two towns, actually. Very close together. A reduction plant in Washington, a mining company in Duquesne. A fine school here. A thousand residents, including, so it's said, George Westinghouse at one time. He had hot and cold running water in his home.

Time to head north again. Closer to Tucson.

* * * *

The 21st

Time is the mystery. My days turn relentlessly toward a seasonless season of more heat and sudden storms, which gust and go. Another sunrise, another orange stepladder of clouds slowly raising the sun up from behind low rolling hills.

What am I doing out here? I wonder. I should be easy on the couch, watching some Hollywood vision of history.

"Help me," I said, and pointed at another point on my map. "Can you tell me where to find this place?"

"There?" The rancher named Cory scans my map, then looks up in obvious bewilderment. "Why you want to find that place?"

"That's where a man named John Dillon discovered a silver-lead mine in 1879. When they asked him what he'd name the place he said it looked like a total wreck. Then in 1881 the Empire Mining and Development Company bought the place, and constructed a mill. The town grew up around it."

"What town?" Cory asked.

"I just showed you. Total Wreck. Fifty houses, four saloons, three hotels, a butcher shop, general store, and lumberyard."

"You're kidding."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, because there's none a' that there now."

"I know that," I replied, exasperated. "Just like I know that no Apaches are gonna be coming down from the cliffs to surprise some Mexicans cutting wood, like they did in 1883!"

Cory laughed. "That's good, 'cause if you're looking for Geronimo, he's gone too. Only outlaws out there now are drug runners from Mexico."

"Few and far between, I trust."

"If you're lucky. Maybe you heard the one about a guy named Salsig got in an argument in Total Wreck with a man

who drew a gun and shot him? Salsig had a thick packet of love letters in his vest pocket stopped the bullet, and he lived to marry the lady who wrote him the letters."

"Nobody loves me. I better look out. That what you're saying?"

Cory laughed harder. "If the boot fits."

Following his directions, I finally come to the cliffs surrounding the old townsite, making the note: no anvil-shaped rock, no boulders. Could they have been moved? I hadn't considered that possibility. Just to make sure, I recheck the dates. The mine closed in 1884, then the property was sold for taxes. Although the Total Wreck post office wasn't discontinued until 1890.

I climb the bad road out of there in one long third gear moan.

* * * *

1 P.M.

"Boulders on a cliff? Lots a' rocks round here. Why you lookin' fer them? Got rocks in yer head, have ya?"

That's what an old timer named Frank told me. Lifted his hand against the sun, cocked his head, and glared at my iron steed—wheels and engine seined with a heavy layer of dust, idling on the slope of a hill. Then he nods, but whether with admiration or a sense of secret confirmation I can't tell. His mind tracks the rails of his recollections like a runaway train in a broken switchyard.

"Rugged area, this," Frank declares as a cow blundered by me toward the pasture below. "Yeah, hard ta believe it used

ta be a boom town, ain't it? Yup ... Placer gold panned outta here back in the 1880's by over five hundred men and women. Jail was a hole dug in the ground. Used ta cart water on burros from yonder Gardner Canyon. Mexicans here liked ta dance, too. Organized a baile once and tried ta lock out the cowboys from the nearby Empire Ranch so they wouldn't steal their señoritas. Cowboys, they poured bullets down the smoking chimney! Girls came a-pourin' out, and they had'em partners fer the next dance! Later on, the cowboys invited the Mexicans over to the Empire to make up for it, though."

I tell him about why I was there. Then I thank him and circled above the spot, moving outward in wider and wider concentric circles, up and over the surrounding hills, further and further away from what was once Greaterville.

* * * *

3:45

Thirty miles southeast of Tucson, after skirting that rugged dirt pass across from Greaterville, I stop at a basin at the foot of an impressive cluster of mountains.

Looking north into the distant haze from the Santa Ritas, I can see the second largest city in Arizona—the 'Old Pueblo,' as it's called. In that valley surrounded on its other three sides by the massive Catalinas, the jagged Tucsons, and the rolling Rincons the lives of over a million people live to accumulate green pieces of paper which are no longer fully backed by silver or gold. Taco franchises, factories, shopping malls. Compare that with what's left of a vanished town which was abandoned in our rush to the future, this one called

Helvetia. Only one building's crumbling adobe walls remains as a token reminder that there were once three hundred people here, living in an assortment of buildings, tents, and shanties. Only a few scattered planks amid the cresote bushes to indicate that this place was once home to humans whose skulls are now cavities somewhere buried in the hot sands. The Old Frijole Mine, the 150 ton smelter, all the investments made by the Helvetia Copper Company of New Jersey ... where were they now?

Astride my slowly cooling bike I contemplate the date.
1885.

After a solemn walk through the debris I find a tiny cemetery, check for names amid the weeds and barrel cactus. Then I scan the mountains with binoculars, and finally mount my iron steed.

"Giving up yet?" the wind seems to ask.

I can't say, but doubt if my tenacity matches those of such prospectors as grandad. Perhaps it's time to go north of Tucson instead of south.

* * * *

22nd, Noon

In 1873 General George Stoneman was constructing a road to Camp Picketpost in the Pinal mountains. One night a soldier named Sullivan returned with some strange black rocks he'd found which flattened when he tried to break them. He showed the rocks to many people, but never said where he found them. Then he disappeared—taken, it was thought, by Apaches. Two years later a rancher named

Charles Mason went to Globe with some friends. On their return they were ambushed by Apaches, and one of them was killed. They took the body to Stoneman's camp to bury, and while there one of their mules wandered away toward the foot of Stoneman's Grade—the road the General had constructed for better accessibility to the camp. While retrieving the mule, a man named Copeland discovered the same silver outcropping Sullivan had found. Years later, in 1882, a man appeared at the boom town of Silver King to look for work. It was Sullivan, the same man who'd discovered the strange black rocks in the early 1870s.

Perry Wildman, Silver King Store. Begs leave to call the attention of the people to the fact that he is in receipt of largest and best assortment of General Merchandise. Clothing & furnishing goods. Boots & shoes. Hats & caps. Groceries & Hardware. Miners tools, blasting powder. Flour & Grain. Tin & Glassware. Wallpaper, paints, etc, etc. Freighting to Globe. Goods delivered to all the camps. Perry Wildman, proprietor.

Silver King died in 1888 with the drop of the price of silver. Did grandfather die in 1889 of heartbreak?

* * * *

About 4 P.M.

I'm in the middle of some vast valley maybe thirty miles southwest of Casa Grande. I can't go on tonight. I've been out in the desert for over a week, and there's no end to it. Not much left but dirt, sand, rocks. Of course gold is a rock, right?

Maybe the heat's getting to me. Ahead somewhere's the Vekol mountains, but I feel wasted. I need a cold bath, a cool hotel restaurant. At least I know what it was like for those prospectors now. I'm even thinking maybe it shouldn't matter what happened to grandfather. Maybe I should just give up, go back to Tucson, eat at the Golden Coral, and wonder.

* * * *

23rd

Vekol. It's where two brothers fought over a silver mine back in the 1880s. One of the brothers went to Tucson to get married, and the other tried to get the marriage annulled because he didn't want the wife to inherit part of the \$3 million dollar stake. Then a third brother joined in and sent the first to the Napa Insane Asylum, where he died.

It's so quiet out here, and luckily not as hot today. I wasted a lot of time looking around. Just some adobe walls left standing. Mill ruins. Used to be homes here, a school, boarding house, post office, even a library. A quiet, peaceful town that didn't need a jail, and only had one saloon, and it went out of business. Like Sunnyside, only this mining company was just strict about drinking and crime.

What a shame. I know they coulda used a cold one, too.

I've decided tonight to chase the tumbleweeds back to Casa Grande for a beer and a room at the local Motel 6 before heading southwest of Tucson for one final search.

* * * *

24th, Morning

The Indian was walking beside the fence when I stopped to ask directions to the Cerro Colorado. After I explained my reasons he replied in broken English that I couldn't get there from here. I laughed, thinking it a joke.

"Where you want to go is where your grandfather was," he told me. Then he put something into my hand. "I've been waiting to give this to someone," he said. "This for you."

I looked down. It was the amulet, he explained, of an Indian shaman—his grandfather.

"It will grant you one wish. Make certain this the right one."

* * * *

Near Noon

Cerro Colorado. This is where it was, anyway.

I roll out past some mesquite, killed my engine. There's nothing but a few crumbling walls here on this barren stretch of mesa some 55 miles southwest of Tucson.

But somehow I feel it. Something beyond the statistics. This village ... this usual assortment of buildings. A town plaza here, perhaps. A tower and fortification to protect the mine workings. Something more about it. Something right.

I've check my book. Cerro Colorado, established in the 1860s. Post office established April 17, 1879, discontinued April, 1911. Yes ... Sam Heintzelman of the Sonora Exploring & Mining Company. He's the one they named the big silver mine here after. The Heintzelman. Apaches raided the place a couple times, too. Then after the Civil War a John Poston was

left in charge of the mine workings and he caught his foreman heading south to Mexico with a stolen load of silver bullion.

Poston executed him as an example to his Mexican workers. Only it backfired. More miners stole from the mine, and deserted to Sonora. And a story leaked down there that this guy Poston had executed buried \$70,000 in bullion somewhere near the mine. So some Mexican outlaws rode up, ransacked the mine workings, and murdered Poston when he got in the way. But they never found that bullion, and no one ever has.

I'm staring at some scattered bricks when the weirdest thought hits me: a hundred years ago a man stood out here and wondered what this would look like to someone in a hundred years. Well, I guess this is it, and I'm that "someone." I just wish I was the one to find the bullion, too.

* * * *

Sept. 25, 11 A.M.

Not sure where I am now. My motorcycle died. I don't understand it. I've checked out the engine, but nothing seems wrong. And just when I'm seeing what might be two large boulders on the apex of a hill to the left! Something beyond there too—a mirage? No, it's more than just shimmers of light.

My God—it looks like a ghost town. But this one's not on my map. I can't be seeing what I'm seeing, can I? Even looks like an old man over there waving to me now. Maybe I'll go ask him where I am. Funny, but I think I've seen that old man before somewhere, too.

Doesn't seem very far over there. I should check the fuses, but I need to investigate this first...

* * * *

October 17, First Entry

They found my brother's bike half buried in sand at the edge of this desert valley. Still haven't found his body, just an Indian relic which I've since discovered was once used by a shaman of the Tohono O'Dam tribe. I don't understand this, or know what happened. Maybe he got picked up by someone or was murdered. Maybe this wasn't the place where he was when he wrote his last entry. But I've got to find out.

And I'll find the ghost town he mentioned if it's the last thing I ever do.

YOUR HEART, MY WINECELLAR

(originally published in *Buffalo Spree*)

It was a night for memories, a night when winds mutter in trees to speak of days forgotten. A night to relive old friendships, and a night to whisper again names unspoken for years. But how strange, thought Martin as examined the interior of the intrafraternity house, to hold a class reunion and to have only one other person show up. Only one lady, and she unremembered from that faded season between childhood and the adult world of petty aggravations.

True, he WAS early, but...

"Hi."

Martin took the bottle of wine handed him. The woman would not have been a bad looking hostess, he thought as he took it, if she had better skin. Hers, though, it was ... stretched somehow. Tight. As if a smile would rip her face.

"I'm rather clumsy," she admitted. "Could you open it?"

"Certainly."

A homely one, he thought. With an unusual name. 'Max' she called herself. Now why did women call themselves by men's names? Did it make them sexier? Martin looked her over again, and decided that it was true.

"It's a vintage '81," Max said. "Remember the year?"

He smiled. "Oh, I remember, all right."

He wondered how he could forget those dismal classrooms where corpse like professors droned monotonously on about ancient battles and fallen civilizations, and where the blinds always seemed to be shut as if to exclude the real world from

view. Long hours of his life had ticked away there, dissolving youth itself. But the lady who sipped wine with him in the empty reception hall began to leaf eagerly through the old yearbook, wanting to remember it just the same.

"Your pictures in here five places," she said.

"Do we know each other?" Martin asked, wondering: has she counted?

"You never knew me," Max replied. "I wasn't as popular as you."

"I wasn't that popular," Martin said.

"You're just kidding, of course."

Martin smiled politely. For there, distinctly, was the time when he'd mapped out the summers and winters of his life, trying to marshal some kind of order amid all the fragments remembered, scratched in old yearbooks, and distilled from the tide pool flotsam of dreams: the several rental homes his father had taken to in his early cabbie days in Kansas. And later, their novelty shop in Florida when they moved to a house made of coquina shells and pink brick to escape the cold. He remembered the quiet sea at twilight, and the deserted beach, and how at night the hotel palm trees lit up with colored spotlights. He remembered everything but the innocence and magic, which was lost sometime during his late teens after that he'd lost his girlfriend Mary to a car accident ... and how could he forget eyes that seemed to look right into him and see things no one else could? How could he forget a girl who played Chopin's Preludes for him on the piano, and promised to be his always? Still, that's what he'd done. When she died he'd stared into her eyes one last time

at the funeral, and had seen nothing there. Nothing in those eyes. Afterward, he'd stranded himself in a flat by the pier, obsessed with only the gulls—the whirling, remorseless gulls, forever circling, forever scavenging. Birds as real to him as Van Gogh's crows had been to the artist before he committed suicide.

"It's funny, isn't it," he heard himself say in a sudden ironic and mocking tone, as if to wipe clean the odious slate once again. "Funny, thinking about how things might have been, and the many ways things could have been."

"Yes," said this woman, nodding. "I find myself doing that a lot."

Martin propped his feet on the untouched reception table. His head found the cushion, and he closed his eyes. The woman poured out the wine into twin crystal glasses, and placed one in his hand. He sipped, muttering thanks, sightless.

"Excellent."

"Is it?"

"Ummm. Do you mean to say the old wine cellar is still stocked for the season break, and old dean Andrews didn't confiscate his stash?"

Max nodded. "Care for a look?"

* * * *

They followed a circular staircase down to a dim and musty-smelling room directly below the hall, where the dean kept his rack padlocked against the prying hands of minors.

"You have a key, have you?" said Martin, excitedly.

Max nodded. "Let's just taste some of our old vintages, shall we, and drink the old years away? After all, the old man is away, and it'd be fun to pay him back for his intolerance, wouldn't it?"

"Praise the fates," said Martin, "I think it would."

She selected several bottles at random. Sipping from the brandished glasses, Martin soon felt his other memories grow stronger. He seemed to see the faces of Andrews and the others he'd been swept in with those next years—those who'd probably gone their ways to become accountants like him, or to work in factories, doing time/motion studies in the unreal atmosphere of the graveyard shift. He saw the girls too, the ones he and Eddie and Gerald and others in the fraternity had gone after, rings in their noses, brains far behind. Only he didn't see her: "Max." For some reason, he couldn't remember her. Not even with the help of alcohol.

"Your memory puts mine to shame, evidently." Martin laughed giddily. "I wonder do you remember that blond most of us went ape over, what was her name?"

"Angela?" Max said, refilling his glass again.

"Yeah, yeah. What a doll."

"You mean slut. Don't you?"

Martin laughed tipsily. He couldn't stop laughing now. Not even when Max said: "And don't forget Rosalind, or Rosy, as you called her."

"How can I?" A tear trickled down Martin's cheek. He laughed even harder, and then only after an effort at self restraint managed to take in a deep breath and exhale. "Sorry, but what a time we had! Guzzling oceans of beer,

sneaking out late, raiding the girl's dorms. Those were the days!"

"Yes," Max said. "They certainly were."

"There's only one thing," said Martin, feigning sadness, and then feeling it. "It all had to end. Come graduation, we disbanded. Our fates forged, somehow. It was like some big change of seasons. A dark cloud slid overhead, and what was real seemed over. You know what I mean?"

Max pointed at the empty glass he held. "How was the bouquet?"

"What? Oh ... great! I mean ... you know what I mean. '82 was a good year, wasn't it? Hell—we won the championship that year, didn't we? I remember getting a motorcycle and some of us cutting classes to celebrate. There was that hayride party too, when I—"

"—Scored with Sally Ashland?"

Martin fidgeted as Max refilled his glass this time. *When had she stopped drinking?* he thought. Tossing back his head to down the sweet liquid, he realized dimly that he hadn't noticed.

"You knew Sally?" he said.

Max nodded, fixing him with that sober gaze of hers.

"Of course," Martin continued, looking away, "the next year we steered within a hair of the title again, and ruddered through it all with some damn smooth sailing."

"So there weren't any mishaps?"

"Not for us. No, I've gotta say lady luck favored us then. It's like we were drunk with laughter, and chasing the sun, and thinkin' it'd never end, with us alive, ya know? Alive!"

Never askin' the whys of anything, just feelin' in control." He paused, reflectively, aware of his own voice sounding drunk. "Mishaps? Oh no. Not unless ya count a few sentimental types who took things too seriously."

"How do you mean?" said Max, touching his arm lightly.

"Well, you know, just that a few went out on a too fragile limb. One in particular. Ohhh yeah, a real sorry case, yeah. I think her name was..."

"Margaret? Margaret *Maxine* Delany?"

* * * *

Martin had dropped his glass, and it had shattered on the tile floor.

Now he smiled, weakly.

"Max" smiled back.

Oh shit, he thought, smiling half drunkenly in return. *Could it be? Had something twisted her features enough that he hadn't put that name with that face? Could time alone have done this?*

Was it really her?

A sudden numbing sensation ebbed into his knees, spreading. The wine?

"I ... don't know what to say," he muttered, which was true.

"Oh, there's nothing to say," the woman who called herself only 'Max' replied, dryly. "You used me like you used the others, and then you discarded me. I was your fool because of love, and so now I'm no one's fool."

Martin lifted a hand toward her. "But your face..."

"I had the abortion you suggested," Max said. "But the hack I went to left me sterile. I was in an auto wreck soon after that, and had to have reconstructive surgery. Tried to kill myself by driving off a cliff, actually. But the car was caught and got held in a tree." She looked at him impatiently. "Does that about cover it?"

Martin looked around at the walls, as if looking for clues. The cellar seemed suddenly cramped because she was in it—not Margaret, but Maxine now. He knew he had to get past the drunkenness, but it only grew.

"What have you been up to?" he asked, his vision of her slightly blurred.

Her smile was round and somehow calculated. "Hating myself, mostly," she said. "Trying to put aside the pain you gave me once and for all. The pain that made me feel abandoned and worthless. The pain that had me staring out of my apartment window for weeks until ... something snapped."

"Something?" said Martin.

"I eventually became a registered nurse, although it took twice as long as it should have. Then I realized my life wouldn't truly begin until I could drink to my own health. Until, shall we say, a kind of exchange took place. My life ... for yours? So I had this idea, to invite you here alone, Martin—a night before the real reunion—and with us toasting the old years, to slip a lethal drug in your drink."

Martin clenched his now empty hand on itself as Maxine's gaze circled the room.

"A cold, perhaps, but simple revenge," she admitted. "We reap what we sow. While your life was full and happy then, mine was empty and unbearable. While you try to remember what was, it is I who must try to forget. And what better way than this, to break clean of it? How amusing, too, to speculate which of your buddies will find you here tomorrow night, dead of a presumed heart attack."

Martin felt his forehead. It was hot. *Why was it so damn hot?*

"But that's insane," he blurted, his voice now audibly cracking. "Why wait until now? Because it's taken twenty years to ... to turn self hatred inside out?"

"Payday isn't always on Friday, Martin."

Martin felt his chest. His heart was beating faster for sure. His knees did feel weak. He let himself slip to the floor.

Oh my God, he realized. *She's going to let me die here, in this cellar*. But when he looked up he saw that Maxine stared down at him strangely. Almost, could it be...

In pity?

"Don't worry," she said at last. "I couldn't go through with it in the end. And besides, just look at yourself. Balding and aging before my eyes. There's an awareness of sickness in your eyes, too. Of being locked in a sunless room these past twenty years with only your memories, Martin, just your memories to keep you company."

"My..."

"And so I asked myself, just moments ago, why should I put you *out* of your misery? Wouldn't it be better to let you wallow in it? To come back here ten or twenty years from

now, tortured by those same brief years of happiness? That way I could drink to my own health from your misery, which was once your habit with me, Martin. That way, your despairing heart would be my wine cellar."

The woman who was once Margaret Delany smiled a smile of secret consummation. Then she moved quietly up the staircase.

In a moment she was gone.

* * * *

For a long time Martin sat motionless. He looked at his hands. At the red wine stain there. He looked up at the years proclaimed on wine labels, too. Those years corked in brown and red and green glass, waiting to be put against lips, assimilated, savored.

He wondered how long would it take before he would feel like getting up, like driving. Or leaving. But there was no telling, as along the rows his gaze moved, and in the dimness the bottles began to resemble the brooding shapes of a flock of gulls.

THE FAT MAN

(originally published in *Over My Dead Body*)

Beside the tall red fence, behind the bushes.

A breeze blowing warmly. Late afternoon.

With my homemade periscope I could see Mrs. Robbins through the French windows, coming into her kitchen with a big bag of groceries, back from the store. Mr. Robbins was in his usual place, watching TV on the patio, and didn't offer to help.

Mr. Robbins was huge now. HUGE. The way he looked, he must have weighed a ton or more. And he just sat there in the lounge chair out back while his wife did all the shopping, went to work, and did the dishes. Used to be he was the State cycling champ, but gradually the kids took over, and he was one of those who had to be first or nothing. Or so it's said. Of course now he never rode his bike anywhere, and never did anything. There was a stand beside him where he'd put his crackers, beer and things, and he'd just sit there eating and watching, eating and watching in the warm mornings, the hot afternoons, the cool evenings while his gut hung out of his belt like great folds of dough. Especially since the redwood fence was erected, it didn't bother him to move out of the house onto the patio with the remote control color TV Mrs. Robbins made the mistake of buying. Mom said something about him being lazy, and being out of a job. Dad said a few things Mom would have washed my mouth out with soap for saying. He was tired of hearing about those old trophies at their lodge meeting.

"So what's going on?" repeated Peter Fibbs, my sometimes friend and classmate.

"Shhhhhh.—she's inside," I said, waiting for the argument I'd heard every night for weeks and weeks. "She's taking the groceries out of the bag."

"What's this, uh ... 'Cyclist doin'?"

"Watching TV."

"Watching TV," Peter Fibbs mimicked in a dead monotone, then let the silence soak it in. "And I've got to go home. We start school tomorrow, ya know. High school."

I turned and whispered hotly. "What's yer problem? Will ya wait a minute? She's coming out on the patio now. She's got a can in her hand. This is it. This is where she lets him have it!"

The TV droned, babbling like a happy baby off under a cloud-crowded sky.

Peter Fibbs stood beside me and my kid brother Ernie, shaking his head impatiently as we listened.

"Here," Mrs. Robbins words drifted to us through the late August air, "is your beer, darling. Want a roast pork sandwich?"

"Yeah," answered the fat man. "Thanks."

"After that," said Mrs. Robbins pleasantly, "I'll fix you some short ribs and a Dagwood. Won't that be nice?"

"You're ... feeling all right, are you, Alice?"

"Sure, sure. Never better. Let's stop our arguing."

My heart sank, weighted down by her words. Why was she smiling at him? It didn't make sense.

Ernie started whining then, and reached for my periscope.

"Shhhhhh," I hissed, and slapped his hand.

The Cyclist lolled his head in our direction. His face was—I don't know how to put it—pasty-looking. Like 'scetti that's been overcooked. I held my periscope rock-steady thinking he'd spot it. But he didn't.

"So what's that tub a' lard doin now?" Peter whispered, very bored.

"Just eating. Here comes Mrs. Robbins again. Gees—women sure are strange. And this one takes the cake."

While Ernie kept tugging at my sleeve, I kept staring at what pretty Mrs. Robbins was carrying to her husband, the Cyclist. It was the most scrumptious strawberry short cake I'd ever seen.

I let Ernie have a peek, and he licked his lips. "She must real-ly like him," Ernie said.

"Or love him," I said, then added: "or hate him."

Peter grabbed my periscope, peered into it, then chuckled. "What?"

I paused a minute, trying to think up something so Peter would stay. I remembered what Dad said about the Cyclist going to the hospital after he tried to ride his bike at the park one Saturday. A couple of maintenance men found him sprawled out on the ball field, clutching his chest. So trying to sound important, I said: "Listen. I heard this psychologist on educational TV say one time that some men marry just to be mothered. You know, to have someone clean up after them, an' baby them, an' pamper them like they were used to growing up. He said sports and stuff like that is only a disguise for them at first, and that it wears off quick. Well,

just suppose that Mr. Robbins is like that, and that his wife doesn't want to put up with it anymore. What does she do? Well, maybe ... maybe just what she's always done. Only somewhere along the way, she's crossed that thin line."

"What thin line?"

"Like the man said, the one between love and hate. Suppose she's decided subconsciously to pamper him to death. Like some cholesterol sludge in his veins breaks off, jams something up, an' ... he just..."

"Dies?"

We stared at my periscope for the longest time as I turned it round and round nervously in the half light under faint stars.

It was getting dark in a hurry.

A cricket chirped.

The weeping willow wept.

Over the fence, a very fat man sat in a circle of television light, a swallowing machine, a human disposal. Behind him, against the garage, was what was once a beautiful Italian-framed racing bike, its Campagnolo pantographed components now crusted, its spokes rusted from neglect and rain.

But Peter Fibbs was not impressed.

"You're crazy," he said. "You need school."

"But Mrs. Robbins isn't screaming anymore," I said, defensively. "And here she is, pumping him big as a blimp, bringing him ten course dinners, complete with desert and beer. What would you think?"

"I'd say they made up," Peter Fibbs said. "And so would anyone else."

"But that's exactly my point!"

"Give it up, Donny," he said. "You been readin too many detective stories. Or maybe watchin too much TV like him ... especially mysteries."

He laughed. "'Sides, vacation's over, an' you're just trying to delay it."

"Oh sure," I said, dully. "That's it, sure."

Just then, the screen door opened on our house. Mom leaned out. "Time for supper!" she called.

"See you tomorrow," said Peter Fibbs, his back to me already.

I watched Peter mount his Schwinn and glide out and down the street without pedaling, with all the time in the world. Peter Fibbs. Sometimes I wonder why I bothered. Where was his sense of adventure, anyway? How did I rate such a dullard for a friend in the first place? Whenever we'd talked about the future, was it ever him who thought of NASA first? No, Peter wanted to be like his dad. An accountant. What kind of future was that?

After Peter was gone I tugged Ernie's hand and, reluctantly, we went in to eat.

* * * *

In the dining room Dad sat, drinking coffee. Meanwhile Mom was serving dinner: veal cutlets and mash potatoes.

"Dad?" I said.

"Yes, son?"

"Dad, I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you I have a theory about Mrs. Robbins trying to murder the Cy ... I mean, MR. Robbins. With a heart attack."

Dad let out something like a war hoop, and slapped his own widening paunch. "It wouldn't surprise me, son," he laughed. "Just shows ya what all that fitness jive comes to, don't it?"

"Careful now, dear," said Mom, holding the table steady, and then, seeing me toy with my fork: "Now what made you say something like that, Donald?"

I told her. She stared at me with a face like a jury member filing in for the verdict.

"Maybe you should check it out, Paul," said Mom, still expressionless.

"Oh, PLEASE, Dad," I said. "Say you'll come and check it out?"

Dad shook his head like parents do sometimes just because they can.

"There's a heavyweight fight on in a minute. I can't miss that."

"But this is important," I pleaded one last time.

Dad looked at me funny-like. "So's this," he said.

And then that same sense of sadness came over me, just like it had with Peter Fibbs. But this time it was multiplied by the feeling of farewells. Farewell to summer, hello to long gray autumn days of drizzle and homework. Farewell to Junior High, hello to acne and SAT scores. Farewell to imagination, and hello to ... what? CPA school? Job interviews? Retirement programs?

"No dessert tonight, Donald?" asked Mom as I pushed back my plate.

* * * *

After dinner, Mom went into the kitchen, and started on the dishes. Lips sealed. Of course I never really expected her to take my side. She was neutral. Like Switzerland. Maybe it was safer that way because she had to live with Dad while I was away at school, growing up way before my time.

I watched Dad go into the living room and cut on the TV. He'd already forgotten about me. He just settled back into his leather armchair, and gave out this little self-satisfied sigh, almost like he'd mastered the secret of how to make us kids invisible. "Bring me a beer, will ya?" he called to Mom.

Mom opened the refrigerator.

Mom passed us with Dad's beer. "Time for bed," she said finally, turning Ernie toward the hall with her hand. "School tomorrow, bright and early."

I saw on the TV there was a program with cyclists racing across America. They all looked so exhausted, but thin and healthy. Watching them, Dad was expressionless too. Just sitting there, like he was one of those department store mannequins. Not thinking, not remembering. Nothing. I was reminded of that Martian movie where all the town's people got these transmitters planted in back of their heads, and they're being remotely controlled by the aliens. It felt eerie, thinking that, because Dad was always in control of most things. And sure enough, when Mom came in he suddenly seemed to see her pulling at Ernie, who was whining.

"Do I have to—"

"MOVE!" said Mom.

Mom was acting oddly too, somehow. And there was something in the way she looked at me over dinner. I figured she'd wanted to go out that night, only Dad got his way again because he could talk louder. Mom would never try and shout back at him, of course. Usually she just went into her room and closed the door for a while. Then she'd come out with red eyes.

Usually, but not that night.

We went to our room. Ernie started to slam the door, but I stopped him, and left it open a crack. For some reason I wanted to hear what Mom said, and if she was all right out there with Dad, the robot. But when Ernie started hitting me, I had to defend myself.

"Well, I thought it was a good theory," I said, trying hard now to imagine the sirens going, the Cyclist sitting there limp and pasty-faced next to his rusted racing bike, the TV blaring, and that one woman ... smiling. "I thought so, anyway."

As I unbuttoned my shirt and threw it down Ernie went over to where Mom had laid out our school clothes across the bureau. "You NEED school," he mimicked Peter Fibbs exact words. Then we slid into bed and cut the light.

It was in the pitch darkness a moment later that Ernie said, like it had just hit him: "Summer's over."

"Imagine that," I said sadly, and pulled the covers snug.

We listened to the muffled TV noises coming from the living room, and once or twice more heard Dad call: "Another beer in there!" and Mom answer: "Coming right up, dear! ..."

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

You want another roast pork sandwich?"

BACHELOR PAD

(originally published in *The Raven*)

"Look at this, detective," said agent Fletcher of the Nogales, Arizona Border Patrol, and pointed to a small spiral notebook on the floor.

Private detective Bryant strolled across the vanished bachelor's threadbare ranch house bedroom, a languid smile shaping his lips. He picked up the notepad, then aimed it around like a loaded weapon. "Not even a Carmen Electra poster, Fisher stereo or Sony plasma number in here," he observed with a sigh, "but he does have that funky box springs, with Einstein hanging on the wall." He sniffed the air, experimentally. "No signs of this being a crack house, either, that I can tell. But with keys in the kitchen for the company van out front. How well do you know Nick, did you say?"

"Just knew him by sight, is all," Fletcher replied. "Word has it he's quiet, with simple tastes."

"Simple?" Bryant shook his head, dismissively. "For being the sole heir to a men's magazine empire, that makes no sense at all." In emphasis, the P.I. jabbed the notebook in the direction of some haphazardly scattered or discarded books. "Here's a guy who could have it all, and what's he do, Fletcher? He takes the civil service exam, rents a ranch house out in the boonies, and after rounding up his quota of illegals, reads biographies, historical mysteries and Scientific American. Question is, why wouldn't a strong, healthy guy entertain the option of sharing a jacuzzi with supermodels?"

"You mean, is he a closet gay? You're the detective."

"Am I? Well, I detect a blind alley. 'Cause he's not gay, from what I understand. Not anything. Not even a disappointment. His old man brags about him being part of your Border Patrol." Bryant tapped the note pad twice against the fist he made with his other hand, then held it up. "Anyone take a peek at this yet, Fletcher?"

"No, sir. We're the first here, like you requested."

"Think it's a list of babes he could have asked out, but didn't?"

Fletcher shook his head. "That's not my first guess."

Bryant blew out a breath, wearily. "Well, I hope it explains why he's livin' like a monk, when he's got access to a mansion with wall to wall centerfolds."

"Sounds like you seen that mansion yourself," the younger man said, and not without interest.

Bryant narrowed his gaze for a second, giving a sly smile. "That I have, son. But it was years ago, at a convention for private dicks." He sighed again, slumped into a ratty wicker chair, and at last thumbed open the spiral notebook. "And now I've been hired to explain the call his father got from the bank. So lemme see what we got here before we do anything rash. Okay?"

Fletcher said nothing, and watched him read.

* * * *

6/4—My name is Nicholas Carter. I am a single man, age 40, never married, and I have worked for the Arizona Border Patrol for 15 years in good standing. My hobbies include reading and classical music. I particularly enjoy history and

science. What I can tell you now is that string theory is no theory. I don't claim to understand it, but what I know for sure is that physicists are right when they talk about extra dimensions in space beyond what we perceive, and the possibility of there being parallel universes which are like membranes of a higher reality. Not only is this true, but these membranes can be crossed at rare points and chance intersections. I've done it, you see, and I plan to do it again.

It happened at 7:07 AM, two days ago. The first thing that struck me was the sense that my vision was blurred. Upon opening my closet door, I saw that my hanging wardrobe appeared to be a double image, with a tight or narrow overlap, as though viewed through a calcite crystal. I hesitated reaching in, and then for a moment put my hand to my head, instead. A disorientation, like dizziness, seized me. I shut my eyes hard, then opened them again, blinking, but the peculiar sight remained. I turned to look at the room, at objects in it that appeared normal: the night stand, lamp, my shoes on the floor. Then I turned back, and saw that the double image was a bit wider now. Over an inch out of synch, as if an identical photograph behind the original was being pulled slowly into view.

I slammed shut the door, and ran outside in a panic. There I saw a kind of rainbow that terminated at my house. Only it wasn't a rainbow, exactly. The colors extended in a plane straight up into the cloudless sky, in a blurred and mostly transparent image that did not curve out toward the horizon, but seemed to fade instead, as if the plane or membrane extended to infinity in all directions, leaving only visibly

defracted light in the segment that cut through my house. When I returned to my bedroom, and found enough courage to face the closet door again, it opened this time on a dim light, and a space between the two separated images, which had expanded by more than their full width apart. What I saw in that space was a desert valley illuminated by a pale sun much larger and more orange than our own. A broken stone bridge stretched part way between two opposing peaks, and encrusted machinery lay next to what appeared to be a kind of elevator at the base. I stared in amazement, imagining it all to be some elaborate projection. But then I caught the scent from over there—from that parallel world—and it was like rust and sun baked cinnamon. Something real. So real that, without considering the consequences, I took a step forward, on impulse. And then another step, and finally another. At the last step, I turned my head to see that I was now beyond the back wall of the closet, but still within reach of it. Only I was standing on slate gray rock, like irregular slabs of stone stretching for a quarter mile to where the thing that resembled an elevator stood.

I jumped back in a momentary return of fright, then stretched out one hand to touch a blue shirt which hung beside me. I felt the cotton fabric in the cool dimness, then pulled it free to see the clothes hanger rock in place, back into stillness.

I stepped carefully back out of the closet into my room, but this time didn't shut the door for fear the opening would close as well. Afraid even to look away, I sat on the bed and watched for some change, until the idea occurred to me to

get my camera and also to measure the opening, which now appeared stable. After that, instead of dialing 911, I decided I would get a canteen of water and go on a quick expedition, once I determined the risk was worth taking. And so I did.

The air of this world contains less oxygen, but is not uncomfortably to breathe. The predominately orange light, together with the spice scent, somehow gave me the impression of great age. I had not walked more than a few steps on the slate rock when I turned back to see if the interface had changed at all. An identical rainbow-like fuzz extended from it, up through the rock and the sky. I could see that the light coming through my closet was brighter than on the alien world, so I continued my trek toward the distant machinery.

The elevator was caked with orange dust, but at the confluence of two oblong halves was a door like white glass bearing a horizontal ring of some metal alloy. I pulled this ring, and the thing gave an audible crack and then came slowly open, like a bank vault door of enormous weight. An acrid scent more pungent than the ubiquitous spice odor wafted out, and I discovered several controls inside shaped like wheels in a pedestal of green stone. Turning several produced no effect. I estimated the elevator to be twenty feet tall, with curved sides tapering to a nest of wires, perhaps a light fixture. The width of it was approximately twelve feet, and the floor appeared to be riveted metal plating, with flush rivets and circular grooves cluttered with dust.

I left the elevator to look for some other way up, and in so doing used the binoculars I'd taken with me to check again on

my interface at the narrow end of the box canyon. But the light still shone with the same comforting strength as before, and the opening seemed just as wide—or possibly a bit wider—considering my calculations. High above stretched the bridge, which was also the color of ochre, and had a texture like stone. It was approximately two hundred feet across at a height of perhaps five hundred feet, but broken at midpoint by a missing section of about one-fifth of the span. The bridge appeared to be thick and wide enough to support a bus or tank, but had no sides to it, and disappeared into an octagonal hole in the cliff side, where a man-sized instrument resembling a brass sundial stood sentry. The other cliff's tunnel was blocked by a massive door.

I found a staircase winding up from the wrong side, and realized that I would not be able to access the open tunnel from there. But I was determined to see inside, at least. The steps were high and steep, made of stone like rough granite. The final hundred feet or so they took a tighter curl around and inside a sculpted excavation graced by enigmatic designs that I first took to be coring marks left by whatever had hollowed out the upper cliff face next to the bridge. But then I saw that the circular rays drew closer together toward the top, and were attenuated by hooks that resembled arrows.

When I finally emerged onto the bridge itself, I discovered it to be covered in blue squares of stone two feet in diameter, each one unique and with a cryptic design, free of dust due to a noticeable breeze coming through the canyon at that height. I walked toward the edge and the open tunnel on the other side, but couldn't see beyond about fifty feet inside,

where the ambient light faded. But I could detect a shape there, like an amorphous sculpture well behind the sun dial, if that's what it was. Except this sun appeared too large and dim for it to be that. I cursed myself for not bringing a powerful flashlight, and then turned to use my binoculars again on the opening through which I'd entered this world. It appeared to be the same, but I decided to return anyway. I took photos, and noticed that my flash revealed the shape in the tunnel to be crystalline, with pipes or tubes protruding from it that attached it to the floor. The tunnel itself appeared to curve further in, like a large labyrinthine cave with drooping metal rails affixed to its sides. I determined I would need a 20 foot extension ladder to bridge the span to the other side.

Facing the massive door behind me, I noticed an image of this sun and world was depicted there, along with a starburst image further away. I went to the door, and placed my ear against it, but heard nothing. I banged on it with my fist, but there was no hollow thrumming. I next assessed the crack at the base of the door, and felt a slight breeze coming up from below. So the door obviously lowered somehow, but by what mechanism I could not determine.

I was in the very act of wondering if any latent energy still existed, if life didn't, when I suddenly saw a light above me, and noticed a glow atop a thin metallic pole high in the rocks above me. The light grew in intensity until it was too bright to look at, then quickly faded, leaving what looked like a small copper ball similar to what is found atop some lightning rods. Had I activated it, somehow? Was it a beacon, and would

someone be coming soon in response? Maybe I could get higher to see from where the light might be visible. But then fear swept me, and I decided to return to my house instead. There, at the interface, as I watched and waited, I was startled to see a bird, very high in the sky. As it glided overhead I considered the implications. There must be plants—maybe even oceans—elsewhere on this world!

* * * *

6/5—I recall reading about Gamma Ray Bursts, which are thought to come from hypernovas. The theory is that life has not been found via radio signals from space because these random hypernovas periodically exterminate whole parsecs of space throughout the universe. Maybe such a thing happened near this world, but not near enough to exterminate life completely. Perhaps, pre-event, the light here was not so orange? Of course I'm assuming that if this is really an alternate universe, existing in another dimension, similar laws of science apply. While it doesn't seem to get completely dark on this alternate world, I have seen points of light in the sky beyond the atmosphere every few hours, which appear to be the brightest or nearest stars. I have seen other birds too, although none have landed nearby. My GRB theory is bolstered by the fact that the multi-band radio I keep testing on the other side has failed to detect any signals on any frequency. I shall continue to take digital photos, along with temperature and humidity readings, until I decide what to do next. I'm storing these on my computer's hard drive under the file "Ochre," which is my new name for this world. A

measurement of the width of my interface has shown a 6 centimeter shortening of the opening in the last 24 hours, so I have limited time to decide what to do.

* * * *

6/6—Last night I set my alarm to wake me every two hours, and I went over to Ochre to repeat my tests, and to measure the opening. The weather remains comfortable, and once I could even see rain visible in the distance, while the rate of interface contraction remains the same. What to do? While trying to decide, I have begun shuttling large items through to the other side. Extension ladder, tool chest, offroad bicycle, tent, sleeper sofa.

P.M.—I've just returned from a fifth trip to the Super Wal Mart in Nogales, where I've also purchased a water purifier with cleanable filters, chemicals, seeds, fishing tackle, first aid kits, some smaller pup tents, repair kits, fuel, and enough canned goods to feed the crew of an aircraft carrier for a month. I've now maxed out my credit cards, and moved everything over to Ochre, along with all my clothing, extra shoes and boots, some of my books, various containers, utensils, towels, crank powered flashlights, and a solar powered PDA with three different Encyclopedias of Knowledge on it—one technical, one practical, and one medical. If only Robinson Crusoe had it so good.

* * * *

6/7—Things have escalated in the direction of this being goodbye. After all, I have no family here that I can relate to,

much less be proud of, which may also explain to you why I've been a loner most of my adult life. My father wanted to supply me with girlfriends, but they only look at me because of him and his money. It is reprehensible, what he is doing. His associates are evil, being involved in money laundering and racketeering. So I have taken my trust fund, and given it to the needy. Regarding America, and the nature of freedom, let me say I find it ironic that so many illegal aliens try to come to a land where most people ignore or use each other. I hope they don't lose the simple, real things like love and family. I've seen them at the parks, here and in Sonora, with their relations. They laugh and sing upbeat tunes while we live indoors, playing video games and watching actors with pretend lives on TV. How do I define poverty? What does freedom mean to me? I'm not sure, anymore. All I know is that I've never desired wealth, if it means such anxiety, impatience and greed, or includes having spoiled brats as children, and a beautiful wife with soulless, cynical eyes.

I have placed a call to a mule I know who lives in Nogales, Sonora. His instructions are explicit, with timing and directions to this "safe house" for one hand-picked family, of whom I hope to become a new member. If there is a daughter of childbearing age, so much the better. We shall all cross over together, and find our destiny in a new world without prejudice, hostility or traffic of any kind.

* * * *

6/7—My family is here. They have seen Ochre, and agreed to come with me. They see this opportunity as a miracle from

God. There are fourteen of them, all healthy. I believe the oldest daughter, Rosa Celeste, will be my wife. They are simple people from El Salvador, and have sold everything to come to America. There is no turning back now. Estaban asked me if he could go back if things didn't turn out, but I just pointed and said, "that's home now" in Spanish. He could see the bridge in the distance, and the stacks of provisions waiting. Then a bird landed nearby to investigate. It looks like a crow, although more brown than black. It gave me a strange idea, which I leave for you now to contemplate. What if this world is not parallel in space, but in time? What if this is our own mother Earth, in the far future, and the machinery I see has somehow opened this door so that we can get past the hypernova to save humanity? Just a thought, albeit an ironic one, wouldn't you say?

You will find photos of everything, plus all the testing data, on my computer hard drive. Wish us luck, whatever the case...

* * * *

"The case," Detective Bryant repeated, closing the notepad.

"What?" asked agent Fletcher.

"Nothing. See a computer anywhere, by chance?"

Fletcher pointed out a USB cable lying on the floor in one corner of the bedroom. "I think that's for downloads from a digital camera. You can see impressions in the carpet made by a desk, too."

Bryant leaned close, and nodded. Then he straightened, and tapped the notepad again before pocketing it.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just ... that this might a' been the most bizarre suicide note ever, but without a body, I'd say our young Carter split with his trust fund to old Mexico, leaving a none-too-subtle message that he'd like to be left alone."

"You mean his father was secretly harassing him?"

"Oh God, no. Did I say that? But Nick's never said anything negative about his old man up to now, either. Or taken any of his money. So something like this is bound to hit the tabloids, if it gets out."

"What do you mean ... *if*?"

"Never you mind. It's un-American, is what it is. And there's no way to prove any of it. All part of his plan to disappear while making his dad look like an jerk after bragging about him over the years." He lowered his voice. "Going into the closet instead of coming out. That's a funny trick."

As Bryant strode out, Fletcher followed closely, asking, "You mean you're not calling the Sheriff, sir?"

"Is that a problem for you, son?"

"Not with me, but ... I mean, where did he go?"

Bryant stopped to rub the back of his thick neck with one hand, considering it. "Well, see, I can't really say. Have to consult the family after the handwriting is verified first, before we can say anything. You understand?" As they walked through the open side door, out toward the cracked concrete

patio, Bryant observed how the door had obviously been forced by a crow bar. "Nice touch, that."

Near their respective cars, Fletcher made a circular motion back toward the rear of the ranch house with one hand, like he'd forgotten something.

"What the problem now?" Bryant asked.

"Just some plants growing in pots out back I thought you should see. Thought it was marijuana at first, but then I saw that I was mistaken."

Fletcher led him around the back of the house, where he indicated four small clay pots containing ferns against the back wall, in the shade of a cottonwood tree. A brown hose was curled like a snake next to them. Bryant kneeled, and stuck a finger into one of the pots, finding the soil moist. Then he impulsively upended one of the pots, and spread the ochre-colored soil across the ground. A shiver ran across his scalp as he got to his feet.

"What's the matter?" the young Border Patrol agent asked him.

Bryant ran back into the house, through the kitchen and into the master bedroom. At the closed closet door he paused, then carefully opened it, and stared as Fletcher came up behind him. The walk-in closet was empty, except for a nest of wire clothes hangers pushed to the far right on the long wooden pole. Bryant turned and now stared beyond the patrolman's left shoulder. Stared at the framed poster on the far wall.

"What's wrong, sir?"

"Nothing's wrong," Bryant replied, uncertainly. He suddenly flashed on the playoff game that his wife had nagged him for watching. In his mind, he imagined her, even now, lurking just out of sight, forever peering at him with mocking disgust in her soulless, cynical eyes.

Especially now.

"Did I say something was wrong?" Bryant asked, raising his voice.

Fletcher winced as if he'd been slapped too. Then started out. But before following him, he felt the kind of shiver that intuition brought to his job, and to fight it off stuck out his own tongue—in return—at Einstein's gleeful face.

REPLER

(originally published in *The Silver Thread*)

The silent darkness felt almost palpable, as if pressed by the intrusion. After the door swung shut behind him, he stretched out, face down, on the mattress. Although listening, he could only hear the steady rhythmic pulse of blood in his head now. His calves and feet throbbed with fatigue. Reaching beside him, he pulled part of the ragged blanket over his legs. Then he drifted into fitful sleep.

He woke on his back, staring up at the spotted plaster ceiling. It must still have been early, because he could hear his neighbor in the adjacent apartment, making breakfast. The sound of silverware was distinct, but distant. It summoned to him dormant memories of once familiar faces. He did not know where or if those same faces gathered, but only the year—1998—which was the last year he'd known family. Now the thought oppressed him, accentuated by the loss of his job at the Pearson street Daynite Foods, and he fought it off by thinking of the old man on the other side of the wall. Did he really know anything about him? They'd spoken only three times in the six weeks they'd shared the duplex. "I'm Jamie," he'd told the man—at least three times his age—soon after moving into the ramshackle house with only his mattress and a suitcase of old clothes. "And I'm Repler," the old man had replied with a voice like sandpaper, before scurrying inside. Subsequent conversations had been no more significant.

Jamie sat up and shivered. He tried to picture Mr. Repler sitting in his identically tiny kitchen, close to the wood stove, not wearing his thick black overcoat. It took more than a bit of imagination. He'd never seen him without that coat of his. Always, and in any weather, the old man trudged the city streets as if impelled. Not that there weren't others, of course ... Homeless derelicts who moved with instinctive aimlessness down alleys, pausing at trash can fires to warm their callused hands. But he wondered, glancing about the room curiously, what it would be like to be that old and still have only ... *this*.

He got up and approached the wall, listening. There was still movement over there, but no longer in the kitchen. He decided that Mr. Repler was preparing himself for his morning stroll. No doubt Social Security allowed him the eccentricity, perhaps with the help of the Salvation Army. And it was possible that he was covered by insurance and Medicare, although he seemed healthy enough with all that walking. At least he was spared of trying to survive on an endless string of minimum wage stints as a print shop sweeper, groundskeeper, or grocery clerk. Jobs lost, inevitably, to what Jamie considered "personality conflict." Maybe the old man even had connections to relatives or friends somewhere, and hadn't been booted free of his family in a not-quite-forgotten past. But when you boiled away all the pretense, that was all it was—survival.

Jamie went into the kitchen and opened the stove grate. Scooping some soot and nails off the bottom with his hand, he shoved several jagged pieces of wood into the opening. Then he tore a dozen pages out of a National Geographic

from a stack of them he'd obtained at the Mission. *Rogue wave rising over an enormous trough breaks over the Supertanker Esso Netherland—loaded with Persian Gulf crude oil off the Cape of Good Hope* one caption read. His eyes tracked in the slanted morning light. Breath misted in front of him. Preparing to strike a match, Jamie heard a voice—faint emanations from Mr. Repler, talking to himself again. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone was just perceptibly parental.

He crouched into the pantry, placing his ear against the particle-board panel which separated the two pantries, and thought he heard the words "Not much longer now" before a door closed. But he couldn't be sure. The sound was unnaturally hollow, as through a tunnel. And then, because Mr. Repler was gone, the house returned to its usual cold silence.

He spent the day at the employment office, applying for what benefits might still be left to him. The place was filled with mostly bored, young blacks wearing jeans, although there were occasional executive types in suit and tie who sat—it seemed to Jamie—as if they were above it all. What eye contact was made was brief. One fat white woman with too much lipstick and a red scarf drawn over her bund of hair played solitaire across two folding chairs. A man in a Stetson, leaning back and studying the fly-specked rows of fluorescents overhead, idly tapped a pool-cue case beneath his boot. And yet Jamie lingered until closing before lifting the lapels of his worn leather jacket against the bleak and already-dimming skyline.

Irritable at having been offered a Tec school grant to study welding instead of either a job or benefits, he walked westward, glancing back over his shoulder compulsively. The downtown buildings reflecting the crimson sunset seemed to stand obliquely, as if unwilling to face that abandoned zone of poverty—the slums and tenements of the indigent. Down the elevated bypass which swathed across the perimeters of the west end whisked carloads of city workers, their destination the untainted promontory of the middle class. From a hundred ramps and back road parking lots the glittering python had been summoned, but already it had become segmented as the bulk of the snake like scales, reflecting the dying sun, was shunted north. Soon the stilted ribbon of concrete was thrummed only intermittently as Jamie walked under it.

Returning hurriedly to the apartment, Jamie caught glimpses of street people, their shadows stretched in front of them in the growing gloom. Exhaust pattered from solitary cars roving narrow back streets. Smoke rose from chimneys and mouths. Two scarfed black men stood framing the rusted Coca Cola sign on the front of the barred-up Pauli's Superette, slowly rocking and staring. Their words were muffled, unintelligible.

Nearer his street now, Jamie saw him—Mr. Repler in his big black overcoat. The old man moved methodically, stepping over the broken and buckling sidewalk. Then he paused at a grate near the corner to let the hem of his coat billow slightly in the rising warmth. Was he off on another trek? Jamie hesitated, but decided not to follow.

That night he ate at the Rescue Mission at the end of the street. The neon cross outside sputtered JESUS SAVES against the darkness. First everyone listened to brother Shoemaker's sermon on the evils and sins of alcohol, then afterward they were served meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and corn donated by an eastside A&P because the cans had begun to rust. It tasted good, though. None of the men, although mostly transients, ever grumbled.

Back in the apartment, Jamie climbed the ladder into the attic through the trap door in the kitchen ceiling, hoping to find wood not essential to the skeleton framework of the house. He had intended to replenish his supply by ripping some boards from the condemned boarding house on the next block, as he'd seen a woman pulling a red wagon do. But it was late now, and the previous night he'd been forced to walk the six miles home after his boss fired him.

He lit a match and held it to one side, squinting. Well, well. The old man had installed a bulb. He reached across the rafter as far as he could and pulled the short chain. The bulb lit, swaying and throwing his distorted shadow behind him. Maybe the old man had electric heat now. He waved the match into smoke and began looking around.

The ceiling boards sagged. The twin metal chimney pipes were sooty with leaks. What insulation lay between the rafters was stained and smelled moldy. But he saw why the old man had put in the light. Over to one side, near the opposite trap door, were half a dozen low wooden boxes. Beside these were several hand tools on what looked like a

restaurant chopping block. There was a claw hammer, a pair of pliers, a chisel, and a hacksaw.

Crawling along the rafters, he edged closer. His shadow reached it sooner. Poised carefully, the light behind him now, he stretched to pull free one of the boxes lids. Then he breathed into his hands and slid beside it.

At first he thought there was nothing inside. He put his arm into the opening and came out with a handful of straw. Something moist dewed the pale strands. He smelled it and returned it to the box, disgusted. Then he opened another box. It too was empty, except for the straw.

Suddenly, he heard a door open, somewhere below. Mr. Repler's apartment. He reached behind him and pulled the chain. The darkness which rushed around him felt thick and close, almost cloying. Mr. Repler walked into the kitchen, directly below. He could hear the old man breathing heavily, as if in pain. For a long time, just standing there, breathing. Was he looking up at the attic trap door? But now Mr. Repler was fumbling in the sink. There was the sound of silverware again. Something was taken out of the pantry. A meal was being prepared. After a few minutes he went into the other room and a rustling followed, like a paper sack being inverted. Repler began to mumble to himself again. *Or was he alone?*

Jamie resisted the urge to bend closer, and began sliding backward, along the rafters. Touching Repler's chimney in passing, he discovered it warm. Had it been burning all along? Gingerly, he let himself down into his kitchen, thinking

that tomorrow he would find firewood. For tonight he would burn the National Geographics.

The next morning was the same. Mr. Repler was up early and out by eight o'clock. Jamie watched him walking away along the uneven slabs with quick, short steps, the lapels of his coat drawn up beneath his ears in protection. Where was he going? Considering it, Jamie realized he'd never seen the old man at the Mission.

Jamie burned the remaining magazines, washed himself, and changed clothes. Through his kitchen window he saw Mr. Repler turn the far corner, his gait slow but energetically steady, and looking like a mannequin being trotted along invisibly.

Unable to find distraction, or any comfort in the opportunity, Jamie made his decision as a way of relieving his anxiety. He lowered the trap door and climbed into the attic. Hesitantly, then, he crawled across to the other side, intently listening. But why was he so careful? Surely there was no one in the house but him.

He pushed on the opposite trap. It squealed and he stopped. Through a two-inch opening, he could see into the kitchen now. There were dishes everywhere. Cordwood was stacked in one corner, about hip-high. In the open grate he saw several embers glowing dully on a bed of white ash. Another chopping block was propped in the sink, with an oval stain across it from the dripping faucet. Carefully, he pushed the trap down so he could see into the next room. An unmade bed and a round table with an aquarium near the center. As he suspected, the apartment was empty.

He forced himself to descend. His heart quickened at the prospect at being caught. But what could the old man do? Call the police? He didn't have a phone. Jamie grinned, feebly. If he wanted, he could clean the place out, chuck his mattress, and check into the YMCA. Looking around, however, he decided there was probably nothing worth stealing except the wood.

In the living room he switched on the light. It certainly was warm, he thought, noting the filament space heater which stood beside one discolored wall. He stepped over the scattered newspapers to the card table, and put his hand into the aquarium. The straw at the bottom was also spotted, damp. Four other aquariums, their glass lids ajar, lined the hardwood floor.

He went back into the kitchen, not knowing what to do. In the silence the old, battered Frigidaire—which in Jamie's apartment was used to store wood—coughed into a wheezing hum. He grasped the rusted handle firmly and pulled it open.

At first he didn't know what he was looking at. Then the smell hit him. Beneath a 25 watt appliance bulb and stretched across two bent wire-mesh shelves lay the bloody hindquarters of a freshly killed animal, wrapped loosely in plastic. By the feet, he guessed dog. Blundering back into the stove, he also saw that below this were various fruits and vegetables—carrots, onions, bananas, oranges, and apples. None of these were even remotely fresh.

Letting the door swing shut, he stooped and turned away, tightly closing his eyes. When he opened them again he was looking into the grate, where he could see sawed sections of

bones propping open the flue. The ash was very white. So white that the image did not fade when, briefly, he closed his eyes even tighter.

He stood, looking up at the trap. He was beginning to feel nauseous now. Then, as he was about to ascend, he noticed the closed pantry door. Not wanting to, but feeling compelled, he paused to twist the knob and nudge the door open with his foot.

The shelves inside were lined with skulls. Canine and feline. Beneath a row of glasses were several stacks of torn magazines. Glossy photos of nude women. He kneeled almost involuntarily, reaching for a small skull among others. Practically indistinguishable, except by shape.

The skull of a baby.

He turned it over and over in his hands, staring as if at a relic. Then the rush of blood as he stood was accompanied by three sick plunges in his throat, and he dropped it, absently. It fell onto a burlap sack and rolled off against the particle board at the back ... Had it come to this? He staggered backward. His chest felt as if someone had hit him. Clutching his throat and looking down, he saw that the vomit-stained sack in the pantry was moving. He glanced quickly around for something, anything! A knife from the sink—he poked it at the sack. The sack flapped, once, twice. Angrily, he flailed at it. Again, the burlap seemed to respond to the attack, this time by folding in on itself and emitting a very low mewing sound. Appalled, he lifted it with the knife. Beneath the sack was a bat. It's wings had been cut out, like sails from rigging. The bat had a dog's face, like a Pekingese.

It was a vampire.

He heard movement in the yard. Glancing out, he saw that it was only a stray dog, emaciated, alone. But the distraction broke his attention and allowed him to flee. He climbed up into the attic, frantically, and pulled the trap shut behind him. There were the wooden boxes. He scrambled back to his own side, heedless.

In his apartment he paced, back and forth, from front door to kitchen. Should he go to the police? What would he say? Done with waiting, he decided to confront Mr. Repler first. Or at least to follow him.

He traced the route he'd seen the old man take down Ferris street to the train depot. Passing an auto graveyard, he watched as a gray sedan was lowered into the crusher. Beside the giant crane was a hooded man haloed in sparks, welding something. Wistfully, Jamie imagined that it might have been him.

As morning slipped into afternoon he found it harder to concentrate on the images troubling him, and he sought company at the Brown Derby pool hall. The Texan from the employment office was there, straddling a worn leather stool, waiting. Smoke drifted lazily. Had constant need to survive broken Mr. Repler's sanity? Or, Jamie mused, was it the loneliness at being discarded as no longer productive? Perhaps the old man was only a victim now, like so many who'd let dignity slip away one glance at a time. Somehow, though, he knew the explanation wasn't adequate. He was rationalizing.

He left the Brown Derby and went to the YMCA to inquire about a room. The director was curt in dismissing him. Would he try again next week? Would he consider the floor of the gym for tonight?

He walked the gray streets for miles. Twilight came on subtly, in imperceptible gradations. Passing a policeman writing a ticket to a teenager in a dark blue Camaro, he paused. But they were arguing now. With a contemptuous gesture toward both, he walked on under the cloud-crowded sky. Nearer his apartment, he saw an old alcoholic climbing stairs into a bar, steadying himself on the rail. Through the window of a service station he saw where a tired attendant saw in a wooden chair, head in hands, with only a credit card imprinter and a symmetrical stack of oil cans visible in the bare room.

As he approached the house, his anxiety increased. Should he try to stay at the Mission? Brother Shoemaker would be sure to notice him, though. If he appeared too conspicuous, or they were forced to make too much fuss over him, he would be surely labeled as a freeloader. Being unable to blend in with the other transients, then, he'd be denied meals in the future.

Seeing no light in Mr. Repler's windows, he went in and found his own room similarly dark and cold. Cursing himself inwardly for not remembering to get wood, he lit a candle and listened at the pantry door. Nothing. Dimly, he imagined himself stealing some of the old man's wood. But the thought of crawling over there again repulsed him. Instead he glanced up at the trap.

Through a minute crevice, due to the misalignment of the door, he saw light in the attic. But hadn't he turned it off that morning? Of course he had. His breath caught in his throat. His arms sagged, and the candle was gutted. The thin band of light now split the room like a razor.

He stood for what seemed a lifetime, listening. But he could hear nothing but the faint sweep of traffic along the distant bypass. *Where were those people going?* he wondered. Somewhere safe, probably. Safe and warm.

Slowly, his hand reached for the dangling chain. He drew the trap down an inch at a time. At least his didn't squeak.

He peered up, apprehensively. The attic was empty. Even Mr. Repler's boxes, whatever they might once have contained, were gone. Suddenly, he realized that the old man had moved out.

He crawled across, pausing now and again to listen. And there cautiously descended into the dark kitchen.

A low and now thinly-veiled moon illuminated an empty sink. The pantry door was open and murky. He tried the switch but nothing happened. Perhaps he'd taken the light bulbs too, forgetting about the one in the attic.

He walked through the living room to the front door. Nothing impeded his progress. No bed, table, or aquariums. He tried the door and found it locked. A double-keyed deadbolt.

Returning to the kitchen, he had begun stacking the remaining cordwood across his left arm when he felt it. A slight pull of air. Puzzled, he stopped for a moment, and then, horrified, realized that he'd neglected to lock his own front

door. A sound like shuffling, although exaggerated through the traps and the cold, conductive medium of the attic, came to him hushed. In terror, he considered the possibility that the reverse might also be true, and numbed by the thought, cradled the wood in his arm like a sleeping baby. Then the silence returned, as if he'd just imagined it all. *Or were they both waiting, listening?*

Blood hammered his temples, a sluggish throbbing that was enough to erase the feeble sounds of traffic. He clamped shut his eyes and tried to think of a face. His mother's, busy about the stove? His father's, driving him around the block in his striped yellow taxi? No ... Those images wouldn't hold, kept shifting. He saw instead the blurred faces of street people. Faces which appeared on corners for a day, or a week, that just when you thought you knew them would vanish and be replaced. He saw Mr. Repler's face too, or what he could remember of it. How old might such a face be? Sixty? Eighty? Eight *hundred*?

He smiled at the thought. But not long.

He could hear the mumbling now. Distinct, unmistakable. When he realized it was not coming from inside his own head, and that something was indeed moving through the attic above him, he dropped the wood back across the pile and went to the front windows. But they were tight, shut on rusted hasps. The handle would not budge.

He stepped back and kicked. One pane shattered. Jagged pieces hung from the mildewed frame. He kicked again. This time the frame cracked and another pane exploded into fragments. But the pieces would not fall out. The struck the

woven mesh screen and heaped in a pile, like shards of ice in moonlight.

The breeze which wafted around him chilled him, and he turned. Mr. Repler's mouth bore a twisted, almost toothless grin where he stood in the middle of the room, facing him. His fingers worked on undoing his heavy black coat. Jamie pulled back one fist, instinctively.

"You get out of here, old man," he said, his voice almost pleading.

Repler's smile faded, not really a smile at all. His face seemed suddenly older—old and pathetically tired. "I've almost made it," he said, hoarsely. "But the help I've had isn't enough."

"You're still sick," Jamie agreed, "whatever help you've had."

"That's why I've come back to you," said Repler. "To see if I can be ... like you. Did you turn me in?"

"I should have. Maybe I still will."

"Will you?" the old man asked, opening his coat.

Inside, surrounding his thin and haggard frame—as if in protection—were nestled hundreds of bats, hanging wingless, close. Their eyes reflected red, dully. Their faces were twisted miniatures of Repler's own face, piteous but rapacious.

As Jamie groped for a piece of jagged glass behind him, they waited for his reply.

THE NEXT BESTSELLER

(originally published in *Blue Murder* magazine)

August 2

Dear Sir,

While we at Stillwater Press appreciate your considering us as a possible publisher for your "latest potential bestseller," we nonetheless find it inappropriate for our audience, which consists mainly of formerly devout Catholics in search of inner peace as they leave the faith to follow humanistic, non-religious lifestyles. In other words, we do not publish advice or self help books purportedly rendered by fictitious and/or mythic gods or goddesses. Your suggested title ZEUS COMES OUT, while amusing, would hardly resonate with our readers, nor would any of the other titles which you propose for the book, such as THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ZEUS, or ZEUS ON MARS—AND VENUS, or ZEUS VISITS MAIN STREET—AND WALL STREET, and especially not CHICKEN SOUP, ANYONE?—FAVORITE RECIPES FROM MT. OLYMPUS. No doubt you have tried all the major publishing houses with your "latest potential bestseller" under these and other titles, and they too have turned you down. And so you have come to us, now, desperate but perhaps naive, thinking that we are somehow naive as well.

Normally, as you must be painfully aware, when a publisher rejects a book, it returns the book with a pre-printed form rejection letter or slip, sometimes of pastel color, saying what I am saying here: ie., that it "doesn't meet our needs at this time." I am taking the time to write you this

letter because you may not be getting the message, even after receiving a sufficient number of such rejection letters to compress into slow burning logs and keep a family of four warm for the Montana winter. What am I saying? Simply that no one is going to publish this book, sir. Do you understand? No one. Not Bantam, not Warner, not HarperCollins, not Aardvark Press of Newark. Not even St. Martins. If you want it published, I suggest calling the 800 number to Vantage Press, and getting out your checkbook. Although I must tell you, even they may be reluctant. For whoever publishes your "latest potential bestseller," it will inevitably be used as fill under freeways once it bombs on the thrift shop circuit at ten cents a copy.

Somehow I feel the need to emphasize this, and to rephrase it for you. You will never be on Oprah either, sir. Trust me. You won't even be reviewed by the Wickenburg Sentinel or the Clucksbury Gazette. The only radio you will ever be heard on is Channel 14, but only if you happen to own a CB. The truckers who hear you will probably switch to Channel 15, or tune in Waylon Jennings on the AM once they hear whatever title you ultimately arrive at choosing. Am I getting through to you yet? If I didn't have a conscience, I would suggest a book doctor or editorial service which will charge you two thousand dollars only to make your manuscript even less marketable, but many of those people are now either in jail or under indictment.

Give it up, sir, and get a life! You do not need to do this to yourself. Did you know there are literally hundreds of thousands of bored housewives, plumbers, sales clerks,

bartenders, and college professors who, just like yourself, also hope to add "published author" to their name, and are willing to give up their other identities, their free time, their hobbies, their friends, and even their religions to do it? Do you have any idea how many people are writing books and screenplays, many of which are actually good, but which will never, ever see the light of day? Here's the bottom line: If you're not famous already—if someone would not actually go out of their way for your autograph already—you have a better chance playing the lottery, sir. That's the truth, or the Pope's not Catholic. And I'm talking about if you have a good book to sell, which you and half a million other people just like you do not. Do you understand any of this?

We are a tiny press, sir, with a niche audience. By "we," of course, I mean just me and my wife Allison, when she isn't selling real estate or burping the baby. If I thought you had a creamsickle's chance in hell of having a "potential bestseller" here, do you not think that I would snatch it and buy it instead of using the time I've set aside for cutting the grass to write you this letter? Why am I doing this? I am asking myself this question, now. Call it charity, a favor. You owe me big time, I think, sir. In fact, I've just now decided to do you yet another monumental favor by destroying your manuscript instead of returning it. The U.S. Postal Service and my ex-lawyer Bernie both tell me that anything which I receive unbidden in the mail becomes my property to do with as I please. I can only pray that you do not possess another copy of this "potential bestseller" to continue your charade, and I

do not want to know if you do. I will sleep better that way,
my service to humanity realized.

Someday you will, perhaps, thank me for curing you of this
addiction, sir, which can be just as overwhelming and time-
wasting as sports addictions or counting one's rosaries. Let us
leave the bestseller lists to the famous, the lucky, and
moderately gifted, and get on with our lives, shall we? I see
no other way to maintain sanity in an unfair, superficial, and
illiterate world.

Sincerely, regretfully, mercifully,
Simon O. Schwartz, publisher

* * * *

August 9

Dear Editor,

I've enclosed a copy of the potential bestseller I believe
you've been looking for all your life. It's title is, simply, YING
AND YANG'S GUIDE TO LIFE AND DEATH. I've been working
for 48 hours without sleep or food, and am now satisfied that
this is my final draft. It feels complete, and so do I.

Hopefully yours,
Walter H. Pascot, Jr.

* * * *

August 15

Dear Mr. Pascot,

I believe we have passed on this manuscript before. The
title has changed, as have the characters to whom you imbue
your bizarre viewpoints on various aspects of family life, the

arts, religion, and philosophy. I would suggest that you consult an editorial service or book doctor to get your thoughts in line, and I would be happy to suggest one for you. However, we at Hammonds-Rickter Publishing of Omaha will have to decline this {and all future correspondence} from you. Best of luck to you in the future as you continue to pursue your literary career.

Cordially yours,

Bernard Apperson, editorial assistant {and ex-lawyer}

* * * *

August 29

Dear Editor,

Enclosed find my manuscript titled THE 12 STEP PROGRAM FOR SPORTS FANATICS. It has the potential to be a bestseller, as you will soon see. Do you have any idea how many people—how many plumbers, bankers, sales clerks, and chimney sweeps are addicted head over heels to sports? It is totally insane, what people are doing to themselves. And for what? Just to watch some overpaid "god" or "goddess" toss a ball into a goal? There are other things in life to think about besides sports, and we need to get back to those things. Now, at last, here's help!

Game, Set, and Match?

Walter H. Pascot, Jr.

* * * *

Sept. 4

Dear Mr. Pascot,

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

We enjoyed reading the opening to your book, but we here at Dobbs Ford/Honda/Jeep primarily publish car owners manuals and not literary works to be sold in bookstores. May I suggest calling Vantage Press, in your telephone book's yellow pages? Hope that helps.

Best,

Eddie Hatcher, printer's apprentice

PS} Your book's title doesn't seem to match the manuscript you sent us. Not much about sports here, just other stuff. What's wrong with sports, anyway?

* * * *

Sept. 18

Dear Editor,

Enclosed find my latest manuscript, titled THE OFFICIAL GANG GRAFFITI FIELD GUIDE. As you know, the symbols found scrawled on buildings and subway cars can sometimes be indecipherable. You can't stop it, so why not try to understand it? Surprisingly, these "young punk taggers" are really misunderstood artists and poetic philosophers with real points of view, which they are trying to express. Craving a meaningful identity and some meaning in life, they too deserve to be heard, and to have their language interpreted. Here in this book everything is explained, allowing both the layman and streetwalker alike to learn as much as if they had graduated from gang skool in the 'hood. Certainly, given the millions spent on graffiti cleanup each year, this book will be the next bestseller. So...

Whatdayasay?

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

Wally Pascot, Jr.

* * * *

Oct. 6

Dear Wally,

I'm afraid the handwriting's on the wall on this one. No go. Nice try, though. Are you aware that we are being sued by nine school districts in four states? It would therefore be inappropriate for us to publish such a book, even if we felt there was any hope the public might buy it. I would suggest you try finding a small press with a niche market for such humor. I've enclosed a case of sample spray paints in case that doesn't work out, but good luck anyway.

Best wishes,

John Cordlandt, VP, Richland Publishing, a division of
Truebright Paint Products

* * * *

Nov. 27

Dear Editor,

Enclosed find my manuscript, titled THE NEXT BESTSELLER. You will note that I have left off my name from the manuscript. I wish to be referred to as "Anonymous." The novel is about a man who mails letter bombs to publishers, book reviewers, and agents with whom he has—or has not—had dealings with in the past. He is a philosopher, a bit of a poet, and now follows the outline of his last unpublished novel, which is discovered in his abandoned apartment in manuscript form. He is a driven man, with repressed urges

and desires—a lonely man with a twisted past, and an obsession to be recognized and published at any cost. He has spent his entire adult life writing, while calling out for pizza and avoiding family or potential friends. An abused child with limited self esteem, his primary diversion has—indeed—been surfing internet web sites linked to porn and high explosives. But once, late at night, he called out for pizza and got the Oval Office by mistake. The President told him a secret, again by mistake. Pres told the CIA. So now he is in hiding, fearing for his life. Why? Because they have traced his phone call, afraid he will publish what he knows. He is on the run, this sick, twisted killer, but still angry at everyone in general, and the press in particular.

Et tu?

Anon

* * * *

Dec. 9

Dear Anon,

We have read your manuscript with great interest. The vivid imagery of the writing is evident throughout, and the anger which forms the motive force behind the plot is incredibly believable. Your main character possesses an original flair for succinct truths and askance moralizing which does not detract from his obsessive compulsion to exact revenge on those who have snubbed him. The novel has all the elements we look for in a story, too, including dramatic tension, intrigue, irony, wit, and insight into the human dilemma. Told with such power and imagination, we wonder

what your real name is, and have, in fact, a pool of editors and janitors here who have placed bets that you are really Stephen King, James Lee Burke, Tom Wolfe, Christopher Buckley, or William F. Buckley. Which is it? It is difficult to decide, as your writing possesses elements from all these writers. It is enigmatic and fascinating, too, the references you make to Greek gods, and to gang graffiti, basketball, the Papacy, and the U.S. Postal Service. We are still trying to figure out how all the subplots fit together so well, and how you managed to achieve it. We really believe you have a potential bestseller here, and would like your permission to publish the manuscript in hardcover, and to represent it to a major house for paperback and audio rights. Our standard contract is for fifty percent of subsidiary and foreign rights, including movie rights, but we are prepared to offer you seventy-five percent as your share, if you sign with us within the coming week. Please contact us or have your agent contact us regarding a negotiable advance on royalties. {I see no reason why we cannot talk six figures, here. I will mortgage my house for it, if I have to.} You will not be on Oprah, of course. After all, this is not her kind of book, and you do wish to remain Anonymous, right? But we can almost guarantee a Book of the Month club main selection, and quotes from every big wig in the business, including, perhaps, the President of the United States himself.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to my attention. The discolored and soiled envelope really spooked me, I have to admit. Especially since there was no return address, and it had oil stains, and a piece of wire sticking out. But all's well

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

that end's well, they say. And yours does end well. Very well, indeed, sir.

Gratefully, respectfully yours,
Thomas F. Sinclair, President
Aardvark Press

NOVEL EXCERPTS:

From FAME ISLAND

(originally published by Blackstone Audio, narrated by Emmy winning actor Kristoffer Tabori. Now an e-book at Fictionwise.com. About a lotto winner who secretly intends to be famous for more than just 15 minutes ... by disappearing!)

* * * *

1

Just for the record, let me tell you about Sal Valente. Picture a fat, middle-aged former union thug with one rolled up cotton sleeve revealing a tattoo of himself. Sal's a redhead whose perpetually rosy cheeks are not due to embarrassment, but rather from being slapped so often his chameleon face had long decided to stay that way. Flush and ready to print anything, he has come to inhabit a once tidy wood-paneled office with a nasty green Amazon parrot in a antique brass cage, and there he sits behind a cluttered mahogany desk with his hands resting palms-up on the edge. Call me delusional, but his wriggling fingers always reminded me of the legs of giant Brazilian roaches trying to turn over and escape being featured on page fourteen of the *Celebration*. That would be Benny's column on the bizarre in the world of science. Oh, and Sal's voice? It's not unlike the Godfather's, but with a pronounced nasal quality, as though he'd spent too much time underwater. Salt water, by the look of his red eyes.

"What ya got there for me, Jude?" Sal asked me, rendering his patented don't-disappoint-me stare. "Another humor column, I hope?"

Sal worked in a meat packing plant in Dallas before coming to Miami to take the reins of the tabloid. No one knew exactly what his connections were to get the job, but it was rumored he'd done some sort of illegal service for Martin Weinstein, the little prick publisher of the *Celeb-Ration*. The job probably involved the breaking of bones. Wishbones, most likely, because whatever education Sal possessed in the area of magazine editing and English grammar wouldn't have been able to parse *The Cat in the Hat*.

"What I've got," I replied, "is a migraine, Sal. Sorry, but have you got anything real for *me* is the better question. That's why I come in here with this hang dog look, see it? Any leads on the South Beach party tonight?"

"Stick to satire," Sal said. "Mark and Russ are coverin' that."

I sighed. Mark Messna and Russ Wells were fresh out of journalism school at FSU, having failed to make the recruiting cut to the Miami Herald or the Orlando Dispatch. True, they hadn't picked up anything of compromise in the way of ethics or self respect as roomies in college, thanks to frat parties and online term paper purchases. But their actual field experience was limited to those contacts who scouted for resumes, not for celebrities snorting coke with known felons. The little matter of how to keep their student loan creditors from holding a pocket mirror to their noses as they slept in a dumpster had brought them to Sal in the first place. And Sal,

being inept at everything but delegation himself, always admired desperation more than he did credentials. In this way he was similar to the old curmudgeon he'd replaced, back when I'd first applied, after my failed career as a travel writer.

"You know, Giselle is supposed to be there tonight," I said, angling to be included somehow while I voiced my complaint.

"Forget 'er, she's eye candy," Sal declared. "Too skinny, anyways."

I chuckled as I admired the cheese Danish next to his telephone console. "Too skinny for what?"

"Huh?"

"Anyway, you can't be too skinny or too rich," I reminded him, quoting a fashion bible I hadn't read in a long time.

"Oh no?" Sal said. "Then what was that series on anorexic stars ya did last year?"

"That was different," I told him.

"How zit different? *Nevermind*. Look. If ya gotta get outta the office and write somethin' that might actually get us *sued* ... well, ya come up with your own dirt, okay? Just remember—I need something big. Unusual. Gimme somethin' with teeth."

"You mean like the biggest Everglades croc? What?"

"I dunno. What do I pay you for? Fadricate something."

"You mean *fabricate*?"

"Yeah. That's it."

"Lie?"

"Well, ya don't have ta do that, exactly," Sal said. He swiped at a fly, slapping his tattoo in the process. Then he

picked up his cheese Danish and studied it. "Just make sure it's big and juicy," he said, and sank his yellow incisors into the pastry. "And be careful out there."

"Right," I told him. "Thanks for your wonderful input, Sal."

He glanced up as I was leaving, and clutched the three new Hollywood News satire pieces I'd reluctantly just airplaned him. "Hey, Jude," he said, still chomping on pastry.

I frowned as I turned at the door. "Yeah?"

"Good rhymes-with-luck."

* * * *

I was reading the society pages of the Herald in Clancy's Bar on west 13th Street off Biscayne when Julio Martinez finally showed up twenty minutes late with some guy in an open denim vest looking to show off his washboard stomach. The tight, tough little weasel was introduced to me as Carlos Figueroa, a local pool shark with bleached hair who wanted to be called Carl. They both slid into the tooled red leather booth opposite me and ordered a pitcher of Dos Equis Amber. I studied their vacant expressions as a wan sense of queasy disquietude invaded my torpor.

"So what's new?" Julio asked me, dredging up a smile that left his teeth hidden. "Been a while. Where ya been? Busy?"

I contemplated my prospects grimly. Here was Julio, a thirty year old doorman at the Fontainebleau Hotel, and sometimes stringer for our rag, wasting my time by asking me nothing original. I figured if he had a story, and 'Carl' was partner to it, they would be probably angle for a cash advance next. And since Sal appeared to be abandoning me

for younger talent, that meant any upfront cash might come out of my own pocket.

"Yeah, lots going on," I lied in reply. "Busy week. Now, please tell me something I don't know."

Julio looked me over with a flat scan, like an x-ray for hidden malignancies. Then he nodded around at the bar, a comforting space that nodded back—an earthy, enveloping cocoon from which one might never want to emerge. "Hey, Jude," he said to the mostly empty booths around us, "lookin' almost human. Lose some weight, or what?"

Almost. The word was key. I didn't look down at my visible paunch. It knew it was still there. I knew that *Julio* knew, too. I made an indelible impression. Still, his detectibly nervous attitude had more of my attention for the moment. "No," I replied, dully. "You don't sit around swilling beer with stringers and snitches, and come out of it looking like Val Kilmer."

"Who?" Carl asked.

"George Clooney," I told him.

"Oh," Carl said. "Oh."

"Doesn't Jude look like Nick Nolte to you?" Julio asked Carl.

"Who?"

"Drew Carey," I said.

"Oh," Carl says. "No."

I sighed again. "A *younger* Nick Nolte, before his bad hair days and boot from the B list. Now cut the crap, and tell me what you got."

"We ... need to talk about price first, Judy," Julio confided, his deceptive green prizefighter's eyes dancing around mine with obvious caution.

"Price? Who am I, Bob Barker? Try that one on Ebay."

"This is big, Jude dude," Julio declared.

"Big," I repeated, recalling Sal's use of the word.

"The biggest," Julio insisted.

"Let me guess. One of the Grays landed on top of the Fontainebleau last night, took over the penthouse, and ordered room service. Its instructions were to snooker the human race, so it wanted to learn how to play the game from Carl here, first. Am I right?"

"You're close," Julio said.

I leaned back and studied him. His pretty boy face didn't change expression. The pitcher of Dos Equis came, and I accepted it to refill my own glass. Then when the waitress left with my credit card, Julio leaned closer and commanded my attention by lowering his head a bit and raising his eyes.

"A thousand bucks each," he said.

"How's that?" I blinked rapidly, and accidentally spilled beer onto my shirt, then brushed it away into little droplets that landed on Carl and prompted a similar reaction.

"Five thousand more if you want us to keep our mouths shut."

"Each," Carl added, his tone cryptic.

I laughed, like a spasm, then looked between them as though between nuns after being ass kicked. "Wait a minute. What are you trying to—"

"Per day, plus expenses," said Carl. Then he nodded at Julio for approval, and Julio nodded back. They had begun to enjoy this.

"You can't be—"

Julio waved over at me like a traffic cop, and leaned in. "We *are*, though, Judy. Very serious. Can't you see that?"

I downed my beer in one long guzzle, then refilled my glass. "What is it?" I asked again. "You know an old fart doorman named Elvis, and you got the DNA to prove he's the King?"

"Better," Julio said, and now let some teeth into his smile. "No one would want to see Elvis now, anyway. He'd look like you, plus twenty years and minus the hair, except for what's growing in his ears. Maybe a couple more pounds, too."

"Thanks," I said, just before imagining the aging heartthrob on The Larry King Show, now a bloated whale blowing blood from his nose while he complained that the paparazzi were oh so cruel. "Who, then?"

Julio picked up the Herald from beside me. Gently, like it contained either a gram of plutonium inside or the World's Largest Silverfish. "We got a deal?"

"Do you think we have?" I asked.

He nodded. "I think so."

"Then let's say we do. Theoretically."

"Wait a minute," Carl interjected. "Where's the thousand?"

"I'll write you an I.O.U.," I told him.

"Why not a check?"

"Checks can be stopped, and they can bounce."

"Yeah, but ... we can't take an I.O.U. to the bank," smart boy Carl complained.

Julio waved a hand at Carl, dismissively. "We'll take it to his boss if we have to, no problema. If he won't cash it, we'll sell it to Vinnie Mustafa." He looked back at me. "He's a local gangster Carl knows. Likes gamey meat. Venison steaks, ostrich."

"Who cares what he likes to eat," Carl said, "long as he gets the job done?"

"I think Judy does," Julio replied.

"Quit with this stuff, already," I warned, "and spill it."

"The I.O.U. first." Julio aimed one forefinger at my gut. "Write it on a check, and sign it. Date it due Friday. Two thousand."

I did it. I didn't think he could cash it at the bank because his name wasn't I.O.U.. Julio took the check, then opened my newspaper as if to read. I looked for a silverfish, but there wasn't one.

"So?" I said.

"Hold on." He folded back a page, then slapped the paper back in front of me again, and tapped an image there.

I looked down.

It was an old image, but my eyes widened with interest anyway.

"Have we got a deal, my friend?" Julio asked. "Was I right?"

* * * *

With the Herald tucked securely under my arm, I reentered Sal's office with what might pass for a grin on another stoic's face. Sal was working on lunch by then. A Ruben on rye, with chips and a Miller Lite. He also talked on the speaker phone to some woman in Orlando who claimed to have a walking catfish in her parlor the size of Louie Anderson's cat. Sal used the *Celeb-Ration* to wipe sauce from his mouth. At least my satire column was good for something other than catching his parrot's droppings.

"Sal," I said, trying to interrupt.

Sal stabbed a finger toward the stained couch near the door, meaning for me to sit. But I declined. You don't sit to deliver the kind of news I had. If he didn't give me his undivided attention in the next minute, I decided to take what I had to the *Enquirer* in Lantana. Maybe I would anyway.

"Sssshit," said his bird.

"I'm not kidding, Sally," I whispered. And so when Sal finally clicked off I told him I needed five grand to pay a stringer for a lead on a story. Sal laughed, so I used his word on him, like he occasionally used my word—*bullseye*—on me.

"Big," I repeated the word. "You wanted big, right? This is big."

He frowned at me. "That was quick. How big ... is *big*?"

"The biggest," I said. "As in 'none are bigger.'"

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Howard Rosen big?"

I shot him an index finger, and made a clucking sound while my grin cracked an area of my face rarely used.

"Bullseye."

"So what is it?" he asked me. "Jacko went to confessional, and the priest wants ta sell ya the transcript, or whaaat?"

"It's better than that," I told him. "It's Howard Rosen, himself."

He gave me a quick brayed belly laugh, but stopped short when he eyed Rosen's photo on his desk. Then his eyes' fleshy rims stretched back to reveal the red pulp around his veined whites. I understood his reaction, too, although his trust in my veracity came as a surprise. Because Howard Rosen had not merely won the largest lotto jackpot in the history of the world a month previously, but he'd delayed coming forward, then promptly vanished with \$358 million and change, *after* taxes. A bad year-old photo of his face was featured on the cover of *Newsweek*, a copy of which lay within view on the edge of Sal's desk. The big question mark beside Howard's face was WHO IS THIS MAN—AND WHERE? No one knew for sure because Rosen apparently spent his life savings to hire a computer hacker to erase his identity just before he cashed in. Between the time of verification and followup—just after lump sum disbursement—the money had apparently been wired to some numbered offshore account, and Howard Rosen's records had vanished even from the Social Security mainframe via a targeted virus. With no close living relatives or friends, the reclusive self-employed bookkeeper had so far eluded the clamoring press, which quickly became ravenous for photos and interviews when his mystique grew to epic size.

"You got some idea where he *is*?" Sal now asked me in sudden nervous hysteria.

"Got a stringer does. Or rather, I mean, ah, his own stringer does." I watched Sal slump a bit at that. "I know," I said. "A stringer to a stringer ... but the guy claims to know the hotel Rosen is holed up in. Swears by everything Holy."

"Sssshit," said Sally the no-no bird. "Shiiiiit."

I had inadvertently laid my hand atop a pile of *Celebration* back issues on the other side of Sal's desk. Sal noticed, and regained his composure. Now he was in full retreat, backpedalling from his momentary display of blood lust. "Listen, Jude," he said, his tone already condescending, "there's been a hundred sightings, none of 'em panned out. Guy's got a homely face. Probably in Rio by now, spending some of that money on a yacht. And hookers."

"That what you'd do? Listen, Sal, imagine you're Howard. Would you leave the country right away, or would you wait until the press dies down? Hide out somewhere. Like maybe here. Miami. Gateway to all points south." I waited a beat for that to soak in. Then I said, "My guy knows a guy who's ID'ed Howard, Sal. Says he went out one night, stir crazy, ended up in a little pool hall across from the beach on Westwood Avenue. Place called The Blue Cue."

"Sssshit," repeated the bird. "Sssshit, sssshit, shiiiiit."

"No, it's not," I said. "The Blue Cue is where Carl hangs out. Carl played him, won a couple hundred bucks, then followed him. Howard's bleached his hair almost white, and shaved his mustache. Anyway, they threw Carl out of the hotel lobby, but not before he saw where Rosen got off the elevator. The indicator went all the way to the top. The penthouse."

"What hotel?"

"That's why I need the five grand," I lied.

Sal shook his head, then held his nose as he turned away. "Dead mackerel smell in here," he declared. "Barra—stinkin'—cuda."

"No, no, no," I insisted. "Carl said Howard was drinking Black Russians. Isn't that Howard's drink?"

"Read that in the Star. Who knows if it's true."

"He wore a school ring from Michigan State, too. Said his name was Barry, a carpet salesman from Kansas, on vacation."

It had been rumored that Howard had gone to MSU, but the rumor had never been verified. All of Howard's records from the community college that he *did* attend in Flint, Michigan had been wiped, and former classmates didn't return their calls for fear of a catastrophic invasion of privacy.

"*Barry?*" Sal chuckled, his transformation complete. "And you believe this numb nuts Carl whas his—"

"I believe Julio believes," I said, "and I know where Julio works."

Sal crunched on another handful of chips. The phone rang, but he ignored it. "Give'em a grand, then, tell'em he gets the rest if he's right. Then go stake it out."

"Already thought of that, Sal. Except I told'em two grand. They wouldn't budge. They want five or they're going to the Enquirer, asking for ten."

"Why don't they, and ask for twenty?"

I shrugged. "Julio knows me, is why. A bird in the hand."

"Stinky bird," Sal said, then glanced at the parrot. "A buzzard."

"Whatever. You really think to pass on this?"

Sal favored me with a steady, unblinking stare as the parrot cackled maniacally. "Ya really think me *that* deadbolt dumb?"

I didn't answer. I took his money, and ran with it.

* * * *

3

The FOR SALE sign in the window of Grover's camera shop and photography studio took me by somewhat less surprise than the establishment's smallness and shabbiness. Even though my own dreams may have been beaten down by Fate's fickle fist, I somehow always imagined Grover found the prestige and the security he craved. How wrong I'd been, and what a shock to discover there and then that Grover's dying dream consisted of an aging storefront next to a used appliance outlet. This, on a block the gangs had left for the winos to call home.

It was the fourth time in two years that I'd stopped by to see my old friend, since the day we'd dissolved our limited freelance partnership as travel writer and photographer. But it was the first time I'd actually gotten out of my car. I'd intended to tell Grover I was in Miami, those times when I only imagined I had a really good story to tell. Now, leaning closer to grip the rust-eaten bars that protruded from the ancient mortar of old red brick, I could see beyond the protective screen over the starred front window. And what I

saw was that the merchandise in the display cases was neither high-end nor abundant. The bright blue front door, newer and recently painted, was locked. I tried knocking, but in vain. Grover was not in.

If two years was a typical life span for the majority of new businesses that fail, it was certainly a much longer time to be out of touch with someone who'd once been a friend. I'd been nuts to avoid whatever brief embarrassment I imagined enduring, telling myself that when we'd split in a bar in Belize two years prior, the arrangement had been to meet wherever the dart we'd thrown landed in a world map a full *five* years later. But there it was. Chalk up two years of continued friendship now lost over a trifle.

I wrote down the number printed on the sign in the window. Then I walked resolutely toward the corner, past a drunk homeless man who gaped at the tall red brick edifice across the street, with its faded relic lettering LUCKY STRIKES. As I took out my cell phone, however, I reassessed my idea to ask Grover which hotel penthouse he thought I should investigate to save myself the five grand I'd otherwise have to fork over to the Laurel and Hardy boys. What would Grover really make of the fact that I was now a writer for a grocery store gossip rag in the very city to which I'd sworn never to return? And that the reason I'd never stopped by to say hi was because our five year 'old-times' pact hadn't yet expired? Did he still think I was out there somewhere, living out of a suitcase under direction from our former agent Phil, still thirty pounds thinner, swimming faster than the sharks? Obviously he did, unless he was a mindless reader of the

Celeb-Ration, and deciphered my pseudonym, which was Judy Johnson. Or J.J., as he sometimes called me, along with just plain Judy baby.

I flipped open my cell phone, but paused while I punched the digits as another thought struck me. What might have happened to Grover during the same two years I'd been avoiding him? I resurrected his face from memory, and imagined the possibilities. A Denzel Washington lookalike, Grover shared Denzel's last name, and might have been a trumpet player too had he been able to carry a tune. Perhaps he'd married in the interim, maybe had a kid too? Maybe he'd put on weight, gone partly bald, and discovered the joys of cable television. And what if his wife answered ... what would I say then?

Hi, this is J.J.. Your husband and I used to entertain stewardesses in various resort jacuzzis before our welcome ran out, and he burned out. Now I'm part of the paparazzi, and I may need Grover's expertise to help me find and film a reclusive multimillionaire for a front page tabloid exclusive. So ... can Grover come out to play now?

I closed my phone. I did so, not because it was three years too soon—the wrong place at the wrong time. And not to avoid embarrassment, either. I did it because the name Doral Golf Resort & Spa popped into my mind. Wasn't that where I'd go if I were looking for a private penthouse in Miami Beach? If cost was no object? And wasn't the Doral just across the bridge, not two miles from the pool hall where Carl claimed to have met Howard? A long shot, at best, but I realized that Grover could wait, for now. Howard might not.

I used my phone card in a nearby booth to make other inquiries, aided by a battered phonebook. Although several beach hotels with penthouses in the vicinity of *The Blue Cue* were available for lease, I soon learned that the Doral's penthouse was not. It being off season, the only question I was asked in return by the various desk clerks was whether I preferred to pay by Visa Platinum, Gold Master Card, or American Express. Before hanging up each time I asked them if they accepted Diners Club, and if Wolfgang Puck was still in residence.

* * * *

Boldness is a required trait for anyone who expects to make it as a peeper for a pulp paper. You also need to possess certain acting skills that would preclude you from an otherwise natural tendency to look over your shoulder, and draw suspicion. The best approach is a direct one, projecting that you belong where you do not. For this job, those in awe of celebrity and wealth need not apply. Let them be the *readers* rather than the *writers* of half truths, innuendoes, and postulations about whether some privileged headcase 'hotsie totsie' is doing their kid's nanny, downing Ecstasy pills like dinner mints, or dying of some rare tropical disease. For my part, I no longer had time to be in awe of anyone; and anyway, I knew the rich and famous didn't get that way by magic. Entry into their class had certain requirements, too. Besides winning the gene pool lottery with well-connected parents, these required traits included unbounded ambition, a lack of inhibition, a young and trim physique, a first-name

grasp of the "in" and "it" crowd, acting ability during interviews and required awards shows, street smarts, a trust fund, an ego-driven myopia, and luck. Or any three of the above.

I was feeling giddy, if not lucky, as I hoofed imperiously past the little sign *Guests Only Beyond This Point*. I neglected to wave at the security camera, and just gave it a George Clooney smile ... this, while my lopsided but self confident demeanor suggested Chris Tucker in a *Rush Hour* sequel. Or, rather, make that Jackie Chan in the hit musical *Kim Jung Il On Ice*.

Needing a prop to make it through the pool area and into the elevator, I purchased an eight dollar raspberry daiquiri at the bar, discarded the straw, downed half of it immediately, and set off past the buffet where chefs in ridiculous hats served prime rib and roast rack of lamb to unsmiling people in Gucci loafers and sandals. I drew a few stares from men with pony tails, but I decided that each of them was no one important, this season. To wit, no one on the hotel security staff. This gave my smile just the snooty edge it needed.

I strolled nonchalantly past the pool area, and drew a complimentary embossed towel from a stack of them, then draped it across my shoulder, and continued on. When I detected other eyes focused upon me, I waved at someone at the other end of the figure-eight shaped Olympic sized pool, over where the swim-up bar was. The old fart must have known another pudgy Nolte lookalike, or maybe he needed cataract surgery, because he waved back.

The elevator was next, just past the Grecian fountain where a scantily clad and muscular youth made of marble attempted to drain his endless urn—or maybe his bladder—by holding it tilted from his waist. Alone inside the cool metal cubicle at last, I then hesitated pushing the button marked PENTHOUSE because of the camera monitor in the corner, which gazed at me like the red eye of a Hal 9000. Or rather a Sal 5000.

What to do?

Bravely, I sneezed and punched the button anyway, going for distraction in the hope that my doubling over gave me the benefit of a mistake. Unfortunately, nothing happened. The button was depressed, but the elevator did not move. Had they disabled it somehow, and were they now moving in to bounce me like a lush who'd just touched a table dancer's tit?

I tried depressing the button just below PENTHOUSE. Thankfully, there was an engagement, and the elevator finally started to move. On my way up I soon began to wonder if the saying about its being lonely at the top was true, or if whoever had written the saying now either worked for *The Globe* or for "The Donald" in that gaudy mirror maze known as the Trump Tower penthouse.

Floor twelve was the end of the line. For me, anyway. There was no floor thirteen, and no way to go higher without Charlize Theron or Salma Hayek on my arm. So I got out. The elevator indicator in the hallway had a down arrow only, and I suspected that the purpose for the keypad I'd glimpsed above the main control panel was to enter a code, which could be changed each time a new guest rented the paradise above.

Briefly I peeked into the stairwell, and indeed saw a chain that blocked the way up, and another security camera which guarded what was surely a locked door up there. I speculated how long I might have to wait in the twelfth floor hallway before hearing the elevator go higher in response to a call, at which point I might push my own call button as well, and join Howard—if it was really Howard—going down. The figure that came to me was six hours minimum, until nightfall. Or possibly seventy-two hours plus six until Howard went stir crazy again. Meanwhile, I had maybe ten minutes before security came for me, probably in response to a hotel guest's sighting a deranged killer in the hallway through their door's peephole. All of which presupposed, of course, that whoever had been monitoring the video displays had, in fact, gone to take a piss while I fondled the elevator controls. No doubt if I now broke into some room in search of a way to climb verandahs on the outside of the building, they would put me in a straight jacket instead of handcuffs.

And so it appeared not to be my lucky day, after all.

Or so I thought.

What happened next was beyond luck. Meaning it could only be fate. It happened like this: I had decided to try asking for Howard at the front desk. The direct approach. If the response was 'Howard?' it would tell me one thing. If it was 'we can't give out information about our guests' it would tell me another. Maybe then I could decide if I was wasting my time, and also whether I should waste Sal's money on filet mignon and Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1958. So I called for the elevator. I entered. As the door slid closed, just for fun, I

punched some digits into the keypad, and depressed PENTHOUSE.

Then the elevator began to move...

Up.

I sucked in a breath and held it. Then I laughed, despite myself, because the numbers I had just punched were 1, 5, 1, 2, 3, and 7. The first three numbers of Howard's now infamous winning lotto had been **15, 12, and 37**.

I covered my mouth with one hand as the door slid open again. Then I stepped out quickly, and was faced by a heavy wooden door in an alcove portico. The little gold plaque read PRIVATE. On either side of the door stood two black marble swans. The carpet was white and plush. There was no security camera, and I knew why. The thing about rich people is that they love their privacy, unless they make their money from the masses, in which case they *really* love their privacy. Management knows this, and so as long as said god or goddess continues to pay their tab and tip well, they respect any bitchy wishes. I might have wondered why Howard didn't just move to Palm Beach, that secure haven for multimillionaires and billionaires, but of course I knew the reason for that too: He would simply never be accepted by the social elite there. During the social season he'd be a running joke, with no pedigree or claim to fame other than having picked the right combination of numbers and coming out top pathetic numbnuts. Aristocratic and sophisticated heirs to fortunes from oil and real estate and *haute couture* were loathe to add anyone to their party lists not already considered "in" by right of birth or conquest. It was a town

where plastic surgeons were thought of as 'hired help,' and where the best lawyers were required to do *pro boner* work. Even P. Diddy—ie. Puffy—was once thrown out of a club after having wandered over from Trump's Maralago estate, while rich has-been musicians were regularly rebuffed by local cocktail waitresses who had better prospects. How would they treat Howard, those Beluga caviar eggheads whose guest houses made *Town and Country*? While he might never be hounded by the paparazzi there—because the Palm Beach police stopped anyone who didn't belong—he'd never get a membership in the Palm Beach Country Club as a Jew, either. Even at triple the \$150,000 fee. Unless he was a headliner Vegas comic. In all likelihood, he wouldn't even be sold a house, and would end up at The Breakers hotel after bribing every member on staff with a new Rolex. Not worth the aggravation.

So here I was, standing outside the Doral resort's penthouse, wondering if all *this* was worth the aggravation. But then I thought *what the hell*. It wasn't like I had another hot prospect, or even a luke warm one. I stepped to the door, stretched out one fist, and pounded.

There was a click, and then, without the need to be unlocked, the door whispered open...

I must have staggered in. Next I found myself standing alone on a white marble foyer floor, and looked up at a high sculptured ceiling where a crystal chandelier hung over a Louis Philippe trundle day bed in the living room. The Steinway baby grand piano beside it gleamed with an obsidian gloss under the multifaceted light.

"Hello?" I called, and got no answer. For a moment I half expected some vacationing socialite to appear—perhaps Rene Wyatt in a Bill Blass gown with a Craig Drake diamond choker and a Cartier watch. And she would no doubt ask me if I'd like to join her for Kirsch flavored vanilla cream and pan fried apricots, prepared by her personal pastry chef Renoire. But when neither Rene nor Michael Dell, (much less Oprah Winfrey), appeared to tell me about dinner with Oscar de la Renta at Kensington Roof Garden, I began to feel the knot in my stomach tighten like the invisible noose around my neck.

"Hello!" I called again, even louder. "Mister *Rosen*?"

With suicidal recklessness, I stepped toward the bedroom, past an elaborate black marble and glass bar bearing several ornate lead crystal rocks glasses. One of the glasses was a quarter full of diluted whiskey, amid which floated the remnants (just a half moon sliver, really) of an ice cube. I knocked on the bedroom door.

"Howard?"

Still no answer. I stepped to one side before turning the doorknob, in case a gun was trained on the opening. I turned the knob, and pushed the door wide. There was utter silence, unless you counted the rough thud of my heart every half second.

I peeked quickly, like an infantryman does when he scouts for a sniper. Then I brought in my flank. The room was clear of hazards, except for a man's Bertolucci watch on the teak dresser. It was a hazard because any moment the police would be here to arrest me for breaking its restraining order.

"It's just me—hotel security," I said aloud to anyone who might be hidden in the walk-in closet, one hand over the mouth of a Kerry Blue Terrier named Filbert or Fifi.

Nothing. I moved to the closet's accordion doors, past the canopied king size bed with its mussed red silk sheets. An original oil painting near the closet portrayed a Hinckley yacht docked in Martha's Vineyard. I imagined Martha Stewart in the closet, now, clutching a sharp cleaver. A clever cleaver that sharpened itself. Not an important trait to slice and dice Bermuda onions, but more so after cutting through iron bars.

"Oh, shit," I said, at last, and then simply threw the doors wide to see. Just as I did, though, (to find no Cesare Paciotti boots, no women's clothes at all, but rather a man's), I heard the entry door in the other room slam shut. This was followed by the distinctive sound of a deadbolt being thrown.

Do you really think me that deadbolt dumb? Sal had asked me. It was a question I now asked myself as I tiptoed back into the living room to find a short, middle-aged man with blond hair turning to face me with a bag of ice. I focused on his face as all four of our eyes widened in shock—his with terror, mine with vague recognition.

"I'm ... here to fix the ice machine," I managed to say.

From AWAKENING STORM

(originally published by Blackstone Audio, narrated by Barrett Whitener. Now an e-book at Fictionwise.com. About a lady psychologist with a secret motive to help a man cope with nightmares by facing the greedy televangelist who caused them.)

The spider that crawled from its hiding place inside the hanging bull's skull above Michael's bed was not a tarantula. It possessed no large, slow-moving, hairy arms. It was small, by comparison. But it was faster. Its venom, too, was significantly more deadly. As the brown recluse hesitated on the edge of crossing under the skull, it suddenly slipped from the base of a bony projection of nasal cartilage on the skull. And it fell.

It landed on Michael's forehead.

Michael opened his eyes, although he wasn't sure why. Then he felt something twitch on the sensitive skin of his forehead, and he froze in terror. The sudden springy impact and a slight spasm in his forehead had animated the spider into a defensive mode. Now, as he slowly raised his hand, the thing darted onto his eyelid, poised and ready. When his eyelid twitched as well, the insect atop it sent a barb of nerve venom deep enough into the fleshy lid to penetrate and mingle its minuscule cargo of toxin with the eye's surface liquid. Its offensive reaction complete, the spider now jumped into Michael's hair.

Michael thrashed wildly, hands butterflying across his sweaty scalp. He screamed as he twisted, locking himself into

his bed sheet as effectively and as tightly as if into a straight jacket. The spider jumped onto the wall just in time to avoid being crushed, and now it waited there, on the hard, unmoving surface, tense and ready for what was next.

The skull's eye sockets stared down at Michael in the moonlit bedroom as a silent transformation began. He began to go blind.

He screamed louder and tossed his pillow away from his head, thinking the pillow had obstructed his view of the twilight room, but it had not. He rubbed his left eye at finding a soreness there—a shooting pain that was almost electrical in nature. He blinked rapidly, rising up in bed, thrashing against his mummy-like wrappings. Once free, he stumbled into the bathroom, and turned on the light.

He stared into his reflection. His left eye was open, but he could only see it with his right. A welt appeared on the surface of the eye. It was a milky white color, as if bulging with puss. He splashed water into the eye, braying out in pain. It was no use.

The eye was dead. He had a dead man's eye.

His face, too, looked dead in the mirror. His clammy skin was ashen, his curly black hair awry. The wrinkles he'd always tried not to notice were deeper than usual, giving a sunken deathmask pallor to his normally well groomed and handsome appearance. He screamed again, then rushed to dial 911. But the phone was dead now.

The line had been cut.

He turned to see a figure behind him, now, in the shadows. The glint of a blade ... He screamed as loudly as he could, and this time it worked.

This time the scream woke him.

Only a dream, only a dream, only a—

Breathing heavily, his heart thumping abnormally in his chest, Michael was staring up at the motionless bull's skull above him. The dark sockets stared down at him like the eyes of a demon.

He turned to switch on his nightlamp, and saw his alarm clock. It was 2:18 A.M.. He got up, wrestled the skull off the wall, and took it into the other room, where he laid it on his desk. Then he returned to bed, and cut the light. Now it was 2:20 A.M.. Still hours to dawn.

What would be next? he wondered. *What nightmare was coming next? And how bad would it be?*

* * * *

1

"So anyway," the nervous but handsome man on her couch continued in a quick wispy voice, "I can't sleep. I mean I really *do* sleep, but I try not to. Some people get by with a few hours a night. Mainly old people. That's all we really need, isn't it? Couple hours to recoup? It's the rapid eye movements that get you. I've got a loud alarm clock now, to prevent that. Like one of those car alarms, with a high hooting followed by some loud horn blasts that diesel trucks make. Because, you know, I dream in technicolor. They're

panoramic, wide-screen. And horror in a way, like the Hellraiser movies."

"That right?" Veronica McCord guiltily scratched one word on her note pad. *Wacko*. Then she added a question mark.

"You find that odd, don't you? That my favorite thing to do when I'm supposed to be sleeping is walking around downtown, and looking into the shop windows."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

Basket case.

"No, no—you mean from muggers or cops? Muggers are asleep that late, and cops ... well, you can see them coming, unless they're in unmarked cars. Got stopped once, but I explained that I'm a photographer."

Veronica rechecked the man's brief profile in her case folder. "A photographer? Nothing in here about that. Says you work at a restaurant."

She held her pen above her pad, again. She couldn't help it. Like a magic 8 ball, as she listened to Michael speak, the words popped up, inappropriate though they were to the discipline to which she had been licensed by the state of Arizona. Outwardly, of course, she only nodded or shook her head, anticipating the months years ahead it would take to unravel this particular mystery. In the meantime, she indulged herself with simplistic labels that she secretly hoped other psychologists sometimes indulged as well.

A napkin, spoon, and soup tureen shy of a full place setting?

"Coffee house, actually. That's my new job. I used to be a photographer, though, see. For a magazine, and then for

myself. Weddings, graduations, you name it. That's how I can afford talking to you, for now."

"Uh-huh. Which magazine?"

"National Geographic."

"You're kidding."

"Am I? Maybe so. I meant to say RV Life. Although I've never owned an RV myself. My dad did, until that time he went down to Big Bend National Park in south Texas, and some two bit drug kingpin waylaid him, figuring a '73 Caddy wasn't as comfortable as having an air bed and an outlet for a satellite linkup. You know, so you could know exactly where you are, and how the Broncos and Raiders are faring."

"You and your dad were close?"

Michael looked at her, turning his gaze from the ceiling at last. He resembled an actor named Ray Liota, a man with jet black hair, intense blue eyes, and a kind of mischievous charm that hid a lurking danger beneath. "Not really," he said. "I did run away from home, if you can call it that, at age eighteen. We're weren't rich, either. Dad used the money he might have used for my college education on the RV."

Veronica adjusted her note pad, studied the words there, and then ran a line through one of the tags she's written. "So tell me about your mother, Michael."

Michael's lips widened into a thin smile. "That's what it always comes to, doesn't it, Doc? Are you sure you don't want to ask me what I was doing downtown taking photos late at night?"

"Okay," Veronica sighed. "But next session, please don't drink so much coffee before you come in here."

"No coffee?" His voice sounded fearful again.

She shook her head emphatically. "No. Because I'd like to hear from the real you."

* * * *

There were fourteen envelopes waiting for her at her condo on north Country Club drive. Veronica tossed six away—one marked Occupant, and five others less obvious advertisements. The manila one bearing the law office return address she ripped open immediately, letting several other personal letters fall onto the foyer table absently. When she read what was there, she stared into the ornate mirror above the table, and watched as a tear formed in the left corner of her eye. She brushed the tear away before it could fall, denying its reality, and combed her long red hair to one side. She would make it, she decided. Somehow she would find a way to get Jeremy back, even if it took a dozen more brainstorming sessions with colleagues and friends.

She slumped into the couch beside the phone. Who to call this time, though? Already she'd made a nuisance of herself to Valerie, to Mel, to Bill and Jody. Since her lawyer had given up, and now—as she feared—the lawyer she'd been referred to had tossed in the towel as well, who was left?

That's what it always comes to, doesn't it, Doc?

She snatched up the receiver and began to punch digits mechanically. A sweet familiar voice across the continent in Jacksonville answered, "Hello?"

"Mom, it's me. How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. Your dad is out golfing again with that state senator, what's his name..."

"Polk? Senator Mark Polk?"

"That's it. How are you?"

"I'm worried about Jeremy, Mom."

Her mother's voice was borderline sympathetic. "What else is new, dear."

"That new law firm I told you about, Rogers and Weiss? They specialize in custody cases, and now it's official, they've cancelled out on me too. I just got a letter saying they're returning my retainer. They obviously don't think anything will change. Do you think Edmond got to them too?"

"I ... Well, how could he do that, honey?"

Veronica paused, then sighed. "You're right. They're probably just intimidated."

"Well, that's certainly true, I'm sure. Edmond is a Federal judge. He has powerful friends, and a spotless record. Even if you could prove he used his influence in the custody trial, do you really think it would matter?"

"We'll never know. But I do know one thing, Mother. When I move my practice to Phoenix, and there's no more shuttling back and forth like this, I'll be watching Edmond like a red-tailed hawk. If he ever stumbles, well, I'll be there with a list of child psychologists as long as his arm!"

She heard her mother sigh this time. "I know this hurts, Veronica. It does me too. But Edmond is a good father, you know that. I've heard you say so yourself."

"Is he? How can he be good, to take a son away from his own mother? I don't drink, or fool around. I'm the good one

here. This just doesn't happen, unless you're a judge ... unless you abuse your power, and—"

She stopped herself. *No*, she decided. They'd had the same conversation many times before, and nothing had changed in the three months since the divorce. It wasn't healthy to dwell on things you couldn't change. A strong person, a successful and well-adjusted professional person simply didn't cope with life that way. Better to focus on the reality of the moment, and to do what one could to improve the situation.

"If only you'd gone to church with Jeremy, honey," she heard her mother say, a slight hesitation in her voice. "A boy does need a spiritual influence in his life."

"Now you sound like Edmond's lawyers," Veronica replied with disappointment. "Are you trying to say it's God's will that Jeremy live with his father? Is that what you want too, Mother? If so, you've gotten religion a little late in the game. It was always Dad that—" She stopped herself again, hearing the same tone return so quickly to her own voice. She sighed. "What I mean is, I don't *mind* Jeremy going to church, Mother. And Edmond could take him there on weekends. I don't have a problem with that. The Baptists are a little severe, being Republicans ... just look at how they've changed Edmond's decisions from the bench. But that's okay too! When Edmond wanted what you said, I stood right up and said 'fine.' But I just don't think that's enough for him. He wants Jeremy in a Christian school. Wants to turn him into a Jesus freak."

The silence on the phone line now seemed deadly. She could barely make out her mother's breathing, which sounded pained somehow. It was a bad choice of words again, she knew. Her mother was very sensitive these days, she had to remember that. She continued carefully, explaining herself.

"Mind you, I have nothing against Jesus. Love and compassion and all. But I wanted Jeremy to have a wider view of things, Mother. It's only reasonable. Edmond didn't have to keep throwing the word *Atheist* at me until the jury buckled. Now I've got that big letter 'A' branded on my back, and when I wear my old school jersey at the park, people don't see it as representing the University of Arizona. I should sue Edmond for slander, is what I should do. But that would get nowhere either, so what's the use?"

There was a long pause. Her mother continued to say nothing. Maybe all she saw was the big A too, now.

"Are you there? I know what you're thinking. Edmond's a good man, and he's even better now in your book, since you've both found God. I'm happy for you. But just because I don't believe I'm a lost soul going to hell doesn't mean I'm not a good person too."

"I know you are, dear," Connie McCord said at last, although there was a slight disappointment to her tone. As if good was not enough.

"Okay, then." Another long pause. "Anyway, thanks for listening, and being there. I mean that. Say hi to Dad for me?"

"I will, honey."

They finally hung up.

Veronica felt awful now, for sure. Like she'd just beaten up her own mother. But their anniversary was coming up. Maybe she could send flowers, and get them into one of those spa weekends on Hilton Head island, where the employees pampered and massaged and dined you. Maybe even The Palms, where she and Edmond had honeymooned in what seemed a lifetime ago, but was really only ten years. Her and Edmond's own anniversary would have been coming up in a few months ... She considered that. What if she'd gotten religion too, or pretended to, at the same time as Edmond? Now they might be returning, and the tickets she'd be buying would be for herself. Then she'd have Jeremy every day, not just one day a week, most of which was spent with the hundred forty mile commute.

Better yet, she thought, what if Edmond hadn't gone to that Baptist church when her father came to town and invited him?

Veronica went into the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator. Musky jumped up on the table in anticipation, whiskers twitching. She took out a carton of skim milk, and poured some into a bowl, placing it in front of her lovable fat cat. Musky sniffed at it haughtily, not liking the new diet at all.

"You're no good as a substitute, you know," she said wearily as she stroked the animal's large furry frame. "All you do is look to me for food so you can maintain your beer belly. Were you a Roman in ancient times, or what?"

There was no answer as Musky lapped at the white liquid. Only a purring tremor radiated along the rotund back. As she

felt the vibration, Veronica stared at the photos of Jeremy magnetized to the refrigerator. One was of Jeremy in a swing at Reid Park. It had been his eighth birthday, and he'd wanted to go as high as possible, to a point where the swing hung up there in the sky and gravity was momentarily gone, with him like an astronaut tethered to the Space Shuttle during an orbital walk. Veronica remembered how beautiful the trees were that Fall day—trees so rare for Tucson. Tall cottonwoods with golden leaves shimmering in the sun, and with that rare fresh chill in the air, making the leaves rustle and vibrate.

She looked down at Musky, then back at the photos again. So many memories. Memories that now seemed all the more precious for their own rarity. Her days now seemed to rush past like the traffic along Speedway Blvd. Was this all anyone had left for a life in the end—*photos*?

She thought about the photos that one of her patients, Michael Rivers, had mentioned. And about Michael too. Such a disturbed and repressed man, although sensitive. The photos he'd taken downtown, as he'd described them, were of abandoned parking garages. Closed cafes in the eerie neon light, their stools on top of the tables. Antique shops with only one solitary bulb dimly illuminating the waiting furnishings and memorabilia. What was he trying to show? Society's apathy or some personal abandonment? It was curious, she had to admit.

After dinner, and needing distraction from work and from thoughts of Edmond, she scanned the movies she'd accumulated from membership in the BMG Video Club. Movies

she'd chosen at random from lists, but had never taken the time to view. Her finger paused over the title ANGELS IN THE OUTFIELD as she was reminded of an even older sacrilegious movie her parents would also no longer approve. In OH GOD! George Burns played the Omnipotent One while looking like a seedy tourist who'd missed his tour bus. *It's just a comedy*, she imagined explaining to her mother. Besides, Hollywood also made an angel out of Warren Beatty once in HEAVEN CAN WAIT, so what did it know? *Lighten up, Mom! Or rather the voice in my head!*

She chose a half completed book from her bookshelf, instead. Another religious comedy, titled GOD IS MY BROKER, this time. A comic novel about a monk who got stock tips from the Almighty and turned his monastery into a media circus, she remembered. But now she imagined disapproving looks from her father, and so she chose a legal thriller instead—a cliché-ridden formula story with at least one or two serial killers, which was last year's bestseller. But while reading, she was reminded of Edmond again, and so she sipped Chamomile tea as she watched the Late Show monologue. She didn't laugh at Martha Stewart jokes, but it managed to ease her mind at last. As she got ready to turn in she remembered that research had long shown that what one thought about just before going to sleep affected their dreams. Would she be lucky enough to find relief for her loneliness tonight?

The Chamomile helped. With Musky curled beside her, her eyes soon darted quickly beneath her closed eyelids, and she dreamed about being at the park with Jeremy.

* * * *

2

In his nightmare this time Michael was driving across an oddly barren Bryson Christian University campus. As he passed the auditorium, he had to swerve around an abandoned Ford Taurus in the intersection. Then he coasted down toward a strangely silent gymnasium. He stared at the high open windows of the gym, listening for sounds of a basketball game. But there was nothing. All he could hear was shudder of his Mazda as his newly rebuilt carburetor coughed due to bad idle adjustment.

So real. It all seemed so real.

Now when he turned left onto the street fronting the gym he even saw—just past the stop sign ahead—that a blue station wagon with one brake light still on had smashed into the science building. As he took the right turn that the station wagon hadn't, he glimpsed the words just below the white dome of the planetarium:

Night after night showeth knowledge.

He stomped the pedal hard as the word came to him: *Rapture*. The car surged forward as the carb opened up.

Was she gone too? he wondered. He began to yell her name.

"Julie!"

His voice echoed off the cold stone of the faculty apartment buildings. But no window curtains parted, and no one appeared on any of the sidewalks.

No...

He drove past the dorms and toward the cafeteria. Nothing disturbed the eerie, almost storybook silence until—

There.

He heard it. Half expected it. A low rumble in the distance ahead.

He raced toward the sound, jumping the curb and rolling under the covered sidewalk between the cafeteria and administration building. Beyond, just past all the parked cars—that's where the sound originated. From somewhere on the vast front lawn.

The parking lot was full, blocking his view. So he edged out onto the front campus street, still seeing no movement ahead or through the open windows of the administration building. Only when he'd made the rise did he finally see what it was.

A riding lawn mower.

The mower's wide circular blades glinted in the setting sunlight as it did slow turns and figure eights through the short grass. It had missed a few spots, but it wasn't giving up until it ran out of gas. Riderless, but not quite berserk, the thing plodded along with its own cryptic purpose. Several furrows left behind seemed to form an arrow.

Yes, an arrow, he realized.

The arrow lifted his gaze to the highway. Beyond the distance hedge and fence. Toward what was outside the campus.

Michael looked up, and then he began to scream. He screamed, although he knew it was a dream this time. Because it was so real. Because out there on the somehow

oddly slanted highway was traffic. Silent, slow-motion traffic. And the cars on that steep road were all going in one direction.

Down.

He screamed again, a shriek that finally woke him.

So real ... so horribly real...

Slowly, he reached for his notebook, remembering to write down the dream this time, as his new and pretty psychologist had recommended. Then in the silence, just as he began to write, his alarm clock sounded with a deafening ring that momentarily stopped his heart.

Two days later, he entered the psychologist's office on Broadway near El Con mall, right on time. He sat in a jade green cloth chair in the lobby as the blond receptionist named Patty-something told Veronica McCord that he was in. It really *did* feel worse than being at the doctor's, he reconfirmed. The drill used here would be words penetrating into the gray matter of his brain, and he knew it would hurt worse than an operation would under anesthetic. Pain was what it was all about, and there would be no anesthetic used in the removal of this particular tumor, if it—like the real one—could even *be* removed.

Michael stared down at his trembling hands as he waited, and wondered what he would do if treatment didn't work, and his secondary 'disease' was inoperable as well. There were no bottles at the checkout counters that could deal with this nightmare. No St. Johns Wort or L-Tyrosine at \$9.95 on special, with half the bottle packed with cotton. He was

contemplating suicide via overdose of Prozac when Patty returned, and ushered him into Veronica's office.

Once again, he was awed Veronica McCord's simple beauty and casual elegance. Her taste was evident not only by the relaxed but stylish powder blue business suit she wore, with its accompanying delicate gold bracelet, but also by that smile reflected above the deep mahogany shine of her desk. *What was it like to be able to smile like that?* he wondered. Not the mask of a fake smile, this was the real thing. He saw right into her, not knowing how exactly. He just knew her to be genuine, open, and most of all, trustworthy. It calmed him enough to drop thoughts of suicide, although he could never be serious about that, for other reasons. He was trapped, he knew, and therefore desperate.

"Morning, Michael," Veronica McCord said in a friendly tone, gesturing to the white leather chair opposite her.

"Hi," he replied, as cheerfully as he could muster, admiring the way her natural red hair had been braided to one side, the shine of it alive in the natural lighting from the window behind her.

Veronica looked down at a manila folder, and read something there. She made a note. And then her smile turned subtle and vacillated a bit. A few lines came into her once smooth forehead. The smile was not quite as natural, he could tell. He'd seen the same smile on the face of his medical doctor's. Or on David Letterman's. He braced himself for the worst.

"For this session," Veronica suddenly announced, "I'd like to get to the actual reason you're coming to see me each

week. You mentioned wanting to stop your dreams, but I want to get to the root of those, okay? We have to know what the problem is before we can ever think of solving it."

Michael avoided her critical gaze, studying the floor. *Dream the impossible dream*, he thought, ironically. But he said nothing. Could he tell her the truth?

"If you'd like to lay down again, if that will help you, feel free." She motioned to the couch behind him now, and rose momentarily as if to take her place in the Victorian-looking chair beside it there. She was much better looking than either Freud or the inept guidance counsellor from his high school days, who'd resembled Beowulf, still...

"No, I'm too sleepy right now," he told her, quickly. "I didn't sleep last night."

She studied him, her depthless green eyes widening. "You didn't sleep at all?"

"Not a wink. I didn't even go to bed."

"You do look awful. So what *did* you do?"

He shrugged it off, as best he could. "I went downtown. I took more photos."

"Did you bring some of them like I asked?"

"I will next time. Promise." He saw disappointment in her eyes now. "I did start my journal ... a log of the dreams, and a memory book."

"That's good, Michael. I want you to date each entry, and write down whatever you remember about your dreams, and if you have memories of your past, write those down too. Keep the journal beside your bed. You might want to keep a

small recorder handy too, so you won't have to turn on the light. Light can wake you up, you know."

"But I *want* to be awake," he heard himself say.

"Yes, but you need your sleep. You're not getting enough of it. I want you to see a doctor, too, for a physical. You seemed jittery last time, and your voice, it's..."

"What?" he asked. "What?"

"Intense, but weak. Like you're on drugs or something. Are you taking drugs, Michael?"

He shook his head, then stopped himself and nodded slowly. "I mean I work at a coffee house. That's the number one drug there is, right? Caffeine? I need it to stay awake, when I—"

"What? When you what?"

He paused, looking for clues to understanding and sympathy in her gaze. "When I know it's going to be bad."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you mean, *bad*?"

"Bad, you know. Really bad. Sometimes I just know. It depends on what I'm been thinking about before it's time to go to bed. I try not to think about those things."

"What things?"

"I said I try not to think about that."

"You'll have to, when you're with me. That's what I'm here for. Do you mean memories?"

"Yes, memories." He paused, trying to frame the words to explain it. Then he said: "When evening comes I go to work and listen to all the college kids that come in to talk about a zillion other things. You know, like exams and dating and sports, or how some idiot barfed up his tacos after he guzzled

a pitcher of Coors at the frat party. On those nights, when they're all laughing and telling jokes, I can kinda get into the flow of it, and imagine I went to a college like theirs too. Like I never ran away from going to college. Like there was this other me that had the same experiences they did. This *alternate* me. You know? Like I'd lived a parallel life that I just couldn't quite remember. On those nights I can just drink decaf. It'd be all right. I was okay. Didn't have to go downtown, then. I can go straight to bed, with the help of a beer, maybe."

Veronica wrote herself another note, then looked up. "At some point, we'll have to talk about what happened in your past, so I can see how your memories affect you. But you should know that drinking too much coffee isn't good for you either, Michael. Caffeine is a stimulant to the central nervous system, and dilates the coronary blood vessels while constricting cerebral vessels. Do you get migraine headaches? Caffeine is also a diuretic, you know. Causes insomnia, restlessness, increased anxiety, gastrointestinal distress, and the need to urinate."

"Speaking of that," he said, "may I use your restroom?"

Her look hardened. "I'm not kidding," she insisted.

"Neither am I," he lied, and rose.

She directed him.

Once in the restroom, with the door closed, he stared into the mirror at his pale face. He ran some hot water, and put both clammy hands under it. It *was* obvious, he realized. He had been drinking way, way too much coffee. But it kept him awake, that was the important thing. Plus it helped with the

headaches. As a supplemental drug of choice, it was better to him than straight vodka or even medical marijuana. The pressure that has brought his dreams back radiated from the middle of his brain, and caffeine helped him cope to an extent. Not completely, though, of course.

He took out a small bottle of green pills, extracted one, and swallowed it, chasing it with a handful of water. *No coffee here*, he realized. No coffee maker in these offices that he'd seen, so the pretty shrink probably didn't understand what a good cup of coffee—a *great* cup of joe—was really like. Was she one of those insipid tea drinkers who ate scones and English muffins while discussing Freud and P.G. Wodehouse? he wondered. Or was the conversation more about her nutty clients, their names changed for legal purposes? Maybe his own name would become Walter Mitty, in that case. *You know, Stella, instead of taking so much Valium, you should try what my wacky patient Walter does to cope with his miserably tortured soul.*

Would that be her? He hoped not.

He splashed hot water up into his face from the sink, and then gave the toilet a flush on his way out. When he resumed the hot seat, the good doctor tried to disarm him with a question about his hobbies and friends.

"I don't have either of those," he replied evenly, "except at the Java House. But they're all too busy outside of work. I don't like people generally, anyway, and they generally don't like me. So it works out." He shrugged, feigning indifference.

She paused to digest that. "Maybe if you took the time to let someone know you, you'd find someone you'd be compatible with, and enjoy knowing."

He spread his hands, playing along. "I don't hate people, it's them understanding *me* that's the problem. No one really gives me a chance. I guess it's too hard, and others are easier to figure out, so they move on."

"Find someone with a shared interest, then. Photography, for instance."

He smiled sadly. "Most amateurs go to Sabino Canyon to shoot saguaros and hummingbirds, Doc. Sunsets too, so they have pictures to mail all their relatives in Michigan. You know, all those paunchy, balding types nearing their golden years, who haven't moved down here yet to live in one of those new subdivisions raping the desert. As for the pros, they're too busy shooting weddings and birthdays."

Veronica was edging toward exasperation. He'd seen the look before. "How about a hiking club?"

"Bunch of retired codgers wishing their gossipy wives would let them play more golf."

"So you don't like sports at all, then?"

"Why are sports so important, anyway? What me to analyze that for you? Okay, doc ... Well, here you have two teams, or squads, trying to advance a ball toward a goal that the other group defends, right? Both teams have decided that this is an important endeavor, a worthy goal. The people watching also tend to identify with one side or the other. It never ever in a million years occurs to them that it's just guys running back and forth with a ball, wearing baggy shorts."

They've all paid cold hard cash to be there, see, and if their team makes enough goals, they will *also* be declared legends in their own minds. Even better, the *other* team, which by the way represents everybody keeping them from success, gets declared the loser ... as in any combat situation where one squad maims and kills and plunders, and the other squad bleeds and dies. So in a way it's kinda like a mystical identification, as if a coronation was taking place. You know—where the flat part of the sword is tapped on each shoulder, conferring knighthood, and where the same blade lifts the heads off the shoulders of the enemy?"

He paused to gauge her stoic reaction before rambling on ... "Symbolically, then, what you get from the game is title, gold, and a renewed sense of virility and power, with all the implied pillage, rape, and bloodshed. Instant catharsis! No seven years in therapy, trying to understand why daddy never hugged you. For the price of a ticket you get these gladiators to bear your alter ego into the arena, where survival goes to the fittest. Then you get to see your enemies symbolically laid in shallow graves with all the poets, philosophers, loners, and vegetarians. People like *me*."

Veronica took in and then let out a long slow breath. Finally, she knit her beautiful brows, studying him. "You're a vegetarian?"

"Not anymore."

"Can we talk about your dreams now, Michael?" she asked wearily.

After a moment she lifted both her ledger and one eyebrow, ready to take notes. Michael studied her for a

moment, then sighed in defeat. Misdirection failed, reversal of roles reversed again, now he didn't know where to begin.

POSTMARKED FOR DEATH

(originally in hardcover from Write Way Press, and an audiobook narrated by Frank Muller. Now an e-book from Fictionwise.com.)

About a politically-motivated letter bomber hunted by a rookie postal inspector, who is the only person who suspects the police are looking for the wrong man.)

* * * *

Prologue

He pushed through the swinging back doors into the carrier station. People he'd seen every day for years were there, busy as usual. He walked past them. When he got to the big fan set up near the stairwell, he paused and stared into it. Taking off his sunglasses for a moment, he gazed into the polished and spinning surface of the fan's convex center hub.

It was like a circus mirror.

His face appeared fat, and drenched with sweat. His bloodshot eyes stared back at him like a clown's whose makeup had run. He turned to look back at the others, wondering if they saw too, but no one cared for sideshows.

The stairwell's doorknob beckoned. Gleaming. Seeing a tiny but headless reflection of his body mirrored in it, he reached out his hand in fascination. Then he gripped it. Suddenly, resolutely. Like a handshake. Finally, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Once on the staircase, he began to climb methodically, one step at a time. Having come to return his postal carrier pack as he'd been instructed, he now opened the pack and withdrew the .45 automatic inside. When he arrived at the top of the stairs, he opened the door into the office hallway, and could hear the secretaries chatting together. Laughing.

It was cooler up here. Much cooler.

He ran his hand across his matted hair, feeling for a moment the cold air streaming down from the vent nearest him. Then he lifted his gun, and started down the hallway. Walking past the offices, he fired as he went. When he got to the corner office, he found station manager Ollie Westover behind his mahogany desk, on the phone. A cup of black coffee was spilled across several papers.

Ollie looked up and said, "No—don't do it ... Thompson, right?"

"Right," Thompson said. And fired.

Afterward, he went to the window, and gazed down at the street fronting the postal station. As he waited, he felt the air conditioning coming from the vent above Ollie's slowly cooling body. Then, in the distance, he heard the expected sirens approach. At last, several police cars and an unmarked white Cavalier arrived, screeching into the front lot, narrowly missing several patrons.

He smiled sadly as he put the .45 to his own head.

"Vaya con Dios," he whispered.

* * * *

Calvin folded the afternoon's *Tucson Citizen*, and sighed. Another loser, he thought. What was next? He pushed the paper back across his kitchen table, and picked up his own postal I.D.:

United States Postal Service, Tucson Arizona
85726.

Calvin Beach, Data Kee 1A-84937.

His face in the photo was humorless, the expression of a man who'd just been to a funeral. And he had. His father's on that go around. His thick black hair had been shorter then. In the photo, he was squinting. That was before he started wearing sunglasses inside ... before he'd started growing more and more sensitive to light, a side effect of the diabetes which had also left him impotent. Surprisingly, the photo showed him wearing a Madras shirt—a shirt he no longer owned because he wore mostly fatigues now. His usual clothes were Army surplus, and fit his short, stocky frame better than most of the K-Mart or men's store clothes he'd tried. He still had the white shirt he'd worn to his mother's funeral the day after he'd graduated from Rincon High, but he hadn't worn that lately. He wondered if it even fit him, now. He didn't look fat. He was just wider these days. *Fireplug*, they called him at work, mostly behind his back.

Calvin went to the closet and slid open the door for a peek. Yes, the shirt in back was still white, but not quite as white as it was twenty years ago. Not as white as he remembered it. He might have worn one like it to his father's funeral, he

realized, except that one wasn't much of an affair. No one had showed up then, not even Crockey, his dad's fellow postal contract driver during those couple of years when his old man wasn't driving coast-to-coast for Rodeway. They didn't care. None of them. No more than they'd cared about Randall Thompson, whatever his problems were.

He closed the closet door, looking up at the horned bull skull over his dresser. *Which is worse, Dad?* he thought. *Disease, accident, or suicide?* Marlboros and alcohol had ended Ralph Beach's forgotten life eight years ago, although it took thirty years to do it. And a bus on a wide turn ended his mother's twelve years before that. A bus that had casually squeezed her Valiant into a telephone pole at forty-five miles per hour, leaving him and his dad with no one but each other.

He went back to the breakfast table, and picked up the letter he'd written the night before. He read it again, one last time...

* * * *

Hi Dad,

Last week I went to the postal doctor about my eyes. He told me to see an ophthalmologist about my sensitivity. I'm fine otherwise. Good thing I still don't need insulin. My allergies aren't as bad because the pollen count is finally down, too. Spring is almost over and the wind has died down, so I won't have to put up with all those plants the Snowbirds bring back from Michigan or wherever the hell they come from in the fall. Only bad thing now is the heat. Got them to fix my air conditioning the other day, and it works fine except

for the wheezing sound. It was supposed to be hundred degrees today. Yesterday it was ninety-four. Not quite a record for mid-May, but damn close. Gonna be a long hot summer, and hot as hell, Dad. Humidity's at 10 percent, though. It's a dry heat, they say. But who are they, right? At least I got no problems sleeping.

My new motorcycle is running great. Did I tell you? Do you know? Goes anywhere—even out into the desert hills where I can explore all those old ghost towns around here, maybe find that silver vein near some mine great-grandfather wrote about before the Apaches got him. Cost eight grand, dad, and I paid cash. Can you believe it? I know you want me to buy a house, and I will someday, I promise. Right now, though, I just don't need a lot of space, see. This duplex apartment is fine. I like it that there's nobody above me moving furniture at 3 A.M.. Got a thick wall between me and that retired guy next door who plays golf a lot at Randolph but collects Social Security disability on the side. I've learned my lesson about apartments, and people.

Anyway, at work, funny thing, they had a meeting about a postal shooting in Phoenix. Said this carrier got fired by his lady boss, then came back and killed five people, wounded three, and shot himself. Sounds like old times, doesn't it? 'Course management talked about stress reduction, guns and white powder, reporting anything suspicious. The usual BS. Thing I wonder, though, is why didn't this guy didn't use his imagination. Dummy didn't use his head. Guess he had to be there, to see it happen. What do you think, Dad?

Later,

Calvin

* * * *

Calvin folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and sealed it. Then he went to the end table in the corner of his living room, and kneeled in front of it. He lit a candle, breathed a prayer, and placed the letter in the copper tray there.

For a moment he stared at the picture behind the tray. It was old, and faded. In the photo his mother stood in the kitchen of their apartment on East Irvington. The smile she wore was one of endurance, of hope. It had been Thanksgiving Day, but on that bleak and overcast Thursday afternoon she held up a homemade pumpkin pie and tried to smile that fragile smile for her only son and her mostly missing husband, who was always on the road.

Calvin picked up the letter and wrote IN CARE OF MARY BEACH on the envelope. Then he laid it back in the tray and lit his match. As the letter burned he smiled and stared at the candle until it was the only light in the room.

Soon it was time to go to work.

* * * *

Five minutes before midnight he inserted his I.D. in the sensor at the main post office on Cherrybelle. The gate rolled slowly open, and when it was wide enough he gunned the throttle of his GS, easing out the clutch. He parked in the space closest to the employee entrance, and then turned off the gas pet cock, put his helmet in the right saddlebag, and combed his hair.

His boss Gary Lennox was on the warpath, he learned. Matuska was on Gary's case about overtime, and Fran had called in sick. Whenever Gary walked around with his clipboard and calculator it was a bad sign. Don't even think about talking to him. Gary was a numbers man, up for promotion, and they were looking at him real hard. Once in a while Gary would even glance up at the bridge overhead, where the inspectors sometimes watched from behind those one-way glass panels spaced every fifteen feet. He pretended to use the glass as a mirror to straighten his tie, but Calvin knew it was really to see if the bridge was swaying. That indicated someone might be up there watching. The bridge made a very slight swaying motion whenever someone was walking inside it. It didn't happen often, but Gary was a paranoid SOB.

As he worked, Calvin imagined what Gary was thinking. *Was it Matuska, the plant manager, up there? Or maybe Harold Graves, the postmaster?* Big Brother was always watching, they wanted you to believe, and only sometimes wore a badge.

On nights like this, everyone knew to stay out of Gary's way. Don't even make eye contact. Just do your job, listen to Top 40 tunes or talk radio on your Sony Walkman, and let the hours creep inexorably to dawn. It was boring as hell, but if you knew your schemes by heart, you wouldn't even have to think about it. Just hit the right keys and that letter would be off to the correct bin for further processing. Fifty letters a minute. No problemo. Of course even this final Letter Sorting Machine was on the way out—the Postal Service's last

dinosaur, as the Remote Encoding Centers were already on line, and technology was coming to allow the ability to read hand-written letters. But there were always other crafts to move to, like the Bar Code Sorter, the Flats Sorter, and the Optical Character Reader. They were Level 5 jobs at least, paying time and a half or even double-time for overtime. Same fringes, too, as the carriers who had to fight the traffic, the dogs, and the heat. With six years in, your postal career was secure, at least until the information superhighway flattened it. Nothing less than an act of Congress could get you fired—the union would see to that ... that is, unless you slipped a government check into your pocket. Or any piece of mail. If they caught you doing that, your ass was grass.

When Gary went out of sight behind some cages, Calvin leaned back to Dave Sominski at the terminal behind him. "Hey, you been to that new place—Fleshdance?" he asked. "Know you'd like it."

"Where is it?"

"It's on Craycroft just off Twenty-second Street, I think."

"Convenient."

He continued keying, then cocked his head back and to the side of the plexiglass barrier, letting his letters go to the zero bin unkeyed. "Read about it last week. Had a blond there named Wendy Whoppers."

Dave grinned. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, and this week it's Tonya Towers."

"Forty-seven D Tonya?"

Calvin smiled. "You would know. How about tomorrow night, nine-ish?"

"Absolutely. But how come ya never asked me bef—"

Dave looked back down at his terminal. His face had lost color. Calvin turned just as Gary Lennox came striding up, clipboard held stiffly at his side.

"Our unkeyed percentage is starting to slip," Gary announced, then louder, to Dave: "I wonder why?"

"Sorry," Calvin said.

"*Sorry?*" Gary pushed his glasses back into place with a forefinger. "*Sorry?* ... Yeah, I guess you are, aren't you. Learn that from David?"

"It won't happen again."

"You bet it won't. 'Cause if it does you get your first warning letter filed. And David, he gets his third. Don't you, David?" Gary pointed his finger at Dave, held it, then dropped his hand and turned away, shaking his head in disgust. When the Flats Sorter manager came over to him with another clipboard, Gary appeared to explain his distress by pointing back at them while continuing to shake his head. The Flats Sorter manager said something, gesturing with animation, and then both he and Gary laughed. A private joke, probably at their expense.

* * * *

In the restroom at break time, Calvin looked up at the stall door. It had been recently painted, but beneath the layer of paint he could still see the message that someone had left as a testament to boredom or union satire. Most of the other messages had been obliterated by the latest coat of brown

epoxy, but this one remained because someone had carved it into the door's enamel with a pen knife.

GARY EATS HERE.

Calvin took out his own pen knife. As he retraced the outline he thought about all the gossipy manual distribution clerks, the joking bosses, and the other ones he'd read about in the afternoon paper ... the ranks on the outside who often complained about the Postal Service. Some of them were on the government dole, and didn't even have to work.

He smiled grimly as he quietly left the stall.

* * * *

2

Victor Kazy waited in the hallway with Phoenix Postmaster Douglas Barnard for the heavy mahogany office door to open. The door was always locked for security reasons, Barnard explained, whether or not anyone was inside. But ten seconds after knocking he rattled the doorknob anyway, just to be sure. Barnard was, after all, a Level 26 official representing and overseeing the entire operation of a major postal network which included dozens of stations, thousands of vehicles, and an army of employees whose payroll stretched into many millions of dollars. With hundreds of customer service managers ranging from Logistics to Labor Relations under him, he alone obviously did not feel intimidated by the engraved seal on the door which read: POSTAL INSPECTOR.

"You in there, Phil?" the Postmaster called, knocking even louder.

There was movement inside at last. A phone was placed back into its cradle. Then the door was unlocked, and opened.

A woman stood before them. She wore a gray power suit, minus the jacket. A .38 Smith & Wesson jutted from the brown leather holster at her side. Her dark hair was short and neatly styled, rendering a pleasant frame for her attractive Hispanic features.

"Well, hello," she said. "Phil is out, I'm afraid. In the field, as they say."

Barnard nodded, smiled, and then slipped a hand behind her arm. "Maria, this is Victor Kazy. I suspect you've talked before? Victor, this is Maria Castillo, the youngest ... and might I say *prettiest* field trainer the Western region has ever seen. Not to mention the best."

They shook hands. Victor was surprised by the strength of her grip, which seemed to complement the startling intensity of her dark brown eyes.

"Yes," he said. "We've talked ... on the phone, that is."

Funny, how he'd imagined her to be a dowdy school marm. A strong yet feminine woman, she was a pleasant surprise.

"You've settled in?" she asked.

"I'm staying at the Holiday Inn for now," he replied. "Two and a half days from South Carolina pulling a U-Haul by trailer hitch. Stuff's on mothballs at Boxcar Self Storage on McDowell Road." He fingered the key in his pocket, and added: "Number thirty-four, same age as me."

Castillo and Barnard exchanged glances. The inspector moved to her desk, tapped an open file. "You're ... *married* ...

aren't you, Victor?" she asked casually. "You mind if we call you Vic?"

"No, not at all. I mean yes, I'm married. Recently separated, actually. Karen didn't much like my career move, especially the law enforcement part of it. Her father was a cop, got killed breaking up a domestic dispute. Guy used a kitchen knife. Karen was only ten. She grew up between here and Tucson with her mother, who was a teacher, too. Still is."

His new field trainer nodded thoughtfully. "*Where?*"

"Casa Grande. Anyway, Karen's staying with her for a while. I requested Phoenix mostly because of that. Didn't realize there'd be such a tragedy here so soon." He looked at the Postmaster. "Was that a reporter I saw downstairs?"

Barnard grunted. "Think they own the place. Not as bad as last Friday, though. Wife thought I was a celebrity, said any day now Judge Judy would call, wanna do lunch." He motioned to Maria. "You got Vic's badge?"

Maria Castillo opened the desk's drawer, withdrew an I.D. card and a square leather holder the size of a small billfold. Barnard took the I.D. and the holder, which he opened to reveal a silver postal inspector's badge. He read the inscription there to himself, then closed it and handed both I.D. and badge to Victor. They shook hands for the second time.

"Welcome to the Phoenix district," Barnard said. "I'm not your boss, but you can always count on my advice and cooperation."

"Thank you, sir. I look forward to working with you."

At that the Postmaster left the room, and Inspector Castillo closed and locked the door. "You like some coffee, Vic?" Maria asked him. "It's still morning, and we do work late sometimes."

He declined, then tried not to notice her figure, which was difficult. Her skirt was proper and professional, but it failed hide the perfect hourglass shape. *Did she work out?* he wondered. *Had she thought about teaching aerobics as Karen had?*

"How late is late?" he asked her.

She turned from the Bunn coffee maker with a steaming cup, and smiled thinly. "Lately it's been ... late. Ever since the reorganization and this new thrust toward automation they haven't been hiring many new inspectors. We had twenty inspectors here two years ago, now we're down to twelve. Tucson had three, now they've got one. When Postmaster General Maxwell gets through, I think we'll have ten and Tucson none. But that's why the new administration in Washington calls him 'Max the Ax.'"

He ventured a smile. "So how do you explain me?"

Maria blew into her cup. "Special circumstances. After they pulled four more of our inspectors three months ago we had a rash of incidents, and lots of overtime. Mail fraud. A clerk theft of treasury-issued gold coins. A carrier dumping bulk mail. You name it. This bizarre shooting was the last straw, so your final approval came late last week, the day after. Barnard demanded our four inspectors back. They gave us you." She paused, nodding at his tie. "You're even *wearing* green."

He glanced at another desk in front of a large bulletin board. "So where are these other inspectors?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"They're out at the stations. Glendale has four. Scottsdale three. South Phoenix one. Tempe two. It's just me and Phil here. Phil DeLong. He's out doing background checks on new hires from the clerk-carrier exam they had downtown last month."

"I thought testing was in hiatus for clerks and carriers."

"Special circumstances again. There were only seven openings, although two thousand showed up for the test. Maxwell is still in favor of letting attrition and retirement decrease the work force, with automation closing the gap. You have to realize too that Max's axe is mostly chopping from the top down. You don't want to cut at the roots when you prune. They're what keeps the fruit growing from the branches that survive.""

"Otherwise you'd have the union screaming?" Vic asked.

She nodded. "Me, I've been mostly following up leads regarding postal employee complaints against management ... in my vain attempt to identify possible problems on the floor or on the routes. While Phil's out looking at handgun purchase records, I'm trying to get a few bad apples fired for lying on their applications. That, and getting a few others into a counseling program with the E.A.P.."

Vic nodded. "What's the E.A.P.?"

Maria set down her cup in astonishment. "The Employee Assistance Program. You mean they didn't tell you about that at the Academy?"

He tried not to fidget. "I'm sure they did, but there was a lot to learn in eleven weeks. Some of it was a blur. I mean literally. The defensive driving thing, for instance. How to weave in and out of traffic without sparking road rage."

Maria grinned as if in memory. "How did you score on the firing range?"

"Top eight percent." He smiled. "Hey, I was a high school teacher."

Her laugh seemed real. Finally, she closed his file on her desk. "So how did you like our murder capital?" she asked.

"Washington? Not much. But I was only in the city once, to tour Postal headquarters. Spent most of my time at the Academy in Potomac. Did you know it used to be a convent?"

She nodded, smiling. "Irony, isn't it?" Her desk phone rang. She picked it up, and her smile soon faded.

"What is it?" Vic asked when she hung up.

"It's your first arrest," she announced evenly. "Let's go."

* * * *

The Arcadia branch had long earned its reputation for trouble, Maria explained in the car. A carrier fight in the parking lot broken up with dog mace two years prior, then the suicide of a Level 3 custodian in the supply room, and now a shooting which drew national media attention. Yet after examining the records and interviewing the employees, she and Phil had found no conclusive reasons for the problems at Arcadia. Ollie Westover had been a likable, well-respected station manager there, with an open door policy and a candid approach to complaints. The shooter, who had used Ollie's

open door to blow his brains out, had never been seen arguing with him or anyone else. Very embarrassing for an agency still loosely connected to the Federal government—an agency which, years later, was still trying to get over the public's use of the phrase *going postal*.

When they pulled into the front parking lot, Vic saw through the plate glass front that a clerk was directing customers away from the window station and into the vestibule where the boxes were. A small queue formed a semicircle on the left side, and there was a dog in there too. As they approached the automatic door on the right, Maria nodded to a panhandler at the other door. The man wore a torn Grateful Dead tee shirt, and was stopping people from leaving by holding his hand open, palm up.

"Take care of him," Maria said, and went inside.

Vic approached the panhandler, who started to raise his hand again, then dropped it when he saw he was about to be confronted by someone wearing a shirt and tie. Just as the man lowered his eyes and turned away Vic said: "Excuse me, sir, I'm afraid you'll have to—"

"Yeah, yeah," the Deadhead said resignedly, waving goodbye.

"This is government property and—"

"I heard ya, man. I'm outta here, okay? Ya *happy*?"

Vic considered the question, but the man never looked back. If he had, he would have seen a rookie inspector holding a closed badge case as uselessly as he had a teacher's pointer or stick of chalk. And with the same look of disappointment.

Inside, Vic found Maria making a real arrest. The suspect, a window clerk, was about to be handcuffed, with the new station manager looking nervously on. When Maria saw Vic she nodded to the people still in the lobby, and this time Vic got to flash his badge.

"Okay, folks, let's move on, shall we?" he said. Confronted with a badge now, they grumbled and started to shuffle out.

"Not him," the station manager said, pointing at the old man wearing dark glasses and holding a seeing eye dog at his side. The German Shepherd panted happily in the air conditioned room. "You'll want to talk to him," the station manager reiterated, seeing Vic's uncertainty. "I'm afraid I've called the police, too. Was that wrong?"

Maria shook her head. When the last customer was out, the other window clerk shut and locked the inner door.

"Okay," Maria said, still holding the handcuffs. "You say you saw him place sheets of stamps under his shirt?"

"Not me," the station manager replied. "Him." Again he pointed at the blind man, who smiled, displaying a lower row of gold teeth.

"How?" Maria asked.

The station manager adjusted his tie. "Well, as Andy puts it, he's been in here since opening, waiting for the general delivery mail to come in. And when a slack time came about an hour ago Andy went on break, with Tom here covering."

Vic looked at Tom, the clerk Maria was about to put handcuffs on. A tall slender kid in his mid-twenties, Tom hung his head down, staring in fear at the floor.

"Well, when Andy came back from break the old man there approaches him. He whispers that Tom went to Andy's station and pulled out about a hundred sheets of stamps from Andy's stock. Then slipped it under his shirt. Tom's break was next, you see."

"But how—"

"The stamps are out in Tom's car, under the right front seat. When Tom went on break Andy checked his stock, see, then called me. I looked out the window from the second floor toward the parking lot in back and saw Tom putting something there, for sure. His back was to me, but—"

"But *how*? I mean—" Maria gestured in futility, and finally pointed at the old man with the seeing eye dog. "How did a blind man's dog tell him about Tom?"

The old man cleared his throat. "Excuse me," he said.

"Yes sir?"

The old man shuffled forward to the counter. The dog remained behind, still panting and smiling. "Think I can explain it."

"Please do."

He removed his dark glasses. The eyes beneath were not clouded, but blue as the Phoenix sky. "Truth is," he whispered. "I'm not really blind. My dog Trixie, she's the blind one. Blind as a bat."

* * * *

When a policeman rapped on the door with his nightstick, they all turned in unison. Everyone, that is, but the dog with the clouded eyes. The patrolman stared with such amazement

at the scene that Vic laughed. He tried to stop laughing, but that only made it worse.

Andy unlocked the door.

"What's going on here?" the officer wanted to know, seeing the kid now in handcuffs, and the German Shepherd.

Maria held up her badge, Vic following suit. "We have jurisdiction here, officer," she said, obviously trying to hold in her own amusement. "Sorry about the confusion. When we're done with our report we'll give you a call."

"Okay," he said. "I see you've got it under control. This time."

In the car on the way back to the office three hours later, and with the thief finally turned over to police for booking, Maria allowed herself the luxury of giving in to a good laugh at the bizarre incident. It wasn't a long laugh, but it was distinctive, and Vic relaxed and enjoyed it. They were going to get along just fine, he realized.

"I'm sorry, I really shouldn't..."

"No, no, it's okay."

"I mean we're professionals, and it's a serious matter for that kid, and—"

"I understand. Really." He grinned.

She glanced at him, then looked back at the road. "You know who you remind me of? I been trying to think, and just now it hit me."

"What? Who?" he asked.

"Agent Mulder on *The X Files*. You ever watch that show? Because they say the truth is out there somewhere. I trust you'll be the one to find it." She paused, and smiled. "By the

Ghost Rider: Stories by Jonathan Lowe
by Jonathan Lowe

way, sometimes I think we work on the same kinds of cases, too. Just so you know."

* * * *

(Jonathan Lowe has published widely in magazines, with awards from the SC Arts Commission, Roger C. Peace foundation, *Writer's Digest*, and *Audiofile*. A bachelor, he lives in Tucson.)

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.