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The Trestle
And Other Stories

By
Craig Saunders

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through English
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Masters of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2002

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This collection of short stories
is dedicated to Kelly Powell.
Thank you for making my work
easier with your support.

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The Trestle

Michael watched the trees pass as the bus turned onto the exit ramp marked *Grand Lake*. He had never been on this new highway before. It all looked so different when he had lived in this small town so many years ago. It was so hard to believe he had not been back in the last seven years. He had left almost right after the funeral for his parents. Who knew the next time he would return, it would be for similar circumstances.

Newfoundland had changed so little that, even though the highway was different, everything else appeared to be the same. The communities were laid out the same way, the highway ran the same track, even the landscape seemed to be the same undeveloped mass of trees and hills. It made him think even more about his insignificance in the world. The land would always be the same here. Even if there were houses and buildings constructed, the land would still appear the same and the hills (which could never be built upon) would always peer down over the lake long after he was gone.

It was humbling in a way, but it was also one thing he did love about Newfoundland. It was like a time capsule that kept out all of the world around it. It lived in its own time, leaving the world to move on without it. It borrowed the technological advances, but for the most part it moved at its own quiet pace. It would not change for anyone or anything. But had Grand Lake changed any since his youth?

It wasn't long before Michael's question was answered negatively. As the bus rounded the first corner off the ramp, and joined Main Street, he could see the old

LeDrew farm from behind the trees on the side of the road. The white, double-planked fence that kept the cows from wandering was still there, just looking a bit more worn than he remembered. The farm itself had been the first one built on the land in Grand Lake, and was owned by Matthew LeDrew, the founder of the community. That old house was the first one anyone saw on the way into Grand Lake (or the last one if you were heading out of town). It had not even changed since he was a boy. It was the same green, only more pale in color, probably due to the years of sunlight. Michael could have believed it was actually painted a lighter color, but if that were the case, it would probably have a newer appearance, even from this distance. The grass was gathered up in round bundles at different points along the field, and the brook, where they had once gone to fish, still moved past the field and under the road.

As Michael looked at the farm, conjuring up images of a life he had hoped to leave behind, the bus slowed and pulled over into the old Irving gas station. The bus had always stopped here. As it hissed and squealed, Michael shivered. That sound brought back too many bad memories. It brought him to places he knew he did not want to go.

As the people began moving off the bus to stretch or claim their bags, Michael stayed seated. He had no luggage with him (just the small back pack he had in his lap) and no one waited for him as people waited for others.

He was in no rush to leave the bus.

Finally, when everyone had exited, except for two large women who were making their way slowly down the steps, Michael stood up and moved towards the front. It had been a rather dull trip. No one sat next to him so that he could at least feel less alone,

and, although he recognized a couple of people on the bus, he remained isolated and unnoticed. He ran his finger across the edge of his tattered jean jacket and then brought it up to his week old-beard. He knew why he was alone.

Michael left the bus and moved down Main Street towards the main part of town. Just walking down this street at one time was dangerous, as it had been part of the Trans-Canada Highway. When the new highway had been built, it was downgraded into a regular street and simply renamed--Main Street. He was both amused and sickened by his hometown's lack of creativity in giving it such a dull name. Then again, all of the street names in his small town were only named after trees or numbered 5th, 6th, or 7th Avenue. If you wanted creativity or adventure, you had to make it yourself.

As he walked, Michael took a flattened pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his jean jacket. Luckily the few cigarettes he had left were still intact. He stopped, placed one between his lips, then reached for his lighter. As he lit the cigarette he looked towards the blue sky. It amazed him how it canopied everything. It appeared as if he was in a gigantic dome, covered by this ever-changing ceiling. But no matter how far he traveled towards its edge, he never came upon an exit door like in that movie with Jim Carey. His world kept going and going.

Michael began walking again, taking a drag from his cigarette every now and then. He still stared just over the hills at the few clouds that were moving across the blue. He had been so close to the sky on that scraper he was working on. He could almost believe that if he was only a hundred feet higher he would be there. But it was the same as the edge of the dome. It kept going.

It didn't really matter that he lost that job. A construction worker. He didn't even feel that it was a real job. It felt as if it was a summer job that he didn't have to actually take seriously. It was with a larger corporation called *Imperial Construction Inc.*

The biggest problem was that he felt lost in the company. There was no difference to the higher-ups between him and the John Doe who worked right beside him doing the same job. He was just another hard hat.

After he reached the top of that building in Montreal, he really didn't feel like going any farther. He never returned to work.

Charlene left the very next day.

She had been his longest relationship in a while, but like all the others she wanted a man with a job. Funny how they would leave after a job ended. It was like a vortex of shit that kept on sucking everything into it.

As he approached the first adjacent street, Michael stopped walking and felt his breath become more shallow. There was a dark strip of pavement which ran across Main Street at a slight angle just before Tenth Avenue. The road was now fixed, filled in with a few layers of darker asphalt, but he knew what used to be there. It was the tracks where the train used to run –when there *was* a train. Newfoundland had gotten rid of the trains years ago, but the scar remained in the road–wide and black.

Michael took a deep breath and continued to walk towards the black patch. He was not afraid of train tracks (there were many trains still running around the country), but the tracks that were there, he now realized, gave him an old uneasy feeling about trains.

His footstep seemed light on the black pavement. It almost felt as if something would roar out of nowhere and...

It was ridiculous.

Michael put pressure down on his right foot and, just to be safe, gave a quick hop over the black strip. Once he was past the mark, he exhaled, realizing he had not breathed since a few feet back. He turned his attention back to the road in front of him and the town he was about to enter. He kept up a normal pace, his head occasionally turning to look back at the black strip which lay motionless in the road.

Michael looked up at the tall thin sign that spelled "Lakeland" across the top and "Mote" straight down like stacked letters. It had always been the Lakeland Motel, but someone must have thought it would be fun to break off the last letter. Then, as Michael walked into the parking lot, he realized how close he was to the woods where he and his two friends used to play so many years ago. There were now a few more houses around the area. but he was sure he could see a patch of trees that was left across the field on the other side of the parking lot. He was also very close to his old house. He did not know if it even stood there anymore, but he was not interested in going back. He was here for the funeral of his friend, and that was all. Then he was finished with the town for good. He could lay the past to rest in the casket.

It was not as if he hated the town or the people, or anything like that. He was actually very fond of his old home town. He thought that it was a wonderful place to grow up. There were parks, playgrounds, a beach, woods, and lots of space.

Too much space.

That was probably some of the problem.

There was so much area to explore and play around that it was irresistible for children to roam. Michael knew that he and his friends couldn't resist the temptation of the forest and what lay behind it. That was the reason he now stood in this parking lot–returning for a funeral.

****** ****** ****** ****** ******

Brian had always been the brave one. He was the one that convinced the other two boys to follow his lead–no matter how stupid it was, he could make it seem like a great idea at the time. They had trespassed on the LeDrew farm to go fishing when Brian said that his older brother Jeff had gone there once and caught a fish "the size of your arm from wrist to elbow". The truth was that the fish were puny, they had had to tread through cow shit to get close to the brook, and they had been chased by the LeDrew's Saint Bernard, Daisy.

Another time, Brian had told them that they should sneak up to *the pit* and watch the teenagers make out. The other two were unsure about walking around the old dirt road at night but when he told them that they would be able to see the teenagers do everything (and might even catch a glimpse of Elisa Monroe's tits), they knew they were going to the dirt pit. When they actually got there, all they saw was a guy and a girl kiss, another couple of guys smoking cigarettes, and a guy pissing in the woods a few feet down from them. There was nothing more than that. The problem came when they were leaving.

Brian had taken the lead back, while Michael and Derek followed. As they moved through the trees, they could hear the teenagers quieting down. They knew they had been heard, but instead of keeping still, Brian screamed "Run!" and the other two followed his lead. They heard the teenagers hollering things from behind them as they too entered the woods and began chasing after the boys. Luckily, because of the teenagers' size, they were impeded by the branches on the trees. They were unable to duck under the lower branches and slide around trees as quickly as the three boys could. The chase was over quickly, but the boys kept running until they exited the woods and crossed the street. They sprinted over the driveway of a house they knew and hid under the steps. There they stayed, heaving quietly for oxygen and waiting for the beating that would never come. The teenagers had given up quickly and probably turned back to their smoking and kissing right away, but the three boys sat under the steps for five minutes without breathing a word to each other. Then finally, as always, Derek was the first to speak.

"That... was a bad idea..."

The three boys smiled at each other and then fell over laughing at the experience they had all been through.

They were not laughing the next time they all went on such an excursion together.

It was mid-July and the three were discussing Derek's birthday party that was coming up in two weeks. The other two boys had already turned twelve, now it was finally his turn. Derek was telling them about the fact that his mom wanted him to invite

Debbie, who lived down the street from him--but they all hated her. Her mom and Derek's mom were friends and so she had to be invited. Derek, of course, despised the thought of inviting a girl whom everyone hated. It would upset their fun. She would have to play games with them and would probably hog the Nintendo as she always did when she visited.

"My mom always treats me like a little boy. I hate it."

"You are a little boy, Derek." Brian smiled at Michael as he spoke "You're not ready for the big boy stuff yet."

"Shut up!" The other two boys laughed as Derek tried to convince them otherwise "I am so! You're such a jerk."

"Oooooo. a jerk. Big words for a little boy."

"Shut up."

"Cmon, Derek." Michael began "You have to admit. You're not even as big as us yet."

"So what?"

"So," Brian rejoined "Remember that time I took my dad's girly mags to show you guys." Derek blushed at the mention of the words. "You wouldn't even look at the picture of the girl's snatch, and when we finally convinced you, you took one look and almost threw up."

"That was a long time ago. I'm soon gonna be twelve too, you know."

"So are you ready to do something only teenagers can do?"

Derek and Michael both turned to their friend with interest and fear. They knew

where these little statements always led them. Brian had an adventure for them.

"Yeah, I'm old enough."

"Well, let's go to West Haven."

"What?"

"Why?" Both boys cried out at the same time. West Haven was a camp near the beach in Deer Brook. It was in a difficult place to get to, even though they could see its flag from the tracks. Derek spoke up again. "It would take all day to walk to Deer Brook."

"And besides," Michael joined in "They will never let us in through the gates."

"We can get there faster if we cross the trestle."

Derek and Michael just stared in awe of the suggestion their friend had made. To cross the trestle would be going against everything their parents had told them. They had been warned about the danger of trains and the teenagers that sometimes hung out around the tracks, smoking and drinking. The trestle was the only thing close that could get them past the brook that divided the two towns. The brook was deep and wide in places, and the sides of the embankment next to it were steep and easy to tumble over. It was possible to wade across the brook in certain places, but they would be wet for their trek through the trees, and they were down about three hundred yards from a sewage treatment plant. They would be wading through treated sewage if they chose to cross the brook. They knew that if they wanted to walk to West Haven camp, they would have to walk away from the beach, head to the highway, walk along the highway, through to the other side of Deer Brook, walk back down towards the beach until they reached the

tracks and the dirt road that led to the camp. Michael knew that Derek had exaggerated the fact that it would take them all day to get there, but it would certainly have taken the day to get there and back–and they would have to find a trail to sneak in through anyway. The trestle was just so much closer.

"When my brother turned twelve, he and his friends wanted to prove they were no longer kids so *they* crossed the trestle and snuck into the camp." Brian looked at the other two boys and knew he was catching their interest. He quickly continued. "Jeff said they had scared the counselors, running around behind the cabins, banging on the walls and yelling like crazy men. But he said that before they did that, they peeked in the side windows of the girls' cabin. Jeff said they saw so many naked girls that he couldn't get rid of his boner for a week."

The other two boys' eyes grew wider. They looked at each other and laughed in amazement. All of this had peaked the interest of the boys. Michael said he would love to see some naked girls and wondered whether they would see any sixteen-year-old girls there. Derek agreed that scaring the counselors would be a blast, and before Brian could even suggest the trip, they had accepted the adventure in their minds.

It was almost the end of July when they decided to go. Derek had already turned twelve the prior week and they had heard that there were campers occupying the cabins at West Haven. It was the perfect time.

They left at sunset so that it would be easier to sneak around the camp unnoticed. They could look in the windows with no problems if it was dark outside–no one inside

would see them and no campers from any of the other cabins would see them wandering around.

But the dark did not help with the mystery and danger the railway tracks presented in their minds.

The tracks were a place the parents did not like their kids to play near, and so their trek held a forbidden kind of pleasure. The trestle was different. It was the absolute forbidden zone.

The tracks were not lit up like the streets of Grand Lake, but dimmed quickly in the setting sun, and were surrounded on either side by trees and underbrush. To go to the trestle at this time of night, they had to tell their parents they were just playing at each others' houses as they sometimes did.

The night was clear and they could even catch the scent of tar from the railway ties as they walked on them. They did not discuss much on the walk to the trestle. It was more of a quiet time. A time to focus and think about the special steps they were about to take. They were about to defy their parents, follow in the footsteps of few others, and cross the bridge they were not supposed to cross.

When they arrived at the trestle it was hard to see in the last few streams of sunlight that flowed over the hills which lay across the lake. The steel beams that marked the outer edges were black and crossed each other like spider webs. The tracks lay straight across and as the rocky bed disappeared, the wooden railway ties became wooden beams, suspending the steel tracks over the brook. The tracks were boxed on both sides for almost a hundred and thirty feet before they were once again released into

the open. It was dangerous (they knew that when they started their plans to cross the trestle), but they knew they were fast enough to run to one side or the other if they heard a train coming. There was no *real* danger in crossing.

"You can go first, we'll follow you." Michael told Brian.

"Alright. Are you guys ready?"

"Wait." The other two boys turned to Derek. "Let's listen to make sure that the train isn't coming."

The three boys stood silent for a minute listening for any signs of a train. The tops of a few trees moved in the soft breeze and a few frogs chirped in the nearby ponds, but there were no other sounds. Brian bent down and felt the track for any vibrations. There was nothing.

"Alright. Let's go."

Brian stepped onto the wooden support beams of the trestle first. He stepped from one to the other with no problems, but was careful not to step between two of the beams. When they got out about twenty feet they could hear the water flowing underneath them. It was about twenty-five or thirty feet to the stream below them.

"Don't look down, guys. The way the water moves in the dark makes you kinda dizzy." Brian spoke for the first time while crossing.

"I have to look down or I'll trip up in the tracks." Derek didn't even look up to tell his friend this. The water flowed in one big black mass–a large organism squirming along beneath them.

Michael stared at the spaces between the wooden beams. If he slipped between

them he knew he would only fall up to the tops of his legs before his size stopped him, but he still felt an unreasonable fear of falling all that way to the water. The bridge made him feel smaller than usual–small enough to easily slip through the tracks. He quickly drew his stare away from the stream moving below him and concentrated on the beams. "Look at where you step, not at the water."

The boys continued to shuffle across the trestle in single file, quickly planning each of their steps so that they would not slip and fall. A slip between the tracks could mean the wind being knocked out of them or even a bruised rib or a busted lip depending on how they hit the wood.

Finally, Brian skipped over the last couple of beams with a triumphant burst of energy, landing on the crushed rocks that lined the tracks. He looked back and watched as both of his friends followed suit. When they were all across the trestle, Brian said "See. I told you it was nothin' to get across."

"So where's the trail that leads to the camp?" Michael asked.

"It's up a little farther, I think. Jeff didn't really tell me where. We just have to look for it as we walk."

Derek was the first to speak up. "But its dark now. How are we supposed to find a trail in the dark?"

"With the flashlights, stupid. That's what we brought them for. We'll see a break through the trees." Brian sensed their lack of confidence and appeared hurt "Look, I know what I'm doing. Follow me."

The other two boys, presented with the option of following or going right back

over the trestle, chose to follow their friend. They walked about fifty feet before they saw the opening in the trees. Brian once again led the way through the small path that directed them into the darkness of the woods again.

The trail was well overgrown with trees, grass and even bushes, but the boys pushed it all aside and trekked farther into the dark. Once they exited the thick growth, the boys compared the scratches they had incurred. Their arms and legs were marked all over. Derek even had one scratch deep enough to draw blood.

As they continued, the three boys tried to take notice of the certain things that marked their path, so if they became lost they could backtrack by using the items as guides. They first went through a small field in the middle of the woods where there were no trees or bushes, just grass. They could immediately see the trail's beginning at the other side. The woods were open at this spot, the rest were closed up almost as much as the spot they had entered through. Michael had actually wondered if that way had even been a path, but now it didn't matter. Now they could see the trail straight across the field like a dark entrance to a cave. The boys moved through the dark entrance, pushing aside the small trees and bushes that grew over the opening.

Then the trail passed an enormous sized tree, which was said to be the largest one in Grand Lake. Brian said that his brother had pointed it out once to him from the tracks and said that everyone called it Big Ben. They had also seen it from the tracks and knew that they were about half way to West Haven.

As they walked farther, Michael could see that Derek was sticking close to him. He was in the middle and Derek was bringing up the rear, but it felt more like he was

breathing down Michael's neck. The trail was really dark now, but they had turned off their flashlights so that they would not call attention to themselves when they neared the camp. Their eyes had adjusted quickly to the darkness of the woods, but the complete envelopment of the darkness had only added to their nervousness about being someplace they were not supposed to be. Michael knew that Derek's mind was venturing deep into the shadows that surrounded them. He himself was considering the teenagers that may be concealed nearby, the dangerous people that could be lurking in the woods at night, the possibility of unknown creatures that thrived on the blackness of the forest, and the other numerous things that may be slinking around behind the trees and bushes, on the ground, in the trees, or elsewhere. Derek seemed to be thinking about them all at once.

Finally there was a small pond which was only about thirty feet in diameter. As they passed it they could smell the stagnant water that just seemed to sit there. Nothing moved or even made a sound in this small body of water.

Just beyond this was the camp, the lights of the cabins shining like their own city of Shangri-La.

****** ****** ****** ******

Michael opened his eyes, blinking at the room around him. Then the recognition of where he was came to him. It was time to get ready for the funeral. It was today. He had to bury his friend and say good-bye to his childhood once and for all.

For a second he had expected to see Charlene lying next to him. It had been a few weeks now, but he still believed she would be there every time he woke. At first it would take him longer to realize she was not there. Now it took only a second.

As he sat up he looked around the motel room he was in. It was dirty. That was the only word he would use to describe it. Dirty. The tables were completely dusty and the lamps looked so old. The bed sheets were white with little patches of brown as if they hadn't been changed in a while. It was really disgusting. He hated staying in places like this, but it was the only motel in town. When he had gone to bed the night before he had checked for rats and bugs. He hated bugs, especially maggots. As a child he had seen them on an old, wet mat that had been left next to a garbage bag. The carpet was covered in them, moving over each other like they were one large, white organism, writhing and twisting in its own skin. He could feel them on him now. Squirming and sliding over his skin. Their mouths tickling and itching his arms and legs as they moved. Michael scratched his skin and felt a cold shiver run up the back of his neck. God how he hated bugs.

****** ****** ****** ****** ****** ******

Michael saw a bug on the cabin and moved further down the side. Brian and Derek tried to boost each other up to the windows, but it was no use. The best they could do was reach the sills with the tips of their fingers. The landscape was constructed so that the land around the cabins tapered off behind them, leaving the back wall of the cabins taller than the front wall. That way the campers could look out, but no one could look in.

"Come on you, stupid shithead, help Derek boost me up higher."

"We aren't going to be able to lift you up that high, Brian. Your brother was pullin' your leg. He didn't see any naked girls."

"He did so!" Brian stopped trying to hop up on Derek's hands and moved towards Michael.

"How? How could they have seen in those windows?"

"They probably had a ladder with them."

"They couldn't have brought a ladder with them all this way. They would never be able to get it through all the trees."

"Well, maybe *his* friends were taller than you two *little* shits."

Derek made a quick shushing noise towards the other two. "Guys, don't talk so loud. The counselors will hear us."

All three stopped and listened for noise outside. There was none. All the commotion came from the girls inside the cabin, confirming, as Brian's brother had said, that the cabin nearest the trail was the girls'.

"They sound like they're having a party." Derek said.

"I wish I could see in." Brian said.

"Maybe if we had brought a ladder." Michael said quiet enough so that the others did not hear.

Derek moved closer to the lighted area in the front. "Maybe we could look in the front windows."

"Are you crazy? We'll definitely get caught if we do that. They might see us. And the counselors will see us if they look out their windows." Michael stood still as the other two moved forward.

"C'mon. There's only one light and they can't do anything to us if they do see us.

We can outrun 'em. Besides," Brian stood behind Derek as the two prepared to round the corner "We're not gonna get caught."

Michael followed the other two into the lighted area. Brian was right. There was only one flood light perched on top of a post in the center of the camp. It was a small camp with only three other buildings that they could see.

They ducked down under the front window which was positioned next to the door. There were curtains in this window, but as they popped their heads up, they realized they could see around the sides of the wavy cloth.

There were about nine girls lying on bunks around the room and three others sitting on the floor around them. The girls were about the same age as the three boys, some younger, some older. Although they were all covered up in sleeping bags and blankets, the boys could tell they were all in their nightgowns from the portions that were not covered. One of them seemed to be telling a funny story as all of the others listened intently and would periodically burst out in giggles and laughter.

The three boys took turns peering in both sides of the curtains–two at a time–watching the girls giggle, twist in their sleeping bags, and talk. It soon became dull, until one of the older looking girls stood up out of her sleeping bag, in perfect view of the two in the window. She had blonde hair that barely stopped before her buttocks, and was wearing a white nightgown with a purple bear on the front. She turned and walked towards the back of the room, her bare legs golden in the dim light of the cabin.

"Woah."

Derek quickly picked up the cue and knew something was happening. "What? I

wanna see."

"Wait." Brian held up his pointer finger, while Michael just stared at the blonde figure of femininity that floated away from him. The white of her nightgown almost glowing like an angel. Michael knew she was a piece of heaven placed there just for him. Then she was gone through the door at the back.

"Move. It's my turn."

"Alright." Brian said, "But I gotta get around to the back."

"Why?"

"Cause that's where she just went and its probably the toilet."

"But there's no way to see in."

"We'll find some way. There may be a peephole, or we could just listen at the walls." Brian looked over at Michael who still stood at the window. "C'mon, Michael."

"No. That's ok. I'll stay here and wait for her to come back out."

"Alright. Come get us if she does."

The other two boys moved around the side of the building where they had come from and left Michael alone at the front. Michael did not want to see or hear her that way. She was definitely a beautiful creature, and he did not want to cheapen the experience.

Michael peered behind the curtain again, watching the girls and the door at the back of the cabin. A few minutes later the other girls turned towards the door for a short moment as the blonde girl reappeared.

She was beautiful. Her hair was perfectly straight and her figure was beginning

to curve underneath her short nightgown. Michael stared in awe. He wanted to talk to her more than anything. He wanted to hear her voice, find out her name, find out more about her. He knew he could not be disappointed. The girl crawled back into her bunk, covering her legs and stomach with her sky-blue blanket.

Michael then realized that he was supposed to notify his friends when she returned. He turned away for a second, calling out for the two other guys in a harsh whisper. There was no answer. He called once more, this time in more of a hiss than a voice. They quickly appeared from behind the backside of the cabin, knowing why they were being beckoned. But then they stopped.

Michael had just turned back to the window when he saw their movement from the corner of his eye. They had already turned to run. He was suddenly frightened and confused all at once. Then Michael heard a noise coming from behind him. There was someone coming towards him.

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Michael walked to the funeral. He was already early and the church was not that far away. As well, the weather was nice enough to enjoy the peaceful time alone–to reflect.

His parents would not have approved of the type of man he had become. Like any mother and father they had expected something great of their son–doctor, lawyer, architect. He would have hated returning to them now, a lowly, unshaven, poor man who could not escape his own past enough to move into his future.

His mother had even talked about how much she would love it when she finally

received grandchildren. He was only in his teens at the time, but she was looking more towards his future. She would have beat his ass if he had gotten one of his girlfriends pregnant then. She was looking forward to his happiness with a wife and child of his own. Of course she never got to see either and would be sorely disappointed in his choice of female companions. Especially the number of them that passed through his life each year.

In a way he was glad they were gone now. His life was a mess and he was ashamed enough without having to face them. He could hear his father's voice asking him why he had lost another job with that hint of disappointment, letting Michael know that he already knew the broader reason–his son was a loser. He had begun to hear it in the old man's voice after that night on the tracks when his grades began to slip and school became less and less important. Michael didn't know if he would even be able to face that kind of disappointment directed towards him at this point in his life.

For once, he was happy to be alone.

The road crossed the power line right of way where the tall steel towers carried the electricity through the town of Grand Lake. As he looked up he could see the sun shining off the top of one of them like a pinnacle of light. It reminded him, once more, of the white, heavenly glow of his angel girl so many years ago.

He felt a stirring in his crotch as he walked along thinking of her. Even now she stirred the same feelings in him. Feelings of sexuality, innocence, life, beauty, and even death. In fact, that was the weirdest mixture of feelings that she brought. She tied sex and death together in his mind as if they were one. With everyone else it had just been

an erection and ejaculation. She presented something more heavenly to him.

Brian would never have been able to see past her sixteen-year-old figure. Michael knew that the funny thing was that Brian would probably lose interest in sixteen-year-old girls once he reached that age himself...

Michael stopped walking.

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Michael turned his head and saw two black figures moving in the darkness, closing in on him. He swivelled back around and began to follow the path his friends had just taken.

He could see his friends just seven or eight feet in front of him. He was a fast runner and knew he could close the gap, but would the two pursuers be as fast?

Michael followed the trail they had taken and quickly passed the pond behind the camp. His heart was clicking in his chest like a toy train going swiftly over its tracks. He could not look behind him, but he could still hear the two figures moving swiftly on the trail behind them. At the other side of the pond he had almost completely caught up to his two friends. They were only about three feet in front of him.

Next they passed Big Ben, not pausing a second to even blink at its humongous size. They could probably have hidden behind it if their followers weren't so close. They knew they could only keep running towards the tracks. Eventually the two figures would give up and turn back. They hoped.

The field was the next mark they encountered. At that point, Michael had passed both of his friends and was leading the way. He knew as he sprinted across the empty

patch that he was almost back to the tracks. The only problem was that there was no sign of a trail to exit back to the tracks. When they had entered, the trail had been overgrown and hard to find. Now it was impossible. There was no time to find a way out–he was going to have to make his own trail.

Michael hit the trees hard. The branches scratched and scraped his face and arms. Twice he had to duck down on all fours and crawl under the thick branches that would not be pushed away. Finally he broke through the tree line and fell upon the bed of rocks that lined the tracks. Michael crawled backward onto the tracks themselves, listening to the rustling that was coming from the other trees and preparing himself to run if one of the figures emerged.

The first one to exit was Brian. He immediately fell forward, grabbed at the ground and dropped down beside Michael. He was breathing harder than his friend, but appeared more prepared to run again. Neither boy spoke to the other. They just kept their eyes on the trees which shook with the force of desired escape. Then Derek broke through the barrier, not falling next to them, but immediately after exiting.

Then came the voices.

The figures were calling after them with harsh adult male voices. Yelling at them. Warning them to stay away and telling the boys that if they found their way through the trees...

Brian was the first to jump back to his feet, followed by Michael and Derek close behind. They were not about to sit there and wait to see if the figures would make it through. The boys were out of breath, but would not feel safe unless they were back

across the trestle. They needed to feel safe. They needed to exit the alien world they had come into and re-enter their own.

They were not ready for this. They needed to be back home.

Brian jumped onto the second beam of the trestle, seeming to move from one to the next in short leaps rather than steps. Michael followed in quick steps. He bowed his legs out slightly from his sides and moved across the beams as if they were six tires lined up in an obstacle course. Derek followed behind. He quickly stepped from one beam to the next, hopping over a beam here or there in an uncoordinated dance to the other side.

They had made it a little more than half way when they heard the train.

Michael turned just in time to see the look of fear on Derek's face. Even in the dark he could see the paleness that overtook any color in his skin. They could not see the train, but the sound of the whistle had been unmistakable. It was blowing as it crossed one of the streets of the adjoining town of Deer Brook. That gave them only moments before it would turn the corner just up from where they had entered the trail to West Haven.

Michael turned back to face Brian who was also sporting a look of terror. There was no time to comfort or encourage, they had to move now. He had to make it to the end of the trestle.

"Oh my God! Oh Shit! Oh Shit!"

Brian turned as well, moving faster than ever. He skipped two beams in a row at certain times, flying across the tracks like they were just regular stepping stones in his mother's garden. Derek kept up the rear, yelling and hopping his way across.

The train's movement soon became audible. The rumbling across the tracks, the rushing of the engine, the motion. It was close.

There was only about fifty feet left to the edge. Michael could almost reach out and touch Brian, they were so close to each other, but neither looked at the others. They were too close to risk it. The end of the trestle was not far away.

The train rounded the corner and the boys all took their chances at looking back. Once the sound of the approaching machine had burst around the corner, they knew exactly its position on the tracks–but they had to see it with their own eyes. The front was large and blunt, one light shining like an angry cyclops searching out its prey. They felt like mice against a giant.

Then the one thing they had feared happened.

The three were about to run once more when Derek turned and, in his panic, stepped between the beams. Michael felt as if it had happened in slow motion. Derek's leg slipped into the space, hauling his body down and forward. While his first leg slipped in smoothly, his left leg caught for a second on the beam before falling through. At the same time, his ribs pounded the beam in front of him, knocking the air out of his lungs. Michael could see Derek was unable to breathe. He remained in the same position between the beams, his mouth open wide, an expression of panic across his still face.

The train was coming closer and Michael and Brian were only a few feet from the end of the trestle. Derek was thirty feet away.

To help their friend meant backtracking across the trestle. By the time they got to

him there would be no more time to return. If Derek was going to make it across, he was going to have to do it alone... and soon.

Derek finally breathed again. It was a quick movement in the dark, followed by a struggle to get out. Michael saw that the train was almost at the end of the trestle and knew that he had to get to the other side. There was not much time left for him, and he knew it had run out for his friend. There was a loud rumbling and the trestle began to shake as the train moved onto the bridge. Brian was already standing on the other side, his feet planted safely in the crushed stone on the side of the rail bed, waving his hands madly at the other two to get to the end.

Then he stopped waving.

The train's brakes screeched–steel grinding steel. Michael jumped over the threshold onto the crushed stone and turned to face the monster behind him. Derek appeared in the beam of its cyclops light. Then he disappeared as the slowing train overtook the spot where he had been struggling to pull himself from the gap. Nothing was heard above the screaming steel and the monstrous noise of the train. The two boys just stood immobilized as the giant creature slowed just past them, a piece of Derek's shirt tagging part of the bottom, a shine of blood on the front of the engine.

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Michael found himself walking the line of crushed rocks that was once the bed for the tracks. He had intended to go to the funeral. He had wanted to go to the funeral. But he could not face seeing his friend lying there. It wasn't the fact that he was dead and was going to be placed in the ground like Derek was, or like Michael's parents. It

wasn't even the fact that he had hung himself (although that made it a little harder). It was the fact that he would have to face what his friend had become. Michael had left Grand Lake when he and Brian were still young boys. He could not stand to see him now, older and different. He wanted to see Brian the boy lying in that church, and he knew that he would not.

Michael would have returned to the motel, but as he passed the line of trees that he knew led to the tracks, he suddenly felt the urge to see the trestle. It had been so long, and he was curious, in a way, to know if it was still there. He wanted to know if the monster that had claimed his innocence was still looming over the brook that separated the two small towns.

As he moved around a bend in the path his questions were answered.

Michael stared at the black weave of steel that still loomed above the bridge where the tracks once crossed. It stood as if demanding to be the center of attention in the otherwise natural landscape. Michael moved slowly towards the mass, keeping his eyes fixed on the black beams as though they might move at any time.

He had always heard talk of people seeing things from their childhood that seemed smaller as adults. Suddenly a once large uncle is only a small, old man; the big playground visited as a child is only a slide, swing set and one see-saw; and an older brother's bike is only a small child's bicycle.

The trestle did not appear this way to him now.

It seemed even more menacing. The steel appeared more crooked and twisted than before. It was darker, larger, and stood tall like a proud god over a mere mortal. It

was bigger than he had even imagined it would be.

The bed of rocks ended at the foot of the bridge and although the wooden ties still made a path across the gap in the landscape, there were no more tracks. They had been removed years ago when the rest of the railway was discarded.

Michael stepped forward onto the first railway tie that was suspended by the trestle. He felt the fears returning to him as he walked across the trestle. His feet could only be forced to tread forward. Then he stopped in the middle of the trestle, peering between the ties.

The water beneath him still seemed to move like a giant fluid worm. Its body winding and sliding far below him. This time, however, it was day and he could see that it was only water moving beneath him.

Michael turned his eyes back to the black steel girders which formed the cage around him. He knew, in his mind, that he could not fall between the beams. He had grown much too big to even fit a full leg comfortably between the ties. There was also no more train to come charging out of nowhere and swallow him as it did Derek.

But he still found it difficult to look down, just as he had years ago.

The water's movement made him dizzy--made him fear. It felt as though, if he stared into it too long, it would capture his mind and sweep it away as well. Moving it further downstream as his body remained still on the trestle. He felt himself losing touch as he stared, drifting with the flow, bobbing along in the current.

Some of Derek probably still existed somewhere along the brook: embedded in the bank or settled at the bottom--a finger bone, parts of a hand. Who knew how much

fell between the ties, plopped into the brook as it kept moving?

Michael noticed a single stone near his foot on the tie. How long had it been sitting there? Since the trains had stopped? Probably not. Just because the trains had stopped crossing the trestle did not mean that kids and teenagers had. They were probably crossing even more frequently now than before. The stone might have been lying there by the edge for years, or it might have been thrown across by a teenager pitching stones earlier today. It didn't really matter. There was no other place for it to go--but down.

Michael moved his shoe slowly across the top of the wooden railway tie until it met with the small stone and carefully pushed it to the edge.

It trembled for a second on the edge...

Then it fell.

Michael watched as it turned over three times before hitting the surface of the water with a small plop. Then it was gone. The brook kept going, sealing its brief wound and moving on. It was constant.

Michael stood motionless, watching the spot where it had hit the water. It was erased as if it had never even existed. Even if he went down the fifty-foot embankment and searched for the stone, he would never find it. Sure he would probably come across a similar stone--there were hundreds of them that had been pitched into the brook. But he would never find the same stone.

Michael stirred from his trance. He had almost lost himself in the flow again. The water seemed to be drawing him away from his body.

But it was comforting.

Suddenly things didn't feel as hopeless, as lonely. He wanted the flow to take him and sweep him away from everything–from where he was now.

Michael placed his right foot onto one of the black steel beams. As he hoisted himself up, he felt like a fly climbing on a giant mesh screen. His hands shook as he steadied the rest of his body on the web of steel.

He climbed higher and higher until he reached a break in the beams large enough to slip through. Michael pushed his body through so that he stared out over the water. He could see Big Ben still standing above the other trees. He believed that it was the largest tree in Grand Lake. But he was higher.

The air was clear and the sun was shining brightly as he leaned forward, looking down into the water below...

He released his grip and fell quietly forward.

On Through the Night

Almost asleep, still awake. Just running on the caffeine from the numerous cups of coffee I had consumed on the road. It was always best to bring a thermos full of it which could be filled once each night. It prevents you from having to stop at Tim Hortons every hour, losing time that could be spent driving. I also use what they call "a John and Jane" container to piss into on the way. They haven't invented something for the other kind, but I can usually wait that out. I know it seems small, but it's the little things that add up. That's what my father used to tell me. If I was to stop and go that much, I would lose time and gas. I didn't want to lose either.

It was a dark night on the Trans Canada. The road's skin was gleaming from its shower earlier that night, before it became so black. The moon was the only light that I could see beyond my headlights as the stars seemed to be extinguished. A strange combination, I know, but it was the only eye in the heavens staring down at me on that night. My high-beams shot out from the flat face of my "bull-dog" (as I liked to call my truck) but were virtually useless as the air just seemed to swallow up the extra light.

My eyes felt heavy and my shoulders ached for a break. It was the greed that kept me from giving in to these desires. I know that now. At the time it was just another night of hauling. It was cars. Nice ones. Jaguars. Beautiful automobiles for rich new

owners who want to indulge themselves with their shiny new vehicles. It doesn't really impress them as much as it impresses others. It's all for the show.

I know my own limits. I know how tired is *too* tired. I know when I need to sleep, and I hadn't reached that point yet. I was headed for the town of Paradise, right outside St. John's, and I knew I would reach it soon. I just needed to stay awake a little longer and I would have another run under my belt. The darkness of the night was nothing to me. I just needed to plow on through and I could catch some sleep before my next haul in the morning.

The road seemed to become darker and darker until it almost blended with the sides of the road and the trees and everything beyond my lights. All that kept me straight was the yellow strips that guided me through the path of the night. The lines that led to the spot beyond the darkness. To what was behind my lights. Then I blinked and the lines disappeared.

All was gone until I felt myself falling and snapped my head up just in time to see the car swerve. It had been coming right for me. It would have clipped the front of my truck if it hadn't hit the shoulder of the road in its effort to avoid me. I quickly realized then that I had wandered into the opposite lane. I thought I must have been spaced out, or something, because I hadn't seen it at all. I checked my mirror to see if the people were all right and was just in time to see the car pull back onto the road. I was relieved. They just drove on and I didn't have to stop.

"Someone must really be looking out for me tonight. Guiding me along."

I was a little shaken by the encounter; I really was. But the best way I could think of getting the incident out of my head was to keep driving. I was very alert now anyway.

I pushed up through the gears until I was back on high again. The mist started to fog my windshield and I had to turn on the wipers again. I turned off my high beams this time because I knew from experience that this type of weather only reflected the light back. It made the rain seem a hundred times worse.

Soon I felt my eyes drying, needing a break from the road, and I knew I had to keep my mind on something else. The coffee was not enough right now. I could turn up the radio, but loud music only irritated me. I needed company, and seeing as how no one would be out hitching in such shitty weather, all I had was my C.B.

I picked it up, turned it on and started calling out into the night. Being close to Paradise I knew that someone would hear my words.

Before long I received a reply from another trucker who went by the name of *Philosopher*. I began to converse with Philosopher and before long I discovered the obvious reason for his odd handle. He was a philosophy nut. He constantly read up on the crap and wished only to discuss theology and religion.

"Did you ever think of the way our creator views us, his creations? Huh, Green Machine?" This was my own handle because of the color of my truck. " I mean, did you ever sit and really think about how he sees us, or if he even does?"

"C'mon, Philosopher, everyone thinks about that shit at some time or another. It's not as if you're the first to wonder about it."

"I never said that I was. I was just asking if you yourself have thought about it."

"Of course."

"Well?"

There was a pause on the line as I waited for him to continue with this shit he was pushing. I was irritated by his comments and on any other night I would have told him to shove his ideas up his ass. But tonight I needed the aggravation. My annoyance was keeping me awake.

There was still no noise on the other end, so I spoke.

"Well what?"

"Well what did you decide on?"

"Huh?"

"Does our creator know that we exist or not? And if so, why does he not clean up the mess we made of the place; like a good parent?"

I stopped and thought about it. I didn't know what this guy had been reading or hearing on the tube, but he was very close to hearing my actual thoughts on this subject.

"Maybe he got sick of wiping our shit up off the sidewalk." My thoughts started flowing now and I felt more awake and alive. I quickly continued with the thought, "Maybe he got so sick of it that he drove us out into the country, let us off the leash, got back in the truck and drove away..."

Before I could continue Philosopher cut in, "Never knowing that we were tamed to the point that freedom would only be a death sentence... Hmmmm. It is an interesting thought."

He was quiet for a few moments now and the last comment he had made had unsettled me a little. I was tired, and the thought of abandonment did not exactly lighten my night.

"Look, can't we just talk about something else?"

Philosopher ignored my words and went on with his own ideas. "But what if he knows we are here, and just doesn't realize that we are real?"

"What?"

"I mean, what if our creator believes that we are a game. He is playing with our lives as if we are objects of amusement, and never knowing that we exist."

"How could someone not realize another being is alive. That's just ultimately stupid."

"Is it?" There was a slight pause, then he began to spew this shit about his ideas on who God was. It was just my luck that when I really needed someone to talk to, it was this lunatic that answered me. I listened with limited patience. "What we call God could be a snot nosed, little sentient playing a complex type of video game where he creates life and then sits back, throwing problems and conflict into the life. Maybe he or she just wants to see what will happen if we have to face death and misery. Will we strive, survive, or die? The game may be like three hours to him or her, but aeons for the earth itself. He or she creates virtual life by giving energy to these objects and watching them grow and die. It is just a game to the creator, but unbeknownst to him or her, or even it, we really exist and feel the things that happen to us." He paused for a second and then

spoke again in a low voice, "Maybe the next time you play a board game, you won't look at the pieces as just plastic anymore, huh, Green Machine?"

"You are out of your fucking mind. You know that?" I laughed at him through the radio "You are the craziest son of a bitch I ever had the time to speak to."

"Am I?" To my immediate surprise he laughed back just as loudly. "Well I'm glad. Did you know that most of the great thinkers were once thought to be crazy? Look at Plato and his Circular Dogma, and then Galileo and his telescope... "

I reached down and flicked the C.B. off before he could continue. I had had enough of him. Speaking to him had quickly become a history lesson, and tired or not I was not listening to it anymore.

Before long the road was running with streams of water that collected in the tire grooves that often formed in these roads, and I could hardly see a thing through the pouring rain. The night just seemed to be completely void of light. My beams didn't even penetrate the blackness in front of me. I began to realize I was too tired to drive but I was so close to Paradise that I did not want to just park and pray for the rain to cease. I would see any oncoming cars as their headlights approached and if I could make it that far I could wait in the first restaurant or gas station I came across. I needed a quick bite to eat anyway. So I headed on into the darkness.

My eyes dimmed my headlights even more as the lids became heavy. I slapped the side of my face briskly and shook my head, but the lids quickly fell again. There was no end to the road, it seemed. I increased my speed to keep my mind clear, but I knew

that I would soon lose the initiative and my foot would unknowingly release the pedal, bringing me down to a lower speed. I needed something else.

I grimaced as I reached into the overhead compartment and grabbed a tape. It was not that I hated the tape; in fact it was my favorite- the soundtrack to Maximum Overdrive performed by AC/DC– but I hated the irritating sounds of music when I was so tired. Other times I loved it, but anything that is supposed to keep me awake becomes an immediate irritation.

I stuck the tape in the player and right away the first part of the title track, "Who Made Who" filled the truck with the distorted electric of Angus Young. It was irritating me right away and I hoped it would at least keep me alert, but as soon as I was halfway through the second song I was feeling tired again. The songs seemed to be playing more in the background of my mind than loud and in my face. The rain ran full against my windshield as if a hose were spraying against it. The road seemed to dissolve into the water on the truck. Then I felt the right side of the truck dip.

I immediately jumped out of my daze and pulled the wheel to the left. It all happened so quickly, but to me it was an eternity of confusion. I pulled hard believing I was soon going to feel the slam of the truck into a ditch or feel the cold water as she tipped into a pond. I was totally confused as to what was happening. I knew that I was going off the road and I was praying that it would not kill me. I swore to myself and to God that if I could haul her back on the road safely I would slow down and then pull to the side to allow the rain to cease. I might even go to sleep and wait until morning. Anything that would please God I would do, if He would only allow me to pull her back

on the road. It was so dark and so wet that I did not see the hitch-hiker but for a brief second, just a flash of yellow that flew over the bonnet and slapped my windshield for a brief second and then disappeared. It was a rain-hat.

The impact was horrible.

As soon as he hit I felt my heart release in my chest. It was as if he had hit me instead. I could hear the thump as the body slammed against the grill. I didn't need to see much, just his face, terrified, but also with a terrible look of hatred and knowledge. It was almost as if he knew that it was my fault that he was about to die. He knew everything. And then nothing.

I finally pulled the truck off the shoulder and felt the smooth, soft touch of the pavement under my tires. My heart was pounding through my shirt, not only because of my own experience, but in the fear of what I had done.

Now I was stopped. I did not want to leave the truck, to see what had been done, but I had no other choice, and so I reached behind the seat and grabbed my flashlight. The rain was still coming down in straight lines and I prayed for it to wash any blood off the truck. I opened the door and hopped down from the seat. As I walked to the front I noticed a trail of blood mixing with the rain that forewarned me of what I was about to see on the grill of the truck.

I stepped into the headlights and, even in the dark, I could see the trails of blood that made lines across the front of my truck. It was like flicked, dark red paint as if some angry artist had used the grill as a canvas for a new piece of work called "Revenge". The blood was turning watery with the rain and running off the grill. Red water dripped onto

the bumper, dissolved further into the rainwater which collected there, and then trickled off of the truck and onto the dirt. The ground seemed to swallow it as it ran off.

"Oh Fuck Me!" I stood back and felt myself retch. It was dry, but my stomach cramped in horror. "Fuck me! Fuck me! FUCK ME!!!"

I now bent over and taking quick glances at the murderous illustration I tried not to think about the man who lay dead about fifty feet back on the road, or in the ditch.

I regained my strength and slowly moved around the side of the truck. I shone the flashlight at the side and tires trying to see anything. As I walked towards the back I could see a yellow object caught on the bottom of the trailer. It was part of his rain jacket. It must have been torn from him as he went under the truck. I slowly approached the back wheels, shining the light on the object. As I got closer I realized that it was a sleeve and an arm was still in it.

I backed away a few steps and began to retch with no release. I had no sleep for days and it was the most miserable night I had seen in a long, long time. And now this. I was not ready for such a bad accident. A car crash maybe, but a guy smeared across my grill was not anticipated.

Then I thought about something worse. I could be arrested for this. It was my fault. An accident like this indicated negligent driving. He was on the side of the road, how could I run him down accidentally. Driving was my job. If I wasn't thrown in prison, I was sure to lose my job over an incident like this. I would have no money. It was negligence on my part, possibly murder.

"Shit, shit, SHIT!"

I had to get the hell out of there before another car came by and saw me at the scene with blood on my truck. I turned to go back but realized that there may be some evidence of my truck being involved. I may have lost a piece off my grill, or paint, or even something as small as a sticker or an imprint of a licence plate. It was crazy, I know that now, but at the time an imprint seemed completely possible. It also occurred to me that he might have lived.

I turned around again and started back along the road to find the body (or what was left of it). The rain was now running off my hair and my face, soaking into the driest parts of my skin. I could hardly see through the heavy web it threw over the night. As I walked back farther and farther, following the shallow trench that scarred the dirt side of the road for about fifty feet, the blood increased in amount. Then, finally, I reached the body. It was unrecognizable as a once living creature. It instead resembled a cloth doll that had been tossed into the garbage years ago. He was off the side of the road, down over the embankment, lying in a humanly impossible position with his remaining arm twisted around the wrong side of his body. I slowly moved down the side of the road, sliding on the grass that was slick with the rain and torrents running off the roadside. As I moved down the embankment my foot slipped on the grass and slid back, then I tumbled. As I rolled once and slid face first, I thought about the view's similarity to the corpse's as it rolled down the embankment. I stopped, lying at the bottom and wiping the excess of water from my face and eyes.

My vision cleared and I could see his eye staring at me from a mess that used to be his face. There was only one eye, and a gaping "O" hole where the other had been. It

was awful. He was a heap of flesh. The body was more jelly than solid. His neck was twisted almost backwards, his legs looked crushed to pieces, his arm was looped around his back, and pointing up the back of his neck, almost directly at me. The one eye stared directly at me, as if there were still life, accusing me of my negligence. The yellow rain-jacket that he wore was colored by his blood and both the material and his flesh were ripped apart from the protruding metal on the underbelly of my truck. His jaw was open wider than any living jaw could ever be as if gasping for air that would never be enough. His face was broken in and his smashed skull warped his head into a disturbing shape. No one should have seen another being twisted into such an unnatural shape.

I could feel the tightness in my stomach, and I was close to vomiting, but instead I could only lie there, staring into that eye, into the screaming skull, wishing that I could produce a sound of some sort. Finally, after what seemed to be a lifetime (but may only have actually been a few seconds), I pulled away and screamed at the sight of him. The sight of what I had done. The horror of my actions.

I jumped to my feet, turned from the body and ran up the embankment. My steps sliding with each step. Fear of slipping again and returning to the corpse, not being able to escape its grotesque stare, filled my chest. I caught my balance by pushing my hands against the ground in front of me. I used both my hands and my feet to push myself up to the road. I stood up straight in the rain. My truck was about forty feet in front of me and I felt I did not have the strength to walk four feet. I stood there, my stomach clenched, my body now soaked from the rain and the tumble down the embankment, mud and some blood ground into my clothes, not wanting to turn around and see him lying down there.

I felt the dirt on my hands from the climb and so I turned them over to wash them in the rain. As I did, I could see they were also bloody. The blood from the grass, his blood, was all over me. The rain watered it down quickly so that it trickled down my wrist and curled its way around my cuff. I felt my stomach heave again and this time I buckled over to let it have its way, but nothing happened. A dry retch and then an empty spit. I remained bent at the waist for a few moments, staring at the ground through my watering eyes, while the rain quietly trailed down my neck. I began to wish that I had had something to eat earlier, but then realized that vomiting would be the worst thing to do. It was as bad as leaving fingerprints all over the scene of the crime. Luckily, I believe my footprints were washed away before anyone found them.

I quickly straightened as much as I could and started running towards the truck. Then I remembered the arm under the truck. I had to get it out. I got to the truck and reached in back to get my crowbar, then I returned to the arm.

It was still there, shining in red and yellow, caught by the metal. I held one end of the crowbar, pushing the other end between the tires and towards the hand. I felt the softness of the skin as I pressed against it. I could see the fingers move in my flashlight beam as I stuck the end of the bar under them and pressed back. Then it let go and the hand dropped to the pavement with a dead thud. I knew I could not leave it lying on the side of the road, or it would be discovered too soon. I reached back under the truck and used the crowbar to roll the severed limb towards myself. Then, as I turned to face the ditch, I rolled it away from me and over the side. I quickly moved back to the truck and before I got in the bar was clean of the blood. I looked at my hands and they were also

white in the light. The truck itself was still marked with blood, but there was only one way to remedy that. I had to drive.

The rain rarely waned as I charged over the highway, trying to outrace my mistake. I could see my hands were turning white upon the steering wheel, both from the cold and the force with which I was gripping the leather. I tried to loosen my fingers, but as they released I could feel my entire hold over the vehicle loosening. It was as if I loosened them a little, the entire rig would fly from my control and drive me into the ditch. I gripped tighter.

I was still entirely soaked from the rain and my fall. The water seemed to cling to my skin, not wanting to dry even though the heat in the cab was now turned up all the way. I felt as if I would never become dry.

Even though it was hard to see through the rain and the heat in the truck was making the windshield fog, I never took my eyes from the road. I was too afraid. It was still really dark on the road, but I would not stop. I could not stop. I was getting close to Paradise now, and I needed, more than ever, to reach civilization.

I could only assume that all of the blood had been sprayed from the front of my truck by the rushing water in the air. I only hoped that the water had done the same for the rest of the truck. I kept thinking about the evidence. Had the truck been completely cleansed of the blood? Would the footprints and tire marks remain? Would there be any paint left from the truck? What about marks the truck might have left on his body? It was all so plausible. With the technology they had now they could trace a hair, that

could have fallen from my head, back to me (if I lost one at the scene). There was so much to consider.

I kept thinking about my guilt. I was guilty for the destruction of this man's life. I could be charged with negligence. I didn't get off the road when I was tired. I always pushed myself that extra bit, always pushed to go that extra kilometer. This time I had pushed too far.

Now all I could do was head for Paradise. There I could stop, sleep, and figure out what I should do. Examine the situation. *Situation.* It sounded so unreal, so neat and tidy in my thoughts. A simple situation. But it was anything but. It was murder.

No. I shook my head to physically try and remove the thought, but it would not leave. Its spikes were stuck in my mind, clinging to my brain. The image of his corpse painted on my mind's eye. This was real death. My actions had resulted in another person's demise and there was no way to reverse what had happened. It was not a clean death as one would see on tv, it was horrific death. It was blood, tissue, broken bones and a pile of flesh heaped in dirt and rain. It was real.

I closed my eyes for a second in order to clear my head, and when I opened my eyes he was there. The hitchhiker stood on the side of the road in his tattered yellow raincoat, one arm missing and the other raised perpendicular to his body, thumb raised to hitch a ride. His hat was gone and his face was crushed and missing an eye, just like I had seen him in the ditch. The other eye stared directly into my face, not blinking or turning away. My stomach turned hard in my abdomen, feeling as if it would grow heavy enough to drop lower into my body. I froze and everything around me seemed to slow as

I passed him. Just before he disappeared behind the hood of my truck, he formed an inhuman smile on his broken face. Then he was gone. Swallowed by the darkness that devoured everything I passed.

I considered slowing down or stopping to find out if I had actually seen what I thought I had. I wanted to prove to myself that it was another hitchhiker on the highway, or nothing at all. An image that had already scarred my mind. I wanted to know, but I could not force myself to apply the brakes. I also didn't want to know. I could always pass this off to myself as a delirious mirage. A hallucination brought on by lack of sleep and shock. If I was to stop and find that it was real, I was sure I would lose my mind with the fear of confronting the living dead man that I had killed. I kept driving to save myself from all the horrors that lay behind me on the highway.

I had killed him and he was dead. No one survives such an incident. There was no way that it could have been him standing on the side of the road. I had seen him dead in the ditch, and there was no way he was coming back to life (as much as I would have liked to see him survive). This was not a movie where the dead come back to convey a message or talk with the living. This was real life. It was my life and there was no coming back from the dead or turning back time. There was no reason to stop and investigate if there was no real possibility of this man returning from the dead. He could not have just been standing on the side of the road. Whoever it may have been standing there (if anyone) was long behind me at this point anyway. Besides all of this, if there were any way he had returned from the dead to talk to me, it would not have been a good

reason. I had seen enough horror movies to know that the ones stupid enough to leave safe places to investigate things were the ones who ended up dead.

After I was a good distance away from the site of my accident, I realized I was starting to break out in goose-bumps. I began to laugh at my own cowardice, but it only lasted a second and almost turned to tears before I caught myself. I was beginning to feel the effects of my wet clothes as I shivered in my seat and knew that I had to remove them. I slowed my truck and pulled over to the side of the road. Once stopped, I noticed that the rain was beginning to subside and the night seemed to be a bit brighter. I left my seat and went in the back seat to strip.

Once dressed I returned to the front, grinding my ass into my dry pants and the seat. I reached down to tie the laces of my boots up, and when I returned my eyes to the headlights he was standing straight between them. His yellow raincoat bright in the beams, the blood covering it like a crimson camouflage.

I was frozen as if I had crawled up inside my mind and began screaming but could not move my flesh. I wanted to drive away, to get away from this grotesque figure that just stood and stared at me with its one eye. Then he started to move forward towards the truck. I used a great amount of effort to swallow once, feeling my saliva scrape on the way down my throat. He was getting close to the nose of my rig now, and I knew that I could not just sit there and watch him approach my door, I had to move right away. I collected enough motion to shift the truck and press the gas. The rig began to roll and he stepped off to his right to avoid the front of the truck. He still remained on my side so that I could see him standing there as real as life as I slowly rolled past. He

never moved fast, just stood there staring at me with a very unsettling calmness. I could even see him in my side mirrors as the rest of the rig passed him and he stood staring. I watched to make sure that he would not grab hold of my truck and wait until I stopped again. He didn't even try to move. I saw him, bathed in the red of my taillights, and then he was gone.

I was alone again and I was shaking. I had never believed it could be possible for this to happen, but it had been real. He was there in front of me. I mean, I was really tired, and under a great amount of stress from hitting that man on the road, but I was not seeing things. I had sat there in my cab, staring at him, checking him to make sure I was not losing my mind. He *had* been there. I was sure of it this time. But then I remembered that the proof was not something I should be happy about. He was there for a reason.

I felt as if I should be coming closer to Paradise, but I still could see no signs of the city lights shining in the now clearing night sky. I shifted my two front teeth against the bottom ones and sighed at the sight of nothingness on the road ahead of me. I needed to be close to civilization and have the knowledge that I was around other people. That I was safe in public. Right now I was alone and exposed to the empty world.

I kept driving and checking the mirrors even though I really didn't want to know if anyone was staring back at me from them. I needed the security of knowing there was no one there for the time being. I watched the darkness glide under my truck and the re-emerging moonlight reflecting in the green on the front of my truck. It was the clearing

sky that allowed me to see something in the middle of the road up ahead. I did not have to be close to know exactly what it was. The yellow showed up in the darkness before I could even see the rest of him standing there in the road.

I knew what he was trying to do now. He wanted me to run myself off the road in an attempt to avoid him. I wasn't going to allow him to bully me, I wanted to end it now. I pressed the peddle down, increasing the speed of the truck, and smashing directly into his already broken body. This time it was different. His body came up over the front of the truck and his face struck the windshield, spreading blood over the glass. Through the glass and blood I could see the corpse grinning through its crushed skull. My heart beat very quickly in my chest, as if it desired to leave the body that was forcing it to witness such unnatural scenes. I screamed with both fear and an unraveling excitement, my emotions mixing into a solid ball in my stomach. He flew over the side of the truck, but as I looked into the mirror he was not falling and rolling on the side of the road. He was gone.

I turned back, putting down my window in order to see out with my own eyes, but I could see nothing more than darkness. He was gone once again. I turned back to the road, hoping he was not there in my headlights. But there he was on the road, his yellow jacket showing up in the night, his thumb out in his hitching position.

I couldn't believe it. He was going to keep doing this to me all night, maybe even forever. Everywhere I go, he'd be there, standing on the road, trying to hitch a ride from his assassin. I didn't know what to do. So I tried ramming him again.

I put my foot on the gas, sped up, and aimed for the railing next to him. I thought I could pin him, but he tried to move this time, further into the road, to avoid me. I turned the truck to hit him straight on. He looked up, but he was different. There were two eyes staring at me this time, and they were afraid. They were scared of me now. His body was real again, not broken and twisted, his arm was back.

I suddenly realized it wasn't him looking at me. I hit another man with my truck, throwing his body against the grill, blood spilling on my truck, his body being crushed and beaten by my rig. It was happening again. I put on the brakes and turned the truck. It quickly jackknifed across the highway and I went into the ditch.

When I woke and realized I was still alive, I knew there had to be a reason for me to still be here. I must need to be here. God, or whoever created me, had allowed me to live, to stay upon the earth for a reason. I don't know the reason, but I was still here. I left the wreck, a small amount of blood escaping the cut on my head, and looked around at the road behind me. This time his body was left on the road. It didn't move or seem as though it ever would. I had taken another life, and there was more evidence this time. I walked to the front of the truck which was partially buried in the dirt. There was bits of flesh and blood dripping from the grill. I touched the stained metal, feeling the blood between my fingers. There was an eye lodged in the grill as well, I don't know which body it had come from, but it was there. It looked as though it were staring at me even from the truck. I left the truck, but instead of heading down the highway, I moved into the woods, going deeper and deeper.

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"I came out of the woods many kilometers away from the accident and began walking the road. By this time the sun was rising above the distant hills and casting an orange glow over everything. I thought it would be the best time to catch a ride and so I stuck out my thumb. I was offered a ride by a man driving a large pickup truck with two dogs in the back. We even passed the crash site which was now crawling with police officers and ambulance attendants who were trying to unravel what had happened. The man who had given me the ride –I believe his name was Randy– just stared like everyone else and made one statement: 'Wow'. We kept driving and I kept hitching rides and before long I was here."

Harold Caines now looked over at the man who sat in the seat next to him. He was trying to hold his concentration on the road in order to avoid looking at his passenger. There was a short silence which was broken by the man's throat being cleared.

"So you made it to the mainland without being discovered?"

Harold stared out his passenger side window. The farmland outside Montreal was spacious and green. There were only a few houses in his eye's view. "I was on the boat by the next night and on the road again the next day."

"So where are you heading?"

"I don't know."

"Oh."

The next fifteen minutes were in almost total silence. The only sounds were produced by the man in coughs and throat clearing. The car seemed to speed up on the highway, passing more and more vehicles. Finally they came to an exit and the man put on his signal.

"Well, this is my stop. I guess you'll have to catch another ride from here. Sorry."

Harold grabbed the small bag full of toiletries he had bought in a small store somewhere in New Brunswick and waited for the man to pull over. The car came to a stop on the side of the road just off the exit.

"Thanks for keeping me company on my drive with that story of yours. It was interesting. You should try to publish it sometime."

Harold could not tell if the man had not believed his story or just wanted him to think that he didn't. He didn't really care either way. He just had to tell it.

"Yeah. Thanks for the lift."

"No problem. Goodbye."

The car pulled off the dirt and back on the road. Harold did not believe the man would say anything to anyone worthwhile about their meeting. He would probably just tell his wife when he returned home from the business trip he had told Harold about. Harold just had to tell someone. The problem was that it did not free him as much as he had hoped it would. The man hadn't said where he was going for his conference, but Harold suspected this was not the place. He would tell no one else.

The rain began as a shower which, Harold could tell by the clouds, would turn heavier. It was going to be a black night on the road. Harold reached into his pocket and pulled out the eye he had been carrying for days now. It stared back at him, the rain beginning to make it glisten in his palm. It was going to be a black night indeed.

The Stone Turtle

Eve, as we called her, was a bizarre woman. My girlfriend and I named her that because she hung out in her garden so much, and the fact was, we had no idea what her name actually was. We had to name her something after all the discussions we had concerning her and her children. We were getting sick of calling her "the crazy woman next door", or "creepy lady".

No one seemed to know her name. It was not as if Cheryl and I actually spoke to our neighbors, but they never seemed to speak to each other either. Everyone in the neighborhood we lived in stayed pretty much to themselves. And even if they had wanted to talk or become friendly with a neighbor, they would not have ventured next door.

There was the Asian family across the street from the apartments (we didn't know how many were actually living in the house as so many seemed to come and go), there were the Frogsons on one side of the building (a name we developed because the father of the family spoke in a cartoonish voice and sounded like Kermit), there was another Asian family living on the other side of us (they only had a family of four living there), and then there was Eve.

We had named Kermit as soon as we heard his voice speaking to the kids in his yard. It was not hard to come up with him as Kermit, and the family as the Frogsons.

Eve was the only one we named because we got tired of talking about her with no proper term of identity. She had finally become such a part of our lives that I was forced to come up with a name of reference. We seemed to talk about her a lot, but then again, she gave us a lot to talk about.

We had been living in our apartment for about one year when the old neighbors moved out of the house next door and Eve and her two children moved in. I say next door, but our building was on a corner, and having the third floor apartment (highest in the building) we had a perfect side-on view of their entire back yard.

Jarred (I at first believed his mother was cruelly calling him "Jar-head", but soon recognized my mistake) was the younger of the two children. He was about five or six years old with short brown hair that looked bowl cut. He seemed very shy and always stuck close to his mother or his older sister Amy. Amy was closer to seven and had long straight hair that was a lighter brown than her brother's. The two children were small and always seemed to be dressed very conservatively. Even in the sweltering forty-degree humidity of Windsor's summer Amy wore a long dress which had a collar touching her neck and Jarred had a turtleneck or a buttoned up shirt wrapped around his throat. Cheryl and I immediately felt sorry for the poor, overdressed children, who would sit outside with their mother while she did things around the house.

We had liked the view of their back yard because of the little three-by-four pond that was filled with coy. They were large goldfish and we could see their vibrant orange figures twisting around in the pond from our apartment. The other item in the pond was a turtle. It was a medium-sized turtle (as pet turtles go) about the width of a hand. The

turtle spent most of its time on the one, flat-surfaced rock that lay at the end of the pond, and at other times would swim around the black, straight sides, trying to poke its head above the rim that hovered an inch above the water. He seemed to ignore the other creatures that inhabited his small world. We sometimes just watched them from our livingroom window in order to relax after a hard day of classes at the University. They sometimes helped to cheer us up, and at other times just seemed sad.

There was also a large area of a flower garden measured out, with a few flowers filling in the area, but it was never a real garden until Eve and her two children moved into the house. She spent hours in her garden, digging in the dirt with her trowel, planting the flowers and plants, and trimming the bushes with her shears. The garden seemed to fill up very quickly then, and before long it was an exotic spectacle. There were flowers everywhere, turning the back yard into what we could only call a small plant store. Soon we saw it as a garden of Eden duplicate, and she quickly became Eve. The strange thing was that we did not enjoy looking at the garden as much as the turtle and the fish that lived on the side of it. The garden, even though it was filled with beautiful things, seemed to become ugly and monstrous in its size and density.

We also quickly deduced Eve's adoration of turtles. Not only did they have the one live turtle swimming in their small pond, but there were three plastic ones (cheap, hollow, lime-green plastic) decorating her back steps. There were green splotches of paint that were placed like footsteps along the walkway, which we soon figured out were small turtles she had painted there one day when we hadn't been watching. There was a small red, blue, and green, turtle shaped sun-catcher that hung from a suction cup in one

of the windows facing our apartment building. God only knew how many other turtle articles she harbored in her house. But the one turtle item that seemed the most precious to her was the stone turtle that sat in the soil on the edge of her garden. It was a bit larger than the actual turtle that swam with the goldfish in her pond, and was a light grey color. It, unlike the live one, always stayed in the same position in the garden, facing the house as if it were guarding something precious.

Cheryl believed Eve had just gone through a separation or a divorce, and had moved into the house to start anew. She also examined the situation enough to deduce that Eve's husband was not a caring man, as he never came to visit and the children never left her side (we figured they must be home-schooled as they never went out of the yard unless she brought them). The only item of trouble was the fact that Eve never went to work on a regular basis. She only left her property once or twice a week (as far as we could tell from the amount we peered out our windows), and the two children always went with her. Some of those times we would see her come back with groceries. We knew she did not have a steady job, so we often wondered how she had the money to pay for everything. I had a more morbid idea of the father being a drunk who beat his wife and kids day after day until finally she left him, stealing their life savings and moving to another city far away. I even suggested that he may be trying to find her and the kids to even the score. It would have explained Eve's odd habits. Years of physical abuse can put a strain on anybody's mind, and she seemed ready to have a breakdown. Cheryl laughed at my suggestion of Eve's past and told me I should not talk about something so

horrible in such an easy manner. "Besides," she said "he could have died in a terrible accident and she could still be recovering from his death. Her odd behavior could be her way of working through the sorrow. Maybe she hasn't mourned properly and it is putting a strain on her. You don't know." She was right, we didn't know. The only thing I hated was seeing how it affected the children.

Cheryl's mother had died of cancer when she was fifteen, and it was still a very touchy subject with her. I didn't want to joke anymore about the whereabouts of the father of the two children. I understood the pain of a lost parent to a lesser degree. My parents had divorced when I was seven and it still hurt sometimes to think of it. My father was a practicing, but unsuccessful, musician and spent a lot of time away. He would be on small tours around New Brunswick and neighboring provinces, but was only working in clubs and a couple of weddings here and there when offered. My mother was fed up with the lack of his presence and so cut it off totally by divorcing him. I ended up with her and hardly saw him for most of my teenage life. Sure, I'm twenty-five now, but it still aches a little if I let it.

Watching the two children stay so close to her and each other, not venturing outside their own fence except with her, was hard to see. They needed friends and people outside of their family to help them get past whatever happened to their father as best they could. They only had each other to play with and would only be alone in the yard at times when their mother was doing something else in the house. They never moved beyond the fence that kept out the world around them, never made any friends. I believe they would have done so much better with friends. They would have been able to

put their lost father out of their minds. They couldn't move forward with no one around to help carry them. Their mother seemed to be no help to them at all. Eve seemed more to be the punisher than the healer. She would scold them often in the house, but never outside.

On hot nights in Windsor the humidity got to be too much and without an air conditioner (as we were for a few years), the windows had to be opened and the fans had to be on. This was when we first started hearing Eve yelling. I don't know what the children could have done to deserve such scoldings–they seemed very well behaved to us–but she would start yelling and screaming at them as if they had robbed a bank or stolen a car. We suspected some kind of abuse, but it was mostly based on the verbal expression of her hotheadedness. Her screaming would last for fifteen minutes or more at times and we were sure with her words that there was some kind of mental abuse going on.

The odd thing was her appearance after these episodes. Upon finishing her scolding of the children, for whatever horrible crime they must have committed, Eve would leave them in the house, come outside, and walk into her garden. There, she would kneel, kiss the small stone turtle which lay in the soil, then take up her small gardening spade and begin working. The kissing of the turtle seemed to be a type of ritual which she had to perform before tending to her garden as she would do it every time we saw her working there. But that was not the strangest thing about her post-chastising work. The most peculiar detail was the fact that it was usually dark at the

time. She would shovel, plant, weed, anything she decided needed to be done, all by the light of the moon, or the small lantern she took with her on overcast nights.

We thought it was a very odd time to be gardening, but we soon believed it to be a coping mechanism. She would have to scream and yell, but before it escalated, she would leave the house and begin her gardening to calm her down. Cheryl and I would smile when she first began to do it, giggling at the strange sight of a woman gardening in the dark. We would peer from the side of our window and shoot quick grins to each other. It was a curiosity that soon became creepy.

It quickly went from a weekly oddity to a nightly ritual. Even if we did not have the window raised we knew that she had been screaming at her children when we went to the refrigerator or began to close the blinds and saw her working in her garden. It was a sign of what had gone on inside the green house that lay below us. It gave us a sense of guilt and involvement, even though we knew there was really nothing we could do.

The coping mechanism didn't seem to work well enough. Even though she would garden every night, Eve's nightly yelling escalated in other ways. She began yelling for longer periods of time, her voice becoming much louder than usual. Cheryl believed the two kids would definitely grow up with hearing problems.

My only run-in with the woman was about the same time that the scolding episodes became nightly events. I was coming back from my weekend job, where I worked in a nursing home for the elderly. I had had a hard day as one of the people I had worked with had died. He had not passed away in the home, but had been taken to the hospital a week before. It was pneumonia and the doctors couldn't help him out of it

because of his age. We had gotten word at about eleven in the morning that he had passed away during the night. Needless to say, the rest of the day went slowly and was very somber.

On such days I get my frustrations out with loud, heavy metal music. I turn the windows down in my Sunfire, turn my CD player up and drive a long route home in order to sing and absorb as much music as I need. The harder or more draining the day, the louder the music and the longer the route home. On this day I had an extensive drive and Metallica was blasting through my car.

After I had pulled into the driveway that separated our building and the fence to Eve's yard, I turned off the stereo, shut off the car, and stepped out to meet an angry-looking woman treading purposefully towards me.

Eve was not as old as she seemed to think she was. She was dressed somewhat like the way she dressed her daughter. She wore a long grey skirt that stopped at her ankles and had no visible slits. Her blouse was plain white and done up to her throat. I tried to tell if I could see a bra under the whiteness of the blouse, but the material was obviously chosen to be thick enough to conceal such things. Her hair was mostly contained in one large braid that lay against her back, except for small, wire-like strands that moved as she paced towards me. She appeared to be only in her early thirties with a few wrinkles beginning to emerge around the sides of her eyes and in her forehead. Her body was plump and short, but she carried herself as if she was large enough to beat me down if need be.

"Excuse me, but must you always have your music playing so blasted loud when you pull into the driveway everyday?" It was not a question to be answered, only to be considered briefly before she continued. "I am trying to raise two decent children over there in that beautiful home I have created for them, and I don't need you driving up everyday with your Satanic music blaring out at us. If you want to listen to the devil's call, do it quietly. Don't try to corrupt us with it."

I was flabbergasted. I didn't know whether I should get angry or burst out laughing. Where had she come from? The fifties? I couldn't believe she was calling me a devil worshiper because I listened to Metallica. It was so absurd. Besides this point she was telling me that my whole purpose in listening to it loud was in order to corrupt her and her children into following my "evil ways". I responded as calmly as I could, but could not help the smile that crept into the corner of my mouth and curled my lips on the side.

"I'm sorry if you thought my music was too loud for you today, but I usually don't have it turned up that loud. Hard day at work... And it isn't devil music."

Eve seemed to be appalled by my answer. Her dark brown eyes widened slightly in surprise and her mouth opened again, allowing only a short breath. I guess she had figured that I would have quickly buckled under her firm demands, and was not ready for such a response.

"I hear it everyday. Every single day when you drive up this way I hear it coming from your car. Polluting our yard."

Her hair seemed even more frazzled now as the extra strands waved with the sway of her head. I could also see the grey threads of age. Her eyes squinted back to their original position, glaring at me as if their cold stare would persuade me.

"Well, its not my music that you're hearing. I don't have my music turned up every day. You must be hearing someone else's music."

I moved past her now as I was already having a bad day and was not in the mood to keep arguing with her.

"No. I hear your music." Eve turned to face me as I passed her by. "It's always the same."

"Sorry." I kept walking away from her and turned up the walkway "You're mistaken."

I turned the corner of the building sharply cutting the conversation off. I did not look back to see her return to her own yard, but I could hear her storming past the walkway and back around the fence.

A few weeks after the nighttime episodes began to become a routine, something occurred. It was early on a Saturday morning, about three a.m. and still pitch black. I remember waking up because I needed to take a leak. I quickly used the washroom and turned off the light. As I was trying to navigate my way through the darkness between the bathroom and our room, I heard voices outside. My first thought was about our car. There were a lot of break-ins and vandalizing of automobiles around the area, and seeing as how our car was less than a year old, the newness might be an invitation for a break-

in. I quickly moved over to the window and hauled up the blinds. I pulled the screen over so that I could stick my head out into the night air and look down at our car. My mind was relieved to see that there was no one around it, but I wanted to keep looking in order to be sure the voices were not around the corner and heading this way.

They were not.

I heard people moving around and quiet voices whispering things only the half hidden figures could hear. It was coming from the other side of the fence. I soon saw the movement of the flowers in the garden and heard a few stifled snickers over the sound of things being quietly snapped and broken. Whoever it was, they were tearing apart some of the garden, ripping apart the flowers that bloomed there. All I could do was watch. A still face in a darkened window, peering down like a powerless god. Not that I cared so much about the garden of a woman who thought I was a devil worshiper. She would probably think I did it anyway.

When I woke up early for class the next morning I could see the damage that had been done. The flowers had been beaten down, cracked and trampled upon. Some were lying still by the soil they had thrived in, others were totally torn up from the ground, clods of dirt still clinging to the roots, and thrown around like dirt bombs. There was even one that had landed in the small pond which contained the turtle and the fish. I must have awakened around the same time Eve was getting ready to discover the mess. When I first peered out the window I could see the two children scurrying around, trying to tidy things. The girl was frantically trying to replant the flowers, while the boy was

taking the heavily damaged ones and throwing them over the fence. As I looked down into our driveway I saw a few scattered stalks and flowers which had already been discarded there. My initial thought was that Eve had seen the mess and had ordered the two children to start putting her garden back in order. I soon found out that she had not yet seen it and the children were just trying to avert an inevitably bad day (or week, or month).

I had been putting on the kettle for my morning cup of coffee when I heard her come out of the house. She immediately began screaming and running around the yard looking at all of her things, checking them, seeing what had survived and what was destroyed. When she found that her stone turtle was gone she seemed to panic.

I watched as she ran around the yard, brushing away uprooted flowers, looking in the pond, looking around the side of the house. She could not find it. I took this time to walk over to my now boiling kettle and poured the water on top of the instant coffee. I added my milk and sugar, stirred it, and returned to the window. I was not overly surprised (or disappointed) to see that she was still looking, and was actually rechecking places she had actually already checked. Then she did it a third time.

Finally she seemed to accept the fact that it was gone. She fell to her knees about the area where it usually rested, and began clawing slowly at the dirt. It was not a searching motion, but more an action of misery. She seemed to be crying, and for the first time I felt compassion for her loss. She had seemed to really love that turtle, and now it appeared as though she had lost her best friend.

After a few moments she seemed to sober and turned her head. I ducked back behind the side of the window for fear of being seen. In doing so I wasted a bit of my coffee on my shirt. I lay the mug down on the kitchen table and moved to the washroom for a towel. When I returned, I heard Eve yelling at the children to "get in the house". It was the first time I had ever heard her yell at them while they were outside. I promptly moved back into position by the window, only to see Eve's ass holding the door open six inches as she moved into the house. It was safe to stand in front of the window now, as she could not see me.

This was the worst session yet. Eve began screaming at them right away. She kept asking them the same questions over and over. "Where is the turtle?" "What have you done with my turtle?" She kept telling them they were awful children who belonged in a zoo. She kept referring to how dirty they were and how the evidence proved that they were guilty. This went on for an hour, maybe even an hour and a half. We're not quite sure as I had to leave for class and when Cheryl woke up, it was mostly over. Before I left for school I was tempted to venture to Eve's front porch and confess what I had seen the night before, for the sake of the poor children who would have to probably hear about this for weeks. The problem was that she would probably believe that I was the one who stole her turtle for a ritual cult sacrifice or some other satanic reason, and I was late for class already.

As I opened the door to the car I heard the back door to Eve's house open as well. The fence that separated the driveway from her backyard blocked my view, but I could

hear her say "No. You are in big trouble Mr." and then the door to the house closed again. I just shook my head, got into my car, and turned up my Metallica cd.

That night I was awakened by a quick shake. My mind was groggy and I could only let out a low "uhn."

"Mark."

Again only "uhn."

The loud clap of thunder was what really brought me into reality. My heart began beating faster, and my mind started to catch up. I was being shaken by someone. Cheryl. She spoke my name again.

"Mark."

This time I was awake enough to form a word.

"What?"

She leaned over me now and spoke into my ear.

"The window is open in the livingroom. Can you go close it?"

I let out a burdened sigh and muttered "Yeah" before leaving the bed. There was a flash of light as I stepped from the bed to the door, and a loud shotgun blast of thunder that quickly followed.

"Wow. That was a loud one."

Now it was Cheryl's turn to say something low and unintelligible. I kept walking to the livingroom where the rain had already begun to soak the carpet. As I stood in the wet spot on the floor and lifted my hands up to pull the windows across in their treads,

another flash came. This time I saw something moving outside. After a second or so, while my eyes adjusted back to the darkness, I could see someone moving in what was left of Eve's garden. At first I thought that it was one of the teenagers returning to reap more havoc on the woman's garden. But as my eyes further adjusted to the darkness outside, I could tell that it was Eve herself who was in the garden. She was working patiently among the few flowers which were left after last night's incident. The rain was heavy and dense and she was no doubt drenched to the bone. I could not believe my eyes. She was gardening in one of the worst rainstorms of the year. I didn't even know how she could stand to be outside with what must have been reams of water flowing over her skin, off her nose, dripping down her back. I was astonished. She would certainly catch her death being out in such weather. She had definitely just gone from creepy to crazy in my mind.

She moved in the dark, stood up, reached her hands up and stretched. The lightning flashed and I saw her look up towards the building. It was as if she were looking straight at me. Her eyes looked locked on me, her hair was loose and plastered to her skull with the force of the rain. Her face seemed white and empty. She looked like the corpses in the movies when they returned from the dead. I quickly ducked behind the side of the window, afraid that she had caught me watching her.

I stood there for what seemed to be about five minutes. I don't know if it was less, but it seemed like it could have been even longer. She seemed so creepy, looking up towards me as the flash of lightning briefly illuminated her face. I don't know why I felt so afraid. It was only my next door neighbor who was outside gardening in a

rainstorm. Weird? Yes. A reason for me to feel afraid? No. However, this reasoning did not help. I felt as if she would be knocking on our apartment door at any moment. I wanted to look out the window again to make sure she was not still looking up at me, but at the same time I did not want to look out for fear she was still there, her hair running with water, her skin white as a sheet, staring up at me. After another flash (a few had already passed while I stood beside the window) I peered around the side of the window, looking down into the next door yard. She was not staring up at the building any longer. Eve was now crouched back down to the soil, digging at it with her small metal spade. I watched for a few moments longer and then returned to bed to tell Cheryl what I had seen. She responded in groggy sentences that did not seem to display any amazement more than "that's weird" or a sarcastic "O.K.". After a few minutes she was asleep once again, but I was not able to return so easily. Eve's presence had made me uneasy and whenever I closed my eyes to try and sleep I could only see her pale, wet face staring up at me. No emotion. Cold as stone.

I had almost forgotten about the incident when I woke up the next day, and whether or not Cheryl remembered much of my story, I don't know. But she did not mention it and I was OK with that as I did not feel like talking about it. It had scared me and I felt a little embarrassed by that fact. I just felt more like letting it go and carrying on with my regular day of studying and listening to music.

There was never any more full blown scoldings after that day. It had gone back to the regular ones that occurred every night. Only now they consisted of the same

questions over and over: "What did you do with the turtle?", "Where is my turtle?", and so on. The children now seemed to be grounded to the house as we never saw them outside with her. We only heard the stern lectures and questions they were receiving every night after dark. Then we would see Eve leave the house and begin working in her garden. It was going to take awhile for her to rebuild what had so quickly been destroyed.

About a week after that stormy night I was returning from downtown. I had been at the bank depositing my most recent check from work. I had walked up Wyandotte Street to get to the bank, and in my usual fashion I took University Avenue to get back to our apartment. I was passing a chain link fence that closed off an empty gulch by the side of the road when I noticed something in the grass on the decline to the bottom of the depression. I stopped and leaned over the top of the metal fence to see as far over it as I could. It was the stone turtle (or at least a seemingly identical stone turtle –although the chances of two missing turtle decorations was unlikely), lying on its back in the grass. I don't know why I cared so much about it, maybe it was the kids being punished for something I knew they did not do, but I decided to retrieve it.

I placed my hands on the round metal bar that ran along the top of the fence, finding a firm grip, and then, using one leg on top of the bar, I hopped over the top. My hands were still gripping the bar when my two feet landed on the other side. I let go and started moving down the slope to where the turtle lay. Its stone feet were pointed up except for one. One was missing; broken in the heist. I reached down and lifted the

ornament. It was heavier than I had realized and seemed to be crafted well. As I held it I read the words that had been engraved in the stone of its belly:

FOR MY DARLING WIFE EMILY.

AS THESE WORDS WILL ALWAYS

BE IN STONE

I WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU

So it was Emily. We had the "E" right anyway. I read it over a few times, running my fingers across the indentations as if it were written in brail. Had he made it himself? It seemed to be hand-carved and there was no signs of copyrights or "made in Taiwan" engravings. Either way she had been married to someone who appeared to have loved her. I turned it over in my hands and looked at the top. It had been damaged on the top as well. I'm really not sure if it had been like that before or if it had acquired the damages from the teenage thieves. They may have tried to break it by throwing it over the fence into the gulch, or maybe they had just tried to discard it and it was damaged in the process. I wasn't even sure of the purpose the young offenders had in mind when stealing the decoration. They might have known she loved the turtle and knew she would miss it the most, or they might have just been looking for something to steal. It had been a few years since I was that young and I had no idea why they would pull such a stunt.

When I returned home Cheryl was sitting down watching a rerun of Seinfeld. She saw what I had in my hands and immediately muted George's voice (which was beginning to escalate into one of his frenzied speeches) and turned to me.

"Where did you find that?"

"Down in that dipped field just after the Bingo parlor on University."

She got up from the couch and took it from my hands so that I could remove my shoes. "Is it the same one?"

"I assume. How many missing turtle decorations like this are there in Windsor?" I reached down and pulled my fingers through the laces, loosening the shoe. "There's an inscription on the bottom."

Cheryl turned it over in her hands and began to read it. I put my shoes in the closet and walked back to look over her shoulder.

"This makes sense now." Cheryl looked back at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she moved over to the couch and I followed. "This is why she kept kissing the turtle every time she entered her garden. And it's also why she became so upset over losing it. She has lost *him* somehow, and this turtle that he gave her is what allows her to hold on to him still. Now that it's gone she feels as though she's losing him all over again."

Leave it to a psych student to read so much into it–although she was probably right. Eve's husband–or Emily's husband–had probably died. If it had been a divorce she would not have held on to something like this with such love. She wouldn't have wanted it at all if she had run away from him. All signs pointed to the turtle as a last memory of a dead husband.

"So what should we do with it?"

Cheryl looked at me with some surprise in her eyes. "You have to return it."

"What? The woman's a nut. She thinks that I'm satanic and probably thinks the same of you if she's seen you with me. If we go over there she's gonna think we took it and probably call the cops."

"We can't just keep it. This woman has been a wreck since she lost this thing. You hear how she yells at those poor children every night. We need to give it back at least for their sake."

I thought about this for a moment and realized she was right. "I'll bring it back late tonight. Once she finishes her gardening I'll give her time to go to bed, or whatever. Then, after all the lights have been out for awhile, I'll creep through her gate and put the turtle back where it always was."

Cheryl agreed that this was the best way to do it. And so the waiting began.

It was almost midnight before Eve turned out the lights. I waited an extra hour to give her plenty of time to fall asleep. Leno was a repeat I had seen earlier in the year and I didn't much care for Letterman. I was left watching an old rerun of "Married with Children" where Bud won a party with the metal band Anthrax. It was also something I had seen before, but at least it was worth a second viewing. At one o'clock I walked over to the apartment door and put on my shoes. My heart had begun to beat faster.

Cheryl was in bed. She had had an early appointment with a test subject for her thesis experiment that day and had to get up early for another one the next morning. She had wished me luck and went to bed, not realizing the nervous feeling that was coursing

through my body. To her it was just a walk through the gate and back. To me it was much more. I was trespassing for a good reason, but I was feeling afraid of Eve. I remembered her looking up at me in the window that night. Her look was frightening and still gave me cold-shivers when I recalled it in my mind. Of course it was worse now after a week. Now I remembered her looking paler than possible, white as a corpse back from the dead. Her eyes were white as well, except for the large black pupils that sat in the middle of them. Her lips were broken and chapped as if she had not exposed them to water in weeks, and yet the rain kept streaming off her facial features. I knew that was not how she had really been, but after a week of thinking it over, my mind began to exaggerate her hideous appearance.

I tied my laces and grabbed the turtle off the floor. It had been sitting by the bookshelf since that afternoon and had seemed to be watching us as we moved around the apartment. I was quite glad to get it out of the apartment. I was sick of it. I was sick of the whole Eve experience. After this was done I was not planning on ever looking out at her and her children again. Their lives were none of my business, and I didn't want to know any more about them. I knew too much already.

I left the apartment, walked down the steps and quietly opened the building door. I don't know why I was sneaking around so much when the door was on the front of the building and Eve's house was on the back. She would never hear the clank of the metal door being shoved open–and even if she did she would never have paid any attention to another person coming and going from the building.

I reached the corner of the building and walked quietly across the driveway with the turtle in my hand. It seemed to be getting heavier as I carried it. I reached the gate to Eve's yard and reached over it to pull the bolt across. It was not a locking mechanism for keeping people out, only to keep the gate from swinging during the night. I was lucky that it made no creaking noise as I swung it open.

Then I was there.

I was walking across Eve's yard with her precious turtle held in one hand. I kept switching hands while walking as the weight would be too much for one hand for a long period. I passed the pond I had only ever seen from our window. It looked even smaller as I moved along the side of it. I could have easily reached down into the water and grabbed one of the goldfish. The turtle was on the rock and did not seem to be disturbed by the sound of my passing.

I approached the garden, looking at the flowers that grew there, seeing where some had lost leaves, petals; or how they drooped just a bit too much. Some were still in fine condition, but most looked haggard and damaged in some way. The dirt in the area where I was about to lay the turtle had been worked loose lately.

I looked up to the window of our apartment to see if Cheryl had gotten up when I had left, but there was no one staring down at me. The light was still on in the livingroom, and I could see the flicker from the tv reflected in the picture above our couch. Could Eve have seen me up there that night? I was in the dark at the time, so it was hard to tell. She may have seen a face, for a second, in the flash of the lightning.

She would probably have just brushed it off without thinking much about it. I wished I could do the same.

A cold shiver went down my spine at the recollection of that night. Now was not the best time to be recalling her creepy presence in the spot I was standing. I had to stick the turtle in its place and leave again quickly.

I knelt down, being careful not to get any dirt on my pants. I not only did not want the mark left on the pant-legs, but I thought of it as some kind of incriminating evidence. My knees touched the grass and I reached over, placing the turtle in the corner of the garden. In order to cover the missing leg I used my hands to draw some loose earth up around its body.

That's when I felt something in the soil. It rolled up out of the mounds as I drew my hands together in the dirt. It was an unusual object that I initially thought was a dirty french fry. It was an absurd first guess but was the same size and shape. Then I noticed the difference. It was the same length and consistency to a point, but rubbery and grey beneath the black dirt.

And it had a nail.

My heart felt as if it dropped into my stomach as I stared at the object, confirming the fact that it was a finger–a child's finger. I stared at the dirty lump, seeing how the larger end appeared torn or cut. My breathing was growing rapid, but I felt as if I was not able to catch enough air. I wanted to move so much, but my mind was occupied with coping with what I was seeing. It was a child's finger–I did not know whether it was

Amy or Jarred's or where the rest of them were, but I knew they were not grounded to the house. They were dead.

With this thought my mind released me from paralysis and, as I stood to run, my stomach released whatever it was holding. I turned and vomited on her lawn, and the more I thought about the finger and the two children, the more I released. It seemed as though it wouldn't stop. I tried to take a few steps before I threw up again. Then I finally reached a dry point. I would retch, but only feel the blood push itself into my face and dry spit drip from the corner of my mouth.

I breathed in and turned to run.

That's when I saw her.

Eve was standing on her back porch. Her body was almost hidden in the darkness and I don't actually know how long she had been standing there. She could have been standing there since I entered her garden and I would not have noticed. It was the angle that I now stood at that allowed me to catch a small stroke of light against her figure.

I wanted to scream, but my voice seemed to have shrunken back into my throat, and my legs could hardly support my own weight anymore, let alone allow movement. I was trapped by her mere presence.

I stood immobile, peering through the darkness as best as I could. Trying to figure out what I should do next–or what *she* would do next. I could see that she held something in her hand. It appeared to be some sort of sharp object. It was hard to tell... until the blade caught a small amount of light from the moon, or a streetlight, or something. It was her gardening shears.

Fear had taken over and my legs began to shake. There was a dark stain on the blades already and I could not stop thinking about the severed finger I had just found. The thoughts weighed heavily on my mind and I could hardly prevent myself from buckling and hitting the ground. I knew that if she came at me with the shears it was all over. I was usually a strong individual, but I had never been faced with such terror before in my life and my abilities were failing. If she came at me I would have no real defenses. I would be helpless.

Then Eve lifted the shears by their handles and thrust the point into the middle of her throat.

I shook at the same time she did. It felt as if she had actually struck me–and for a split second, I thought she had.

She opened her mouth wide and fell forward down the three steps onto the concrete path. But it was not enough. Her mouth was still open as if to speak or scream, but there was no air reaching her mouth to form the words. She just lay there, her mouth open and only a strand of blood escaping.

I felt cold with shock.

I had no idea what had just occurred. I had expected her to run up to me screaming and trying to kill me with the shears; instead, she was the one who dropped.

I watched as she lay on the concrete. Her hair was matted against the blood flowing from her neck wound and her eyes never left me. Then there was something different. Something stopped moving and her eyes lost their intensity. They quickly dulled as she stopped breathing.

I didn't even know if I could stay standing. She had fallen across the concrete that lead the way out to the gate, hindering my path. I did not feel as though I could even move to the gate. Now I had to pass Eve's body as well.

I stared away from her and towards the light that flickered against the picture in our apartment. Whatever was on the screen was making the room glow in a red tinge, then it was back to the bluey-white. I felt sick again but knew there was nothing else inside me to release. I breathed deeply and began moving in small steps. I had my balance, but everything seemed lighter–too light. My arms and legs moved too freely in the night air.

After a few steps I wobbled and fell down against the walkway. My arms did not contain the strength to lift myself back up. My head was too light as well. The night hissed in my ears and everything began to lose focus, snowing over like an empty tv channel. I could see Eve staring back. She was not far away from where I lay, the shears still sitting solid in her throat, her blood trailing down the sides of her neck and staining the little green turtles that were painted like footprints all along her pathway.

The Hunt

Glenn cracked the skull of the trout against the large rock on which he sat, with a quick flick of his wrist. He wiped the bit of trout blood that had splattered on the back of his hand against his pants as its jaw quickly stopped its helpless attempts for breath and it fell limp in his hand. After two nights of sleeping in Jim's little cabin this was the first proper sized trout he had caught. The other couple he had hooked were puny creatures and so Glenn struck them once against the rock and then threw them back. He hated fishing and, as he flattened another mosquito against his cheek, he decided that he detested the entire outdoor life.

Richard, the youngest of the three men at twenty-two, was just wandering back from the bushes when Jim opened another can of beer. He was wearing a Labatt's Blue T-shirt that appeared as if it had been picked up by a tornado and then found and worn again. Richard quickly zipped up his worn jeans and called out Jim's name as he approached the cluster of large rocks that led out into the pond. There were about five, boulder-sized rocks that allowed the men to step further towards the deeper parts of the pond without actually having to enter the water. Glenn had his own rock, Jim had another, and Richard had a smaller one to the other side of Jim. "Toss one of those here, Jim," he called as he approached them.

Jim reached down, grabbed a can, and lobbed it into Richard's waiting hands.

"Thanks. Say, how's Andrea doing?"

Jim released the can from his lips and allowed the beer to slide down his throat. "She's doing good. I'm the one having problems. The baby's started kicking now, and she'll wake me up during the night in order to show me. And if it ain't that, it's the goddamn heartburn she experiences. And if it ain't that it's the cravings, And if it ain't that..."

"All right, all right. We get it." Richard chuckled in good humour.

"Well, do you wonder why I consider this to be a relaxing weekend?"

As the two other men laughed, Glenn slowly slid another worm over the hook, impaling its soft body until only the end could continue wriggling. He did not care about Jim's baby or wife. Jim and Glenn worked in the same office and after ten years of kissing the same asses day after day, Glenn had hoped a promotion was coming his way. However, Jim had come along and stole his promotion right out from under him. His own brother-in-law (or step-brother-in-law if there was such a thing) had destroyed his chance for a raise and a better position. Jim had apologized, of course, knowing Glenn's interest in the advancement, but then he had the nerve to ask Glenn if it would upset him if he took it. Glenn felt like spitting in his face and telling him to go fuck himself, but he had just smiled through clenched teeth and admitted that with a wife and a child on the way Jim needed it more. Jim thanked him for his understanding (as if he would have refused the job without it) and took Glenn's promotion. Glenn was thirty-four, had no romantic attachments, and no children *or* pets. The money could have at least helped him to feel happier.

To make things worse, he had brought this on himself seven years ago. Jim had just started seeing his step-sister when he lost his job as an accountant with Tulk & Ginge, a hundred-year-old business in St. John's. The business had gone under in the early nineties and he found himself suddenly unemployed. Soon after this a job opened up in Glenn's office, and Glenn mentioned it to Jim. He had never expected that such an act of generosity would come back to bite him in the ass.

But now, three months after the promotion, here he sat, on a large rock, on a hunting and fishing trip with the very same man and some dim-witted friend of his. Glenn knew the only reason he was invited on this partial-homo, existentialist hike in the woods was because of his step-sister. He realized that she would have insisted that her husband ask him as a show of good will towards the man he stepped over to get the promotion. To show that there were no hard feelings. Yeah, right. Of course Glenn was then forced to accept the offer in order to appear cooperative. Jim was now his superior at the office and so he could not refuse for fear Jim would think he was still pissed off. Maybe he would even consider Glenn not to be a team player. It would only lead to future problems.

Glenn reeled in his hook which was once again empty. The trip seemed to be a complete failure as a hunting trip. They had not seen one moose the whole time they were trudging around in the damn woods all Friday. They saw a dried-up heap of moose shit on Saturday, but no moose. And now, sticking to the plan of two days hunting, one fishing, they had abandoned the moose tracking and walked for kilometres to go fishing.

Jim and Richard seemed to be catching a few fish, but he was not getting many bites at all. Glenn grabbed another worm and methodically pierced it with the hook.

"Damn worm shit. All over my fingers. The stuff is slicker than snot on a doorknob. I can hardly hold my fuckin' beer."

"C'mon Glenn. Lighten up. You're supposed to get dirty when you spend time in the woods. We're miles from civilization, the air is clear, it's quiet, and all you can do is bitch about a bit of slime on your hands." Jim laughed as he picked up his rod again, stood up on the rock and with a quick flick of his wrist, cast his line.

"Yeah Glenn." *Oh no*, thought Glenn, *now wonder boy has to have his say* "I mean, just lean over the side of the rock and wa--"

Richard stopped talking and turned towards the trees. Both Glenn and Jim followed his gaze to the same area.

"What? Did you hear something?" asked Jim.

"I think."

"Moose?"

"Maybe. It was a snapping sound, like something moving over there. But if it was a moose it would have to be further in or we'd see it."

Richard rose from where he leaned against the closest rock to the shore and moved towards their tackle boxes and knap-sacks. Glenn turned back to the pond shaking his head to himself. He did not share the curiosity of the other two men about this hidden animal. It had been a long trek from the cabin to the pond, and none of them wanted to carry their rifles that far with the rest of the gear when today's game was fish.

Therefore, even if there were an animal in the woods behind them, Glen knew there was no way to kill it. It was useless for them to even waste their time looking. Glenn decided to keep fishing in order to move the day (and the weekend) along. The more he kept casting and reeling, the faster things went.

Soon the other men repositioned themselves on their rocks and returned to their fishing.

"Maybe it was a fox, or a beaver from somewhere around the pond." Richard suggested. Glenn snorted quietly to himself at the stupidity of the young man. Jim was the one to answer him.

"Must've been a moose or caribou, maybe even a bear. Made too much noise to be anything smaller."

"Yeah, that's true. It was kinda loud for this far away." Richard was peering back over the fifty feet of mud, rocks, and the odd patch of tall grass that separated them from the tree-line. "Had to be something large."

No shit, Sherlock. You think so? Glenn thought as he reeled in his hook, feeling another tug twinge his line and pole. It was firmly caught on the line, he could tell. *Two fish now. He was going to be feasting for days!*

That was the last trout Glenn caught for that afternoon. Before long it was four-thirty and they had to head back to the cabin for supper. They had about forty-five to fifty minutes of walking ahead of them and by the time they packed their fish and tackle box and started to walk it would be closing in on a quarter to five. If they were lucky

they would get back to the cabin by six, but that was only partially up to them. It was a hard trek through bogs, wood, over fallen trees, through hornets's nests (Glenn had been stung yesterday and could still feel the tenderness in his thigh), up hills, down hills, around ponds and through brooks. This was even harder when wearing knee-high rubber boots as they all were. There was a very faint trail from the cabin through the woods. It was not much of a path, but more of a way that Jim knew of getting to the pond without wandering into hard to pass areas. It was a way that went through the least dense areas of trees and through the few places without bushes. It mostly avoided places and things that were hard to get through such as ponds and thick-wooded areas.

Glenn had seen many ponds while they were walking and had even crossed a few brooks, but, even though *he* would cast a few lines into the brooks as they came upon them, Jim had a specific spot in mind and would stop nowhere else. The fact that pissed Glenn off so much when they started fishing in the pond was that there seemed to be less fish there than in the other places. What kept Glenn walking was a thought that kept recurring to him. Several times Glenn felt like grabbing Jim, slamming his face down into the water and screaming at him: This is fucking trout water! Can you see any goddamn trout? Because I can see them plain as day from up here!" Then he would just think about him drowning in the water as he kept screaming at him, and Glenn smiled to himself. It made the walk a little more bearable.

The flies and mosquitoes in the woods were worse than the ones on the pond. Glenn could not understand how the little buggers could bite you in such unexposed places. He had put on his fly dope to get rid of them, and yet they got him anyway. He

already had bites on his belly, back, ass, and even below the rim of his socks (he always wondered how they got in there). It was not even as if the repellent worked. He would put it on, and even though he would not be bitten in these places he would feel them pitching on his body. Repellent didn't repel shit! There were a hundred of them surrounding his body, touching him like itchy fingers dabbing his arms and face, crawling on his skin, tickling his eyes, and buzzing in his ear hole.

It had been forty minutes now and they only seemed a little over half way. Glenn could not help wondering how much farther they would have to go before they got back to the cabin. He was tired of the walking, the bugs, the outside, and just wanted to lie down. It was the afternoon heat and their end-of-day exhaustion which slowed them on their walk back. Everything seemed heavier when you were wearing heavy clothing, had gotten up at seven-thirty, walked for fifty minutes, and had been in the sun all day (which burned the back of his neck). They also wore their sacks on their backs and held their fishing poles in their hands. Glenn wished they could just drop the damn things on the trail. The rods were longer than practical for a trek in the woods. Any trees they passed would catch the end of the pole and even tangle in the line if you were not careful. Jim had his own rod that was able to be broken down and placed in his sack, which made his hike a little easier than the other two's. Glenn was pissed at Jim's lack of consideration for keeping this pole for himself and leaving him with the old, tree snagging piece of shit. This was probably the reason he had only two fish to show for his work the entire day. Jim left him with a defective rod.

Jim suddenly stopped and cocked his head back towards the ragged trail they had just broken through the trees. He peered around as if eying each tree individually.

"What?" Richard asked from up front.

At that moment there was the sound of branches snapping and something moving in the patch of trees behind them. Glenn looked at Jim who in turn looked at him with a tinge of concern showing in his face. He began to speak in a calm voice.

"There's something big in the trees back there and we should keep moving. If it hears us it will probably just get scared and run off."

Glenn could not help the urge to ask the unspoken question between the men: "And if it doesn't run? What if it tries to run after us?"

"That's unlikely. It's probably more scared of us than we are of it. But if it does charge..." He smiled at a joke that Glenn could see felt awkward even to his own ears "we should probably not stick around to say hi."

The three men started to move once again, continuing to turn back and peer towards the space behind the cluster of trees. There was definitely something there. They all could hear the sounds of leaves, twigs and branches breaking as something moved through the woods. They walked over a hill, looking back down as they moved over the top, checking for a glimpse of something following. There was nothing but a distant sound of something moving through the trees. When they reached the bottom of the other side of the hill and moved further into the clearing towards another group of trees, they began to laugh. Even Glenn laughed at their silence which now became so obvious with the sound of their voices. Richard spoke first:

"Man, I think that might've been a bear. It seemed large enough. Imagine having to run away from a bear. That would not have been a fun sprint."

"Well," Jim joked in a much more upbeat tone than before. "as the old joke goes, I wouldn't have had to outrun a bear. I would've just had to outrun one of you guys."

They all laughed at the joke, but Glenn immediately began to resent the statement, as he realized that he would have been the one to outrace. Richard was too far ahead already and ten years younger than the other two. Glenn would have been the only one to beat. His anger was reflected onto the youngest of the three:

"Little bit scared there were you, Richy?"

Glenn could see that the shortening of his name had hit a nerve deep within him, but the youngest man quickly brushed it aside. "Me? I think the two of you were the ones who almost shit themselves. Both of your faces seemed white. *I* knew it would be nothing."

"Oh really?" Jim laughed "Then why are you so far ahead of us? You were walking like you were about to unload into your shorts."

Glenn and Jim laughed but were not joined by their companion. Richard was concentrating on the trail ahead of him at something small which was moving there in the taller grass. He turned back to the other two and his face seemed to loose its colour in seconds. He had turned to run when he began yelling for them to do the same. Glenn turned and saw it first, charging down from the top of the hill, its weight and size making it appear like a freight train. It was a huge black bear that was coming towards them. It looked angry and determined.

Glenn was running before he could even think about it, followed quickly by Jim. Richard was far out in front, his youth and fitness creating a good gap between himself and them. He quickly passed the object he had been staring at in the grass, which the other two could now see was a cub. They were standing between it and the mother bear. Richard was mostly out of danger now and it was just Glenn and Jim who had to worry about the bear. Jim's joke now became reality. The two were in a race for their lives. There was no way they could stop a bear from charging them. The only way to survive was to beat the other person. Fortunately Jim was a step behind, but Glenn knew the other man would ultimately be faster. He was slimmer, a couple of years younger, and had not smoked for half of his life. Glenn knew he had to get rid of his competition. He could only think for a second, and so, with his heart racing faster than his legs could go, and his stomach knotting with fear and the beer he had been consuming earlier, he turned, thrust his fishing pole back between his opponent's knees and turned it sideways. The pole was quickly plied from Glenn's grip as Jim tripped. His face had a questioning appearance as he tumbled to the mossy ground. He yelled forward to Glenn, but Glenn had turned back towards his goal, meeting the horrified face of Richard who was stalling up ahead. As Glenn passed the frightened cub, he could see the concern in Richard's face for his friend who now lay at the mercy of a black beast. Had Richard seen what he had done, or was his horror stemming from the looming fate of his friend?

Jim quickly pulled himself back to his feet, but was only able to make a few more steps before the bear struck him back down with a large, heavy claw. The bear was on him very quickly, striking him and using its powerful jaws to tear at his shoulders and

head. While Richard kept peering back, slowing down so much that Glenn could actually catch up to him, Glenn would not look back. He needed to keep looking ahead and moving. He felt that if he looked back something would catch him and tear him to shreds.

When he caught up to Richard, all he could do was pass him and keep running. Richard seemed paralysed in his fear. He had a strong urge to help his friend somehow, but the only other person who could help him with such a task was now running towards the trees and away from what was happening. If he stayed he would be alone, facing an animal which was tearing a man apart as he watched. There was nothing he could do alone. Out of fear and horror, Richard turned back to the path ahead, running to catch up with the other man, holding the image of his friend clawing against the fur of a large beast, blood on his hands.

They were back to the cabin before either man spoke to the other. As they exited the wooded area, still heaving from running and stumbling through the trees for the last ten minutes, Richard started to mumble both to himself and Glenn:

"I can't believe we just left him there. I can't believe we left him there to die. We left him all alone to fight off a bear. We should've done something."

"What? What could we have done? It was a fucking huge bear. We would've been clobbered!"

"We could have ran at it screaming and yelling, thrown stones at it, hit it with our rods, anything."

These ideas were good ones. Not damn good, but they may have been worth a try. *But as they say* Glenn thought *Hindsight is twenty-twenty.* At the time all that seemed plausible was running. Glenn could tell Richard was not going to handle this very well. He was already beginning to hear the choking sound of tears in his voice. Glenn hated having to be the person to talk him down, but he was the only one around. He was going to have to talk some sense back into him. He stopped walking towards the front door and looked at Richard who had also stopped.

"Listen to me. We were standing between it and the cub. That bear was out for blood, it was not going to be frightened away by some puny humans yelling or hitting it with sticks. We would've only pissed it off and given it a reason to come after *us.* Besides, where were we going to find rocks to throw in the woods. Huh? And we didn't hold onto our poles long enough to try to hit it. I don't know about you but mine was far behind me."

Richard's expression straightened out at this last comment and Glenn wondered if he knew something about where his pole had been dropped, but was not saying anything about it. He *did* know something, Glenn could feel it. The two just looked back and forth at each other for a few seconds before Richard broke the silence.

"Well we should have done something. We just left him." He turned and began walking towards the house again. "We just fucking left him."

Glenn was getting fed up with Richard's whining now. He was not going to help them (or Jim) with his bitching about something that was already done and finished. They could do nothing now except get on the Honda quadrunners and get to the truck.

The truck was sitting in the makeshift parking area on the dirt road, which was a twenty minutes ride from the cabin. From there they would have to drive an hour on the dirt road to reach the Trans Canada. It would be dark before they reached anyone to tell about what had happened.

When they stepped up to the door of the cabin, Richard was the one who put his hand on the doorknob, but it was Glenn who first knew that there would be a problem.

"It's locked isn't it?" He spoke before Richard had a chance. Richard only answered by trying to grip the knob harder and shake the door open. It was no use.

"I don't fucking believe this. I can't fucking believe this!" He began to cry. "Please tell me you have the key, or know where there is an extra key."

"No. Jim had the key."

"Fuck!" Richard fell against the outside wall of the cabin and sank down to a crouching position.

"Look. I'll go around the side and break through the side window. When I get inside I'll open the door."

Glenn did just that, using a piece of firewood to break the glass and clear the sill of the extra shards. When he opened the door Richard was still in the same position.

"Come on. We can't just stand around. We have to get to the truck."

"I think we should go back. We can take the rifles in case the bear is still there. Maybe Jim is still alive. He could be suffering there, waiting for someone to come and help him. We can't just leave here now."

"We can't go back. Jim is dead. That bear was tearing into him like it was rabid. He didn't stand a chance." Glenn looked down at the young man who had his head lowered as if inspecting the dirt for some idea of what to do. "Besides, even if Jim was alive, which he isn't, we have no way to get him out of there."

"We could use the quads to go back for him."

"You could never get the quads through the trees, they're too closely grouped. That clearing was surrounded by them. Even if he were alive he would need more help than we can give him. That's why we need to take the quads and get to the truck. It's our only hope." Glenn felt as if he were actually getting through to him with this reasoning. It was true, if Richard wished to help Jim (who could not have survived the encounter anyway) they would have to get help. For Glenn, it was just the fact that he wanted to get out of these woods and go home. Jim was dead and, as they would say, dead men tell no tales.

Richard looked up now, directly into Glenn's face. "Glenn?"

"What."

"Do you have the truck keys?"

Glenn just stood looking at him. *Shit.*

The keys were nowhere in the cabin. Both men searched the two rooms (sitting and sleeping) thoroughly without turning up any keys. They even went through Jim's bags and extra jacket. The thought that Glenn knew was on both of their minds was that the keys for the truck were on the same ring with the key for the cabin. Glenn did not

want to return to Jim in the woods. Not only did he not want to see the body of his brother-in-law clawed and ripped up, but he was mostly afraid of the bear still being there.

"Maybe we should go to the truck and check for an extra set. Jim may have left another set under a mat or in the glove box."

The two men walked to where the quad-runners were parked. Both knew now that they had access to only one. Richard owned one which they had brought down on the back of the truck, Jim owned the other which he kept here all year in a small, hidden shed, not far from the dirt road. This was another place they would have to check for an extra set of keys. Glenn hated the idea of having to climb on the back of such a small vehicle with such an idiot. He didn't even know if the kid could drive. He had ridden in to the cabin with Jim, and Richard had gotten stuck in mud twice on the way. This trip was no different.

By the time they reached the shed near the end of the trail, they had been stuck three times. Twice in the same places as before and once in a new spot that did not seem to have any more mud than a few days before when they had ridden over it. Each time he got stuck he would blame the extra weight, but Glenn knew it was just his incompetence that got them stuck each time.

The shed itself was left unlocked when the quad-runner was removed as there was absolutely nothing left in there. It was only made of sheet metal rivetted to a roof of the same material, large enough to hold one Honda quad-runner and nothing else (which Glenn discovered pretty quickly). There was no place to even hide a key in the empty

steel box. Their only hope would be if he had left an extra set of keys in the cab of the truck somewhere.

"It's locked." Richard said as he pulled up on the handle.

"So?" Glenn felt as if he had to explain everything to the younger man. He was finding himself growing more frustrated at his newfound parenthood for this idiot child he had recently found tagging along with him. Richard just stared at him with an already defeated expression. Glenn, who was standing at the other door of the truck, picked up a large rock from the side of the dirt road and, stepping back a few feet, thrust it through the side window. The window completely shattered and Glenn quickly unlatched his door, opened it, and reached over to do the same for Richard.

"First we should check the glove-compartment." Glen lifted the latch and let the door drop open allowing the papers contained inside to spill forth upon the floor. He shifted through the mess but found nothing more than paper inside. Their search also included the sun visors, behind and under the seats, under the mats, and the pocket pouches on the doors themselves. Glenn kept an eye on Richard's hunt as well, rechecking most of the spots he had already looked over. He did not want to spend another night in the woods after what had happened, especially because some young jackass was not looking carefully enough.

There was no extra set of keys. The two men now realized that they would have the inevitable task of returning to where they had last seen Jim. However, the darkness was already descending upon the woods as they came back along the trail (only getting stuck once this time), and Glenn felt afraid of the oncoming night. He did not want to

return to the spot where he had abandoned his brother-in-law. How would they find the spot with flashlights? How could they protect themselves? Even with their guns the bear would have the advantage of the dark. She could still be around the same spot, waiting for them to return. They could not return tonight.

All that the cabin had for light was the oil lanterns and the candles, both of which were running low from the last couple of evenings. Tomorrow was the intended day of retreat anyway, and so the low amount of light sources was not a concern. They would be gone before the lights ran out. But they had not been prepared for a sleepless night, when they would desire light more than anything else. They were left with two lanterns and one candle which was already half burnt and another that might have had another half hour of light left in its wick at the most.

Neither man had said anything about eating when they returned to the cabin. The two never said much to each other for the next while. They just changed their rubber boots for regular ones and took off their vests in silence. Glenn did not know how Richard really felt, but he knew that he was actually really hungry. His fear of saying so in the wake of another man's demise was what kept him from expressing these feelings. He attempted to look for something small and quick while Richard was outside using the washroom in the last bit of light from the day. It was almost completely dark in the cabin and the lanterns were already lit. Glenn also wanted to clean out his own system before the sun went down so he would not have to go out into the dark later, but he did not have a need to do so at the moment. He checked the few sacks they had in the bedroom with

food in them. There were plastic containers with beans, chilli and strips of raw bacon. In the only cooler they had was a half a carton of eggs, a six-pack of beer, three cans of Pepsi and one pack of three steaks which they were supposed to eat later tonight. There was no time to fire up the small propane stove they had with them to cook the raw meat, eggs and fish. He was hoping to find some of the twinkies, caramel cakes, and cookies they had brought with them, but they had finished them all the first two nights at the cabin. *Pigs. Had to eat all the goddamn snacks right away. Couldn't keep anything for tonight. Fucking pigs.* There were no more fast forms of nourishment.

Glenn made a quick decision to eat the container of chilli, which did not seem enough for an actual meal. He opened it and, using one of the spoons they had brought with them, he quickly scooped it into his mouth and swallowed without chewing. He had to hurry, Richard might not be gone for long. He was almost finished the container of chilli when he heard Richard reenter the cabin. Glenn threw the spoon into his bag and, for lack of another place, followed it with the mostly consumed container of chilli. He grabbed two cans of beer from the cooler and jumped up to the door. Richard seemed immediately suspicious.

"What were you doing?"

"Me? Just getting a couple of beers for us."

"How can you drink after what has happened?" Richard looked surprised now as he stood near the door of the cabin and Glenn stood in front of the door from the bedroom.

"What else can we do? And besides," He responded while pulling the tab of the can, pausing for the hiss of the carbonation and the crack of the aluminum. "I need to ease my mind."

Richard sank into one of the two old armchairs which Jim had somehow dragged to the cabin, placing the lantern he had with him on the small table next to the chair. As he did so Glenn heard him mumble what sounded like "you need to". Did Richard say this as an indication that he knew what had really happened? Glenn wanted to question him about his statement, but was afraid to bring the subject up. If he did know, now would not be a good time to discuss it. They would have to spend the remainder of the night together. He did not want it exposed before the night was over. Instead he just decided to take the other seat and drink his beer quietly. Before he had a chance to bend himself into the hard, worn cushion of the chair, Richard stopped him.

"What's that on the front of your shirt?"

"Huh?" Glenn looked down on the red plaid shirt he was wearing. Even in the light of the lanterns he could see the stain of chilli sauce that had landed upon one of the buttons and most of the surrounding material. In his haste he had not noticed the large drip. He was marked and could not escape persecution. "I– I had a bit of chilli while you were outside. We haven't eaten since lunch and I had to have something."

"You are such a bastard, you know that? My friend –*your* brother-in-law– was killed by a bear today. Do you even get that? He's dead. And you continue your day, eating and drinking beer like it's some regular old fucking Sunday afternoon. Do you even care that he's dead?"

Glenn was stunned by the outburst and could only respond with short statements. "Of course I do. But what can I do about it now? I was getting hungry. I can't help that."

"You are such an asshole. It should be you dead in the forest not Jim. He was a good man who would have mourned *your* death."

Glenn was paralysed by his words. He must know. Why else would Richard have said such a thing? It could not have just been the fact that he was not mournful over Jim's death. Could Richard have seen what happened in the forest?

"Don't sit in here with me. I want to be alone so that I can grieve my friend. You can do whatever the fuck you want in the room. Take the other lantern and the small candle. I don't want to see your damn ass till morning."

Glenn could not believe the nerve of the young jackass. How could he even think of trying to kick him out of the livingroom? He felt like a scolded child being sent to his room for misbehaving. Any other night he would have given the kid a good few knocks in the head, but tonight was not the night for it. Glenn cursed on him a few times as he grabbed the candle and the lantern and headed for the bedroom, only gazing at Richard once to send him a quick look of disdain. He was not sure, but he thought he saw him flinch in the dark.

In the room Glenn sat on one of the four cots, and carefully drank from his open can of beer. He did need to drink in order to ease his mind. He needed something to keep his mind away from that afternoon. Although he was still hungry and would eat if he had the chance, he was also feeling tired but did not want to sleep. He also did not

want to be alone. The dark made him feel somehow confined in the dim light of the room. There was only one window in the room and it was small. He kept it open a bit to allow the air to circulate and cool down the room. Although he felt confined, he did not care to peer out into the night for fear of seeing something move in the darkness. He hated the fact that Richard had exiled him to this room, to sit alone and think about what had happened. If he could have stayed in the sitting room with him he could have used the young man to keep his mind off Jim. He did not like admitting it to himself, but he needed to converse with Richard to make the night go faster.

Glenn's fatigue soon began to take over. He had been sitting in the room for an hour when the five beers he had been drinking generated a heavy tiredness in his mind. He was in a dimly lit room, sitting on a bed after a long day of fishing and the death of another man, but did not want to fall asleep. Not only did he see that surprised and questioning look on Jim's face every time he closed his eyes, but he did not feel completely safe with Richard. Glenn was sure that he knew what had occurred seconds before the bear caught Jim. He was beginning to act very suspicious over the littlest things. His reaction to Glenn's drinking and eating, the fact that he wanted to be left alone, and his comment about Glenn needing to ease his mind, all suggested his knowledge of what Glenn had done. He also showed fear towards Glenn before he left the room. Glenn knew Richard could not be trusted, but did not know what he would do with the information. Would he wait until they got back to civilization to expose him, or would he say something before they left tomorrow? If he was scared of Glenn, he would hide his awareness and might even try to get rid of him. If he knew, then he would not

want to drive all that way with Glenn and would want to get rid of him tonight. Would he go that far? Glenn was unsure of the kid's feelings towards him, but he sat on the bed with his back to the wall facing the door, just in case.

It was close to two o'clock when the lantern had run out and Glenn felt his bowels churning with the chilli he had eaten. In the dark he shifted around, looking for the candle and the matches. He hated to go outside in the darkness after what had happened today, but his stomach was not giving him much choice. He could feel the digested chilli low in his intestines, waiting for a quick exit. On top of that, the pressure was pushing on his bladder which was full from the beer. He had to go now.

Glenn was feeling so groggy from the beer and sleep that he had almost forgotten about Jim's death the afternoon before and the conversation with Richard. He lit the candle, grabbed the role of toilet paper, and opened the door to the sitting room. As he stepped forward into the sitting room, he could see that the other lamp must also have gone out as there was only darkness in the room. The movement must have startled Richard from his own sleep, as he quickly sat up in the chair that now faced the bedroom door, pointing his rifle directly towards Glenn's chest. Glenn could see the other two rifle cases lying on the floor beside Richard's chair.

"I told you to stay in that room."

Glenn was shocked by the paranoid form Richard had assumed in the time between earlier in the night and now. He could hear the distress in his voice and in the

dark he could barely see a look of confusion on his face. He had just been startled awake and was trying to put the pieces back together.

"Whoah! I'm just going outside to take a shit. What the hell are you doing with your goddamn rifle pointed at me?" Glenn stared at him, not moving but needing to get outside before his bowels took it upon themselves to release.

"I thought... I thought you... Never mind. I just don't feel safe here tonight after seeing Jim die in such a way." The tone of his voice suggested to Glenn that Richard was not really worried about the bear coming after him. He was still holding the gun up. He had enough time to process what was happening now, but was not trusting Glenn at all. After a pause Glenn spoke to him.

"Well, can I?"

"Can you what?"

Glenn was getting pissed about the holdup. He really needed to get outside fast. He could worry about the fact that the other man in the cabin had a gun aimed at him after he released the pressure inside him.

"Can I go take a shit now?" His tone exhibited the irritation he was feeling.

Richard seemed to pause for consideration before answering him. "I guess."

Glenn moved across the room towards the door with his candle guiding his way. Every move he made was traced in the air by the rifle Richard held. As he passed him Glenn could see a crazed look in Richard's eyes.

Glenn did not venture far from the cabin to find a place to squat. He was afraid of what he might find in the darkness behind the surrounding trees. There was only the

moon and the candle he had brought with him to shed light on the things around him. After he was finished he began to think of something to do about Richard. He did not have much time. The kid might try and kill him during the night. There was nothing stopping Richard from shooting him as soon as he walked back into the cabin. Time was running out and Richard would suspect something if he took too long coming back into the cabin. Glenn needed to think of something quick.

There was a large rock next to which he had set the candlestick. It was the only thing that he could use to protect himself. He would have to bring it around to the back of the cabin and drop it through the window. Glenn picked the rock up with the candle and quickly moved to the back of the cabin, trying not to make too much noise on the way. He passed the side of the cabin without the broken window as he did not want to rouse any suspicions from the man with the rifle. Glenn slid the small window open and dropped the rock as gently as he could into the soft bedding below, hoping it would not bounce off. Once it lay safely on the cot, Glenn walked back around to the front of the cabin. The only remaining problem was how to get from the front door into the room without being shot. There was no solution he could come up with now. Richard did not seem like the type that would shoot him–but under these circumstances who knew? He had not tried to shoot him as he left. Why would he wait? Glenn realized that he would just have to hope that Richard was not planning on shooting him.

Glenn walked back around the cabin to the front door, knocking first so as not to startle Richard into shooting him. The kid may have drifted off again before he came back. He looked in through the door where Richard still sat in almost the same position.

He was not aimed as carefully as he was before, but he seemed very cautious about the way Glenn was entering head first. Glenn realized that it appeared as though he might be hiding something behind his back, and so stepped in all the way to reveal the fact that he was not holding any weapons or tricks. Richard's expression and posture never changed.

"I just had to go take a dump. Can't stop nature right?"

Richard made no attempt to respond. He just followed Glenn's movements with the gun. Glenn began to feel unnerved by the fact that whatever way he moved, possible death was pointed directly at him. He turned, knowing the gun would still be pointed toward him, and walked into the room, closing the door without speaking.

The rock lay on the cot where it had fallen. Glenn picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It was a little bigger than a softball with one edge that was more jagged than the others. He would only use it if he had too. It was a precaution. If the kid tried to sneak into his room and shoot him while he was asleep he would strike him with it. Just enough to knock him out cold. Glenn was beginning to think that this would be a very possible situation, as Richard was acting strange. Glenn had seen his crazed eyes. There was something going on in his mind that he would never know. Richard might start to consider killing him as the night progressed and he thought more about what had happened to his friend. He might begin to feel that his own life was in danger as he thought more about it. It was very possible that he would wait until Glenn fell asleep and then blam! Dead. He could not fall asleep anymore. He had to stay alert and ready to strike him when he came through the door.

There was not a lot left to the candle. The last bit of flame enlarged the shadows on the walls, making them appear to dance with the draft from the window. It was getting late now and Glenn had not heard anything from Richard. It had been too quiet for a long time. Was the kid listening next to the door, waiting for him to fall asleep. Glenn quickly resumed his position closer to the door, listening and holding the rock in his right hand. There were no sounds. Was he asleep now? Glenn wanted to open the door and look out, but he was too afraid that it was exactly what Richard was waiting for. He might be pretending to be asleep in order to test Glenn. If Glenn stuck his head out of the door, he would blow it off. Glenn was not about to fall for that trick. He would sit and wait for Richard to come to him. He would also pretend to be asleep, and when the kid came in through the door he would hit him with the rock.

Glenn was waiting next to the door for a while before he realized that something was wrong. There was no sound coming from the other side of the door. He was either asleep or waiting more patiently than Glenn. It was time to check. Glenn lay the rock down on the cot he was sitting in and crouched down. As he knelt he leaned forward, placing his ear to the floor, and spied through the space between the door and the floor. All he could see in the light of the other man's candle were his boots at the foot of the chair. He must be asleep in the chair. Now Glenn could sneak out of the room and get his own gun. Not to use, but to protect himself against the other man.

Glenn rose and carefully began to turn the knob. It took him almost an entire minute to slowly turn the knob without quick movements. He did not want to wake the sleeping man (and if Richard was not asleep, he did not want to give himself away). As

he was about to crack the door, Glenn began to wonder if Richard had actually taken off his boots to enable himself to creep more silently around the room. Or it may be possible that Richard thought Glenn might look through the space under the door and so left his boots there as a decoy. Glenn began to suspect that he might be waiting by the side of the door for him to emerge. He had to be very careful.

Glenn pushed the door open just enough to peer through a small crack. He could see that Richard sat in the chair, his head tilted toward a spot between his right shoulder and chest. The candle that sat on the table next to him would soon extinguish. Glenn thought he may be asleep, but knew it could also be a trick to lure him out of the safety of the room. Glenn waited a few seconds to make sure he did not make any sudden movements. He then knew that if Richard were actually asleep it was a deep sleep for he did not even flinch. It was time to make his move.

Glenn picked up the rock from the bed and began to move into the sitting room. He was not going to take the rock with him at first. He thought that if Richard awoke while he was creeping across the floor, he could say he was going to take another shit (chilli did that to him a lot anyway). The problem was that Richard may not believe him a second time. Besides, he wanted the protection the rock gave him. He needed it. Even if he could only throw it at Richard, it was something.

With the rock raised to eye level in his right hand, and his left out in front like a quarterback, he crept across the wooden floor. He was ready for the kid to spring up at any second and shoot him down, but he did not move. He remained motionless as Glenn

made his way to his side and crouched for one of the rifle cases. He kept the rock raised well above his head with the other hand now so he could still strike down if he had to.

Glenn grasped the leather handle of the case and slowly lifted it so he would not disturb the other man with any sudden movements. He slowly stood up, and turned away from Richard to make his way back to the room. When he turned his body, the case swung around, slightly striking the candlestick with enough force to tip it. As it hit the wood of the small table upon which it rested, it went out and Richard stirred. His eyes opened as Glenn turned. Glenn quickly threw the rock at his face before he could even regain his senses enough to raise the gun. It struck him above his left eye, causing him to flinch to the right holding his eye. Glenn could see the blood already running down his hand before he turned to the room and then, changing his mind, ran through the door.

He could hear Richard cursing him as he ran from the cabin. He ran for the trees with the rifle case as he heard the cursing at the front door. Then he heard the shot. It was close, but not close enough. The bullet exploded the bark of a tree to the right of him as he entered the woods. He was heading down the trail they had came back from today. That way he knew Richard could not follow him on the quad-runner.

The trail did not dissuade Richard from following him into the woods. He had received a rock to the face and was enraged. Glenn knew he would definitely shoot him given the chance now. He had to fire first.

Glenn ran off the trail into the surrounding bushes and began to remove the gun from its case when he heard Richard come along the trail. He had caught up to Glenn quickly. Even with his eye hurt and it being nighttime, the kid was faster than him.

Glenn stopped removing the gun from its case as Richard shifted along the trail. He was moving slower now that he knew that Glenn must not be running anymore. Now Richard stopped in the trail. Glenn wondered if he had made any sounds to arouse his suspicions. He could not see the other man, but could tell he was only about seven feet away. Could he see Glenn through the shrubs he was crouching behind? Glenn could picture him aiming his rifle for the shrubs. He could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest and wondered if Richard could hear it as well as he could. It seemed so quiet Glenn was sure that he could hear it. Then Richard began to move again. It was slowly, but he tread further down the trail. Glenn could tell that he was stepping lightly and was listening at every step, so he would not move from his spot.

Glenn remained crouched for what he thought must have been at least five minutes. His legs were beginning to cramp from the position he was stuck in, but he would not dare to move for fear of giving himself away. When he thought that Richard had wandered far enough ahead he sat back on the ground and allowed his legs to stretch out in the dark. He grabbed the butt of the gun and pulled it from the leather case. There were two shot shells left in the side pocket of the case, but that was all that he had. The rest were back in the cabin. He did not know how many Richard had on him. He could try and get back to the cabin to get the rest, but he was afraid of leaving himself exposed in front of the cabin. If Richard heard him heading back through the trees he could easily catch up and put a bullet in his back before he reached the front door. He thought it would be better just to wait for him to return. Soon he would come back down the trail and Richard could shoot him from the bushes.

It was only a little while longer before he could hear Richard moving back towards him. Glenn collected himself into a crouching position once again, this time with his rifle raised slightly above the bushes. Richard's slow, methodical footsteps inched towards the spot where he crouched. Finally he was in the same position only seven feet away. Glenn jumped up and fired his rifle into the trees at the closest thing he could come to a dark figure. There was no scream or falling object, only the sound of something moving quickly along the trail. Glenn moved as well, hearing a shot being fired back and the sound of the bullet tearing through the leaves of the bushes near him. He grabbed the case and began running deeper through the bushes and trees. He had to reload now, but he knew Richard would have to as well.

He slowed his pace, took out the second bullet, and loaded it into the rifle. He had to hit this time. Glenn threw the case off to one side to lead Richard away from his route, and kept running through the woods until he met with the trail once again. The lack of shrubs and dense branches would enable him to run faster, but would also enable Richard to do the same.

The trail was not even as straight as he remembered from today, but it was easier to manoeuver without the rubber boots. He could hear Richard moving through the woods further back (possibly at the spot he left his rifle case). He stopped, knowing that if he could hear Richard, Richard could also hear him moving. It was too late, Richard was moving towards him still. He would be caught up very soon, and as soon as he could get a shot he would take it. Glenn could not waste another bullet; he had to find a way to get Richard first. He was shifting through the woods now, but there were no places he

could really hide. The pines had thin trunks and barely any branches in the lower areas. He might be able to make it out, but then he would be in a clearing and completely exposed. Glenn could hear Richard coming closer and decided to take his chances outside of the wooded area. There may be places to conceal himself past the trees.

Glenn burst through the last few trees and into the clearing. He could see some of the light that was now beginning to come with the dawn. It threw a very dim shadow on everything. Just enough to tell him what was what against the bluish backdrop of the sky. He could see a hill ahead of him. If he could get up the hill before Richard emerged from the trees he could lie down on the top and get a good shot. He continued to run for the hill, but something stopped him. There was something lying on the trail directly in front of him. It was Jim's body. This was the same place they had been this afternoon–although it seemed so long ago now. He was definitely dead. His clothes and body were torn open by the claws, his face, which was turned upward to the sky, was torn open, part of the skin and muscle of his cheek hanging loose. His right eye was missing.

Glenn was paralysed. He felt as if he could hardly breathe. Then he heard a loud blast and at the same time felt as if something burst in the top part of his right leg. He dropped to the mossy ground immediately. He had been shot.

Glenn held his leg, rocking slightly on the ground. He tried not to scream now, clenching his teeth together to bear the pain, but he thought he might have already made noise when he was hit. He had been a sitting duck in the clearing. The shock of seeing Jim's body here had immobilized him and given Richard the advantage of shooting him. He was lucky Richard had missed killing him, but he was wounded now and would be an

easy target. Where did he lose the rifle? He turned on his back, still holding the wound in his leg, looking for the gun. He could hear Richard slowly approaching and needed to find it. He finally felt his foot tap it as he moved. He had to reach it quickly. Glenn twisted on his side, his leg wound pointing skyward, turning his body around until he reached the gun. He pulled it up to him and gripped the trigger with the bloody finger of his own wound.

It was only a second before he could see Richard's shadow slowly approaching. From his viewpoint he could see his outline against the dark sky, but knew Richard would have a harder time seeing him against the ground. This was his only shot at victory and survival. Glenn aimed as best he could and pulled the trigger. The blast was accompanied by the backlash of the head of the dark figure and the figure quickly dropped to the ground with a dull thud. He had hit him directly in the head. There were no more movements in the dark.

Glenn knew he was alone now, and although he was glad to know that Richard was no longer a threat to him, he knew his solitude would be a great problem. He had to find a way out of the woods now. No one was going to be looking for him for another fifteen or even twenty hours--when the three of them did not make it back home. He needed to find some way to make it out. He tried to lift himself up from the ground, but soon dropped back with the pain it caused his leg. He could not stand, let alone walk.

Glenn looked over at the ravaged corpse that this time yesterday was his step brother-in-law. He would have to do some explaining about what had happened to him... to both of them. What would he tell them all when they asked what happened to the two

other men and how he got shot in the leg? They will be able to tell that Jim was dead almost twelve hours before Richard. How could he explain the massacre that had taken place among the three while they were alone in the forest? He could tell them that it was Richard who tripped Jim and then came after him, but he did not know if this would work. It was the fishing pole Jim had given him that now lay next to the body (Richard had his own, Jim's backpack contained his other one). It was Richard's blood that was on the rock in the cabin. It was his bullet in Richard's skull. All signs pointed to his guilt, but he did not have the time or energy to cover his tracks. Now was not the time to think up alibis, now was the time for survival. He was in serious trouble and needed to start doing something or he would die.

The first step he needed to take was to get the keys from Jim. He did not want to somehow make it to the truck and once again have no keys. He did not know how he would even drive the quad to the truck, let alone drive the truck, but he had to think positive. He crawled across the moss, feeling his leg burn with the pain of movement. The blood was still oozing from the wound and creating a large dark spot on his pants. Once he reached Jim's torn vest he slid his hands in and out of the four of the six pockets until he found the ring of keys. He put them in his own pocket and, once again, tried to rise from the ground by pushing with his arms. It was no good. The pain was too much.

He did not know how he would make it all the way back to the cabin if he was bleeding and could not stand. He needed to do something for the wound first. Remembering movies and television shows he had seen, he reached over to Jim's already torn shirt, ripping a long piece and tying it around the top of his leg, just above the

wound. He was feeling weak, and cold from the night air. He needed to keep moving, to save himself from dying alone. Continual movement was very important. But everything was so dark and his head was feeling light. He could not keep his eyes focussed. He was going to pass out.

Glenn was home, taking a warm bath in his bathroom, scrubbing the scar the bullet had left after it was removed by the doctors. He was glad to be home, away from the woods, the cabin, the death. He always hated the outdoors. The only reason he had even gone on the stupid trip was the fact that he wanted to show up that bastard of a brother-in-law he had. If he was going to take Glenn's job and then offer him a weekend of fishing, Glenn was not going to tell him to stick his trip up his ass. He was supposed to be Glenn's boss. Also, Glenn wanted to show Jim who was the better man. He was going to go.

It had all worked out for the best now anyway. When Jim died, there was only one other person right for the job. He took Jim's place reluctantly of course, telling everyone: *I believe Jim would have wanted it that way. His own brother-in-law taking his place. He would have been happy about the decision.* Yeah, his step sister was now a widow with a baby, but Jim's life insurance took care of her problems. Now his life seemed right.

As Glenn got out of the shower and began to dry off, he felt the pain in his leg as he had when he was first shot. It was still really tender to touch. Glenn tried to ignore the pain and kept drying off. He then walked into his living room and checked the

thermostat. It was turned up to twenty-five, but it still felt as if there were a draft coming through the vents. He turned it up to thirty to try and warm up, and then walked towards his room, feeling the pain in his leg as he took each step. He could also feel the chills crawling over his body. It was definitely cold in the apartment.

Glenn thought about calling the landlord about the coldness, when he opened the door and entered his bedroom. There was a bad smell in the room, like rotten eggs or bad meat. Had he left food in there the night before? For some reason he could not think of what he did the night before. He walked to the closet and slid the mirrored door over to the side to get his clothes. To his surprise the closet was full of large hooks. Giant fishing hooks. Glenn stood back and stared in shock. Where had they all come from? Who had put them there? He reached forward and quickly slid the door closed. In the mirror was a reflection of Jim standing in the doorway to his room. Glenn swivelled around and stared into the face of the man he had left to die in the woods. Jim was still in the same battered condition and still dead. His eye was missing, his cheek was hanging open, and his body revealed its many lacerations through his shirt.

He did not speak. He just stood there in the door, blocking any means of exit, and began to laugh. It was Jim's laugh, but distorted and gurgled as if he were drowning in his own blood. It was hideous and although he did nothing else, the laughter seemed filled with vengeance. It knew something Glenn did not. The laughter seemed to make him colder. Cold that got into his bones and cooled his blood. He wanted to scream, but could make no sound.

Glenn woke to the feeling of something licking his cheek. It was a black, furry face like a dog or a very large cat. He found it hard to open his eyes, and when he did they were blurred. He could not tell where he was. He had just been home he thought, but it was just a dream. He was somewhere else, someplace cold.

His vision fixed on the dark figure that moved so close to his face. He inhaled with fright, pushing the bear away with great ease. He sat up (feeling the searing pain stretch deeper into his leg), looked over and discovered that it was just a cub. He looked around quickly, seeing that he was still in the woods and he was still wounded in the leg. It was lighter now as dawn had arrived and set everything aglow in red, allowing him to see his surroundings and Jim's body. The cub must have knocked Jim's head to the right, as it now faced him as it did in Glenn's dream. The problem was the fact that the cub was around him and he did not know where its mother was. He had to get out of here now.

Glenn began to haul himself away from the cub, crawling into the grass to at least hide himself as best he could. He could feel the pain as if it shot up and down his leg through his veins. It was as if someone were pumping it full of gasoline and lighting it on fire. He tried to ignore it, pulling himself as fast as he could, but it was no good.

He could hear the large bear move towards him, grunting and snorting as it approached. Glenn quickly turned on his back to protect himself. He felt its paw touch his side and then a second put pressure on his stomach. It was such a force, he could no longer move. He could barely breathe. Glenn gripped the massive leg which pinned him to the ground and screamed as the bear lowered its mouth to him. He felt the warm

breath of the animal on his cheek and could smell the death on its breath. Its muzzle was wet and warm on his face as it clamped its teeth across his mouth and began to tear into his flesh. Glenn could no longer scream as the blood poured back into his throat and the bear tore at him. Glenn prayed for help. For anyone.

Wherever the Book Opens

"Where did you find it?"

Alexander Wolfe stared intently at the large book that lay on the table in front of him. Its black leather cover was worn, yet sturdy and thick, the pages ragged on the edges and yellowing in colour. Although the cover was large and thick, the pages did not make it as large on the inside. There were no more than fifty pages to the book. This did not curb Alexander's interest in the volume. He picked it up once again and ran his fingers along the crimson words on the spine which shone in the dim light of the study. He then placed it back on the desk.

"I found it in a pawn shop." Neil fell back into the chair next to the table and immediately slumped. As he sat, he began looking at all the books that surrounded him. No matter how many times he came to Alexander's house, the teenager had a compulsive desire to examine the room as he sat.

"What pawn shop?" Alexander leaned over the table, placing both hands flat against the surface on either side of the cover, while peering at Neil from the corner of his eye.

"Just one on the other side of town. Look, does it really matter what shop it came from? I know you enjoy this kind of creepy shit, so how much you wanna give me for it?"

Alexander smiled at him. Neil was the son of a neighbor. His father was down on his luck (had been for a few years now), his mother had left them both years ago, and so Alexander had taken him on as an assistant. Alexander had also known the betrayal and emptiness one felt after a parental abandonment. His father had left his mother shortly after he found out she was pregnant. It still stung him to think of it. To make things worse, Alexander felt as if he had abandoned his own son. His wife had been the one who had left him, taking their child with her to the other side of the country, but it was he who felt like he had abandoned his son. He planned on visiting him one day, but as the years passed, it became harder and harder to gather up the courage to see the neglected child. Now his son was fifteen and Alexander did not think he would take well to seeing his father show up after so many years. However, Neil was somebody he could treat as a surrogate offspring he did not have to deal with on a regular basis. It also gave him the chance to live another's youthful life vicariously. His own had seemed to disappear so very quickly.

Mostly Neil would run errands for him, occasionally finding something interesting and bringing it to Alexander for some extra money. He took any money Alexander could afford to give him, but as he was still young (about seventeen if he could recall correctly) and in need of financial assistance, Alexander was afraid that he was beginning to fall into undesirable side-jobs. He had no interest in contributing to this poor soul's decline in society; however Neil was quite correct in his assumption that he would want this book.

"I just want to know the origins of this piece. A collector always wonders about his material. Its history, where it's been, what it's seen. Without that information, it just becomes another *creepy looking book*. I would particularly like to talk to the previous owner of this book."

Alexander watched as Neil shifted his weight in the chair, sitting himself up and turning his eyes to the large bookshelf that rested against the wall to his right. He exhaled heavily, but quietly enough that Alexander just caught a sense of the boy's dismay at having to explain.

"Well, you won't be talking to its previous owner. He's dead."

There was a silence as Alexander's thoughts turned towards Neil's behavior since his father's unemployment. Since his mother had left, he was on a decline, but this latest problem had made his behavior worse. It was becoming a concern of his that Neil was possibly involved in illegal activities, but murder had never come to mind until now.

Neil must have noticed the silence between them and tried to fill the gap with his explanation.

"He was an old man over on Lincoln Avenue. Burned to death in a fire a couple of days ago. Word has it that he lived alone and never had any relatives or friends. So I went over to the old burnt out place and looked around. Most stuff was destroyed in the fire, but there were a couple of things such as this that weren't damaged. The book was just laying there in the ashes. Someone probably went to throw it out and didn't notice they had dropped it. So anyway, his stuff was just there, left in the house to rot, you know?"

"And you thought that since he didn't need it anymore, you could sell it to me."

"Yeah. I guess." Neil looked at him now with a speculating glance that anticipated either a smile or a lecture.

"Neil, you know that this causes problems. I don't know if I can take this now."

"What? You have to. I need some money right now. I'll even give it to you for half the price I was thinking of."

"It's not the money, Neil. It's the principle of it. I don't like buying things that were stolen from dead people."

"Oh come on, Mr. Wolfe. You know as well as I do that it would have just been thrown out or left in the rubble when they tear the house down. There was nobody to take it, or anyone who would want to, for that matter. Look at it. It creeps me out just sitting here with it. Who other than you would want such a thing?"

"You know you're not going to make a very good salesman with that attitude."

"You know what I mean. Anyway, the fact is that there is no one going to be looking for that book. I guarantee it." He smiled at Alexander hopefully.

"I tell you what. I will give you a hundred dollars for the book," Alexander saw Neil's eyes immediately flare at the mention of the money, "after I find out that there is actually nobody whom this belongs to."

"Oh come on, can't you just take my word for it."

"I'm simply going to talk to a few of the neighbors and ask about the old man. Maybe check the papers or something like that. You leave the book with me for now and if your story is correct I will pay you the hundred dollars for the book."

Neil smiled at Alexander in a strange way, a slight grin that swept across his face and was gone just as fast. He eyed Alexander suspiciously for one moment and then replied.

"I guess that would be alright."

After Alexander had watched the boy walk down his driveway and out onto the street from the window of his study, he turned back to the book that sat on his desk. In the darkness of the room it appeared extremely old. Its dark leather exterior felt thick and padded and yet the insides were so fragile and thin. To most people, as Neil had so delicately illustrated, it was a "creepy book", but to Alexander it was one of the finest looking books he had seen. It had a certain beauty that contained itself within its macabre appearance. All of his books had a certain eerie quality about them. Something that caught his eye, or proved their link to the morbid or bizarre through an odd history. Most of his books he had at least heard or read about in his own research, but this book did not look familiar.

With the new book under his arm, Alexander walked to the basement where he stored his precious collection. As he passed the thermostat that hung on the wall next to the light switch, he checked the temperature and humidity to make sure that it was still cool enough for the storage. To him, these rare and unusual books were as precious as children and needed absolute protection from the harshness outside of that room. When he began his collection he had only a few novelties, but as his collection grew he had to build a room for their special needs. He had to be able to control the environment in

which they remained in order to keep them in optimal condition. He even had the lights covered to protect the pages from the UV rays that would slowly deteriorate his copies.

This, unfortunately, was one of the reasons his wife had left. According to her, he had spent too much time collecting and reading these books and she could not live with a man that had no time for her and their son. He did not believe or understand her frustration and now he was alone. Alexander walked over to the cases where he stored his precious items. He had them specially made as well. Each case stood on wooden legs and contained a glass cover so one could look in and see each book displayed side by side. There were still a few places left in the last case, and so he prepared a new spot for the book he hopefully had just acquired. He believed that Neil was telling him the truth about what he had heard about the old man, but to clear his conscience and find out about the book he wished to talk to anyone who knew its previous owner. For now, he would keep the book in his storage to ensure that it was kept in the best condition. The heat of the fire alone could have damaged it, but as it was in good shape already Alexander decided that it must have been on the other side of the house, away from the fire.

After he had laid down the red velvet material that he placed under every book, he picked up the black tome. He stood with it for a moment, scanning the leather creases in the cover and running his fingers along the incised words on the side that were dyed crimson: *Ad Aperturam Libri*

Alexander chuckled to himself. "*Wherever the Book Opens*. What an interesting title." It was not a title he had heard of before.

Alexander opened the stiff cover to review the pages once more. He certainly wished to examine the book again before putting it in its case for the night. The paper was so fragile that he was afraid to separate the first page from the collective. The pages were thin and inscribed with a dark red ink that seemed to have been written with an old pen (possibly feather) and contained detailed diagrams that did not make sense to him at the moment. The book was written mostly in English, but also included scattered phrases in Latin, possibly even Sumerian or Akkadian (two languages he had seen written in other books he had collected).

Alexander began reading the first paragraph of the book, which began after some of the diagrams of human bodies. As he read, the diagrams began to make more sense to him. The book was a preparation for an ancient spell. It was an instructive book for soul transference between two live bodies. One of the bodies was placed in a circular symbol which was to be drawn on the floor. This was the body of the person transferring their soul. As Alexander read on he encountered many warnings about the dangers of Magick in the hands of the uninitiated. Cryptic cautions concerning the teachings of the book which Alexander knew were supposed to frighten the reader into believing in its power. He knew that the writer of the book was only trying to appeal to the reader's morbid curiosity, to scare him into reading further to discover the forbidden writings. All of these books were the same. This one seemed more blatant in its curbing the reader from trying its secrets. In order to complete the ceremony, the person transferring his soul is supposed to slit open his wrists and allow his blood to spill. It was a delightfully gruesome twist that drew Alexander's interest deeper into the book. He wanted to

discover more about this prohibited text. He wondered about the capabilities of such a ceremony. If he could actually perform such a ceremony, he could become someone younger, and then have a second youth. Alexander laughed at such thoughts. The book was even getting to him. But it was always an interesting thought.

Alexander decided to leave the literature class that he was teaching fifteen minutes early in order to ask around about the book. He had looked through the local papers in the library for mention of the fire, but very little was reported. There was no obituary printed, which Alexander thought a bit strange. All he needed now was one or two neighbours, just to verify Neil's story. He did not want any angry relatives calling the police over some stolen property. Neil had given him the address of the place he had taken it from, and Alexander set off for the house.

When he turned onto Lincoln Avenue, Alexander could tell it was the right place. The house was about halfway down the block and was taller than the others. Its siding was an older, yellow color except for the soot stains around the windows. Its roof had partially caved on the left side and the windows were gone, allowing Alexander to see into its blackened rooms. The downstairs barely had reachable windows, and so it was only the front door that seemed to be nailed shut. It looked like a face with its eyes removed and its mouth taped shut. As he parked in its drive, Alexander peered up into the highest window. It was probably *his* room. Alexander shuddered at the thought of the old man dying in that room. Did he actually burn, or just suffocate? He quickly put

the morbid thought out of his mind and thought about the book as he stepped out of his car. The house looked almost entirely destroyed on the inside. How on earth did the book manage to escape any damage? Alexander was caught up in analysing the house until he heard something behind him. As he turned, he saw a woman come out of her front door across the street. She had a trash-bag in her hand which she was about to take to the can by the side of her house. When she reached the bottom of her steps she noticed Alexander coming from across the road and stopped. Alexander thought she looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Excuse me Ma'am?"

This seemed to hasten her movement as she dropped the trash where it was and began purposefully moving up her steps. She was an older woman and could not manoeuvre her body as quickly as she probably would have liked.

"Ma'am, I just want to ask you something about your neighbour."

"Not unless you're a cop."

"I'm not a cop, I..."

"Then you're not asking me nothing. You're with him aren't you?"

Alexander caught her just as she was shutting her screen door.

"Wait. With who?"

"With that young man." She was about to close her second door when Alexander spoke again.

"Wait. I'm here with no one. Please, I just want some information."

The woman stared at him with her door half closed. Through the screen it was harder to make her face out, but he could see that she was about sixty or sixty-five and wore a beehive that had a greenish tinge that may or may not have been due to the mesh of the screen door.

"Please. I just want to find out a few things. Who did you think I was with?"

"I don't know his name, but he has been hanging around the Blake house a bit lately. Even before it burnt down. I called the cops a few times when I saw him after the fire, but he's always gone when they get here."

Neil. Alexander figured the boy was probably back a few times to find some more items that he could sell. Was he there before the fire, snooping around? He may have to talk to Neil about that after he found out if he had discovered anything else.

"No Ma'am, I don't know anything about him. I was just wondering about your neighbor..."

"Howard Blake." She stared at Alexander without hiding her suspicion. He shifted his gaze to the other houses and then looked back.

"Yes. I just wanted to know a bit about Howard."

"I don't know nothin' about him. Why?"

Alexander wished he had picked another neighbor to question. He decided to try one more time before leaving.

"I'm writing a report on accidental deaths due to home fires and I was hoping to talk to neighbours and families."

"He's dead? Police said they couldn't tell whether he was in the house or not. Hey, are you a reporter?"

"Yes. Well, hopefully I will be with this story" Alexander knew his lies were not very believable, but he did not think it would be much of a problem with this woman.

"All right, I don't know very much about him, but you can ask me a few things." The woman still did not move to open her screen door, and so Alexander continued to speak through the mesh.

"Great. Uhm, you say you didn't really know him?"

"No. He stuck pretty much to himself. I only saw him every now and then when he was leaving or coming back. There was hardly ever lights on in the house and I hardly ever saw him move around in there. He was a creepy man if you ask me. Very unfriendly and creepy."

"I see. Do you know if he had any family? Friends? Anything like that?"

"No. He was about the only one who ever came and went from that house. Besides the other man that would sneak around."

Alexander smiled as he thought about the creepy old man and the extra menacing character of the young man sneaking around the house before the fire. Could Neil actually have set fire to the house to get a book? He couldn't even be sure it was Neil. This was all adding a sinister element to a book that seemed even closer to being his own. He decided to inquire further.

"Can you describe the young man to me?"

The old woman's face contorted through the mesh. Alexander could see he had aroused her suspicions. "You're not doing a report. Who are you?" She peered around his head and her face quickly changed to fear.

"You are with him!" She said quickly shutting the second door.

Alexander turned away from her door and headed back to his car. If this woman was so intent on calling the police on people, he should probably park somewhere else to talk to the neighbors. As he opened the driver door, he noticed a man watching him from the corner of the house, away from the sight of the woman. He started a second at the sight of the unexpected stranger who was dressed in a long trench-coat and a hat with a rim that held a shadow over most of his face. It reminded Alexander of a stereotypical character from a mystery movie, but somehow he did not find the image of the dark stranger standing in the shadowed side of the burnt-out house, at all amusing. As he looked at the man Alexander realized he was staring back. He felt as if a cold finger had trailed down the back of his neck. Alexander shook himself out of his fear, chastising his lack of courage. He closed his car door and walked towards the side of the house. Maybe this man could tell him something about Howard Blake.

The man stood completely still with his hands in the pockets of his trench-coat. As Alexander lessened the gap between them, the shade fell off the man's face and allowed a better view. He was very pale, deathly even, as if he was powdered with makeup, and his skin appeared dry. Alexander shuddered at the thought that this is what age does to a person. He saw himself in the man's face –how he would be as he aged. As Alexander approached him, the old man smiled softly through paper-thin lips.

"May I help you?" Alexander had to force the words as his fear seemed to creep back into his mind. He wondered how many people could see him at this moment in case something happened.

"I hope so. My name is Julian. Julian Blake."

Alexander stopped about four feet away and looked at the wall of the house he was standing next to.

"He was my father."

Alexander stared at him for a moment trying to decide on an age for the man in relation to his father. His father was described as "old", but *how* old Alexander did not know. The stranger seemed old himself, but age was hard to tell as his skin was so thin and seemed disfigured in its texture. Was he diseased? Alexander didn't know whether he should move any closer.

"You are put off by my appearance." Alexander felt his expression turn to surprise at the man's comment. Had he been that obvious? "I get that a lot, but I assure you, it is not contagious. I have a disorder that affects the pigment of my skin and causes it to appear dry. Please, do not be afraid."

"I... I wasn't afraid. You just startled me with your statement, that's all." Alexander hoped that his embarrassment did not betray his words. "How did you know I was asking about your father?"

"I saw you pull up, and noticed you studying the house when you stepped out of your vehicle. Then you seemed to keep glancing at it as you came back from that house. I did not know you were thinking about him personally. I was just going to ask you to

remove your car. There's been some vandalism done to the house and I didn't know why you were here. So why were you inquiring about my father?"

"I- I just have something. I was brought something that I think belonged to him. It was a book."

The man's eyes seemed to open, although his lids did not move. Alexander thought that his pupils may have dilated.

"So you have the book."

Alexander suddenly realized that he was giving away too much information. How was he to know if the man was telling the truth? This could be anyone.

"How do I know you are really his son? Do you have any proof. Any identification?" Alexander stared into his eyes. The man's smile disappeared as sirens could be heard starting up a few streets away.

"I think we shall continue this another time, Mr Wolfe. I will be in touch." The man turned away and headed for the back of the house. Alexander peered around the corner at the woman who was now standing at the side of her window, smiling from ear to ear as if she was a child with a juicy secret.

Alexander turned back to the man, but he had already disappeared. Alexander felt the cold shiver down his spine. How did the man know his name? And even more disturbing was the fact that the man seemed certain they would meet again.

As Alexander was getting into his car, another vehicle pulled up to the house. Alexander turned to meet the police officer who approached him in the drive.

"Sir. May I have a word with you?"

Alexander headed home in his car. The police had at least been understanding about his inquiries. Being an English professor at the university, he had just told them he was doing a little investigating about fires and victims for a book. It was not entirely untrue; he just neglected to tell them about the book he was doing the research for. The fact that the stranger (who claimed the book was rightfully his) had quickly slipped away from the police had suggested that the story he was telling about being the dead man's son was not entirely truthful. He was avoiding the police, which meant that he would not involve them in his own desire for the book. Even if it was really his, he would not be able to prove it for anyone else. The book was now Alexander's property, either way.

It was a few days before Alexander saw Neil again. He was working on correcting papers from one of his classes when Neil showed up on his doorstep. He wore his leather jacket and a shirt with the name of a band: Megadeth. Alexander could see the picture of a boy with a teddy bear and an adult's shadow standing outside the door. The caption read "the tigers eat their young". He seemed nervous and immediately slumped into his usual chair without saying anything. Alexander was the first to break the silence.

"So how is your father?"

"Huh? Oh, he's fine."

"So, are you here about the money for the book?"

"Yeah, of course. Did you look into it?"

Alexander could see something behind Neil's eyes. He seemed to be hiding something. "Yes, there's been a problem." Neil finally looked straight at Alexander with a keen interest.

"What do you mean, a problem? The old guy is dead, just like I said. What could be the problem?"

"First, the "old guy", as you put it, may have a son who wants the book." Neil looked away once more without much shock at the revelation. "You never really talked to many people about the book, did you? You just took the book from the ruined house and thought you could make a buck off me."

"Look, I just needed a bit of money. I figured if there was anyone who was related to him, they wouldn't be looking for some stupid book."

"But that's where you were wrong. The man I met seemed very interested in the book."

"So are you going to give me anything for my troubles? I look out for this type of shit just for you, you know."

"Your troubles were thievery and may have involved me in something I won't like. Tell me something, Neil. Were you hanging around the house before it burnt?"

Neil eyed Alexander with an odd expression. He appeared to be hiding something, but wanted to appease his own curiosity about the question. "What do you mean?"

"I was talking to a neighbour who said she saw a young man hanging around the house before the fire." Alexander stared at Neil, whose eyes were now surveying the room and obviously avoiding his own. "Was that you, Neil?"

"No." Neil moved in his chair as if to rise. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Wait. Neil, were you sneaking around that old man's house before he died?" Neil fully rose from the chair and headed back towards the door. "Did you do anything to that old man, Neil?"

"No. I didn't do nothin' to him. He just died in a fire and I found the book. That's it. And if you're not gonna give me anything for the shit I have to go through, I'm leaving."

Alexander followed him to the door yelling to him as he made his way down the walkway and turned onto the sidewalk without looking back. "Neil! Neil!"

Alexander had definitely suspected the boy, but he wished he had not accused him in such an aggressive manner. He had driven away one of his only links to the book with his assailing words. If he was guilty, there was no way he would admit it to someone who would just attack him the way Alexander had done. Alexander did not think he would see Neil again.

Two nights later there was a knock at Alexander's door. It was a rainy evening that was only worsened with the bit of wind that accompanied it. It was almost half past eleven and Alexander could not think of anyone who would disturb him at such a late hour on such a horrible evening. He opened the door and saw the stranger standing in his

trench-coat and hat. His face looked even more grotesque in the dark. Even though his skin was wet with the rain, it appeared like dried and cracked papier-mache' in the dim light of his doorway.

"Mr. Blake. Uh, what an unexpected visit."

"Yes. Well, I like being unexpected. May I step inside?"

Alexander felt a shiver run through his skin. He did not feel entirely comfortable with the idea of the stranger entering his home, but the stormy evening made it inhuman to refuse such a request. Alexander offered him a seat in his drawing room and a cup of tea. The stranger smiled through his paper thin lips and declined the tea as he sat. Alexander took the seat across from him and let his spine rest against its back with some remaining uneasiness. He looked at the stranger as he spoke.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you know where I lived?"

"I know someone you know. A young man."

"Neil?"

"Yes. I caught him sneaking around my father's house after the fire. That is how I knew your name when we first met. After some questions he had told me he had been there before and had found a book which he had sold to you. For a small fee, he also told me your address. It was only coincidence that we ran into one another at the house that day."

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Blake? I assume this is not a social call."

"I am hoping you can help me, Mr. Wolfe." Alexander fought back a shiver brought on by the man's tone. He was hoping the man would not want anything from him. "I need my book –my father's book– back."

Alexander did not like the man's intruding presence in his home and his demanding approach and so he did not speak lightly about the subject at hand. "I am sorry, Mr. Blake, but I am unwilling to relinquish the book to you unless you can prove, to a police officer, that you are the rightful owner of the book. You see you can never be too careful about giving away articles such as this."

The old man's facial muscles lowered under his papery skin until no expression covered his face. He stared straight into Alexander's eyes, speaking, as if to something behind them. "Do you doubt my claims, Mr. Wolfe?"

"I have been presented with no proof to your claims, *Mr. Blake.*"

The stranger's face forced a smile which was meant to be friendly, but appeared devilish upon his skin. "But you see, Mr. Wolfe, I do not belong to your country. I am visiting only because of the passing of my father."

Alexander immediately spoke on this issue. "Oh, so your father was in the fire. The woman across the street said they had not found the body."

"Yes, well the woman was correct. But I know he was in the house, there was no other place he could be at the moment." Alexander wanted to ask him more but the man quickly continued. "The matter of the book is something that I am trying to settle quietly before I leave once again. I do not want to involve the police in such a trivial affair. If

we went to them it might complicate things further for myself, and you would lose the book yourself. So it should not matter to you, you will relinquish the book either way."

Alexander knew that this was true. If the police were told about the book being taken from the building they would confiscate it from him. It also left the possibility that he was telling the truth about himself and that he would get the book in the end. He would probably have to give up the book but he decided to call the old man's bluff. "Well. Maybe the police should choose to whom the book belongs. You go to them now and if you can prove that the book is rightfully yours, I will give it to you, with an officer present."

The stranger's face became stern once again. Alexander had a strange feeling that underneath his reproachful mask that there was a sense of enjoyment. Perhaps the old man was looking forward to a struggle between them. He moved forward in his chair looking Alexander directly in the eyes as if searching for something. "You don't know what you're dealing with here. I know the powers of the book. I understand it better than anyone. You cannot imagine nor handle the capacity of its strength."

At that moment Alexander noticed a symbol hanging from the necklace around the man's neck. It was one of the three symbols he had seen in the pages of the book itself. The symbols which must be placed in the circle during the ceremony . Could the man actually practice such things? As if recoiling from Alexander's thoughts, the man moved back in his chair, his coat once again covering the pendant. There was an evil smile on his face.

"You recognize the symbol. Do you not?"

He had seen him looking at the chain. Alexander decided not to reveal everything. "Yes, I seem to recall it somewhere in the book."

"You have read the book?"

"Briefly. I did not have a lot of time to admire it yet." Alexander did not like the way the conversation was going. He felt as if this man were leading him down a path that was filled with danger and traps.

"I believe you did more than look at it briefly. You know the reality of the book, I can see it in your eyes. The growing curiosity, the hope of a continual existence, the desire for eternal life. I was once the same way. I was old before my time. In my twenties I first discovered my own mortality. I was at school when I became deathly ill, pneumonia. I almost died away from my home, alone and without accomplishing anything I had hoped for. I eventually recovered, but as I lay there, sick, I vowed that I would not allow time to slip past me. I would accomplish all that I had planned in life. But, of course, plans do not stand well against time's decay. I married quickly, one of the first women I had ever really been with in any sense. We rushed into marriage and had our first child before long–a boy named Charles after my father. I was midway through my thirties when I realized that life was still passing me at a quicker rate. It seemed as though the older I became, the faster the years expired.

"It was about this time that I secretly began to research magick. In some of the literature I had read there was mention of a group of monks in Italy who had discovered an ancient scripture that contained the formula for soul transference. The capabilities of such a formula flared my interest. I immediately began to send my boy servant (similar

in age and purpose to your own–Neil) on quests to different people who could deliver black materials to me (books and manuscripts that contained magick). Many things I came across were simply trash, witches spells created solely to scare people, but with no real power. But some things were very powerful. I began trying out the different spells, quickly becoming a priest in the black art of magick. But even this could not help me.

"As I approached what is now called middle age my fear of death increased. I began to spend all of my time reading these books, practising my skills, and using the underground sources I had developed to search for the soul transference. My wife left me, moved in with our son (who had married a year earlier) and his wife, but I only used the time to work harder. Then one day, I found it. An old man in another city had a copy of the monk's transference formula. It cost me a great deal of money, but I sent the boy to recover it. I read it over, and began trying it on animals."

The stranger smiled now, knowing that Alexander was following his story closely. "You see, the transference releases the soul of the body into which the other soul is being transferred. If used improperly, it will kill both victims, or worse."

"Worse?"

"Yes. In magick, there is so much worse than death."

"So you're saying this works?"

"I am living proof this works. After I figured out that the formula was real, I used my errand boy to transfer my own soul."

Alexander looked closely at the man, his skin so paper-like, his eyes seeming to be as black as ink. "So this is the body of the servant boy?"

The man sat back and began to laugh. His laugh was as dry as his skin. "No, no. He was just the first. I have been many men since then. I am always a young man, living on my own, continuing my practice of magick, until I grow old and have to find a new young man to replace this body. And what a delightful surprise I found when the perfect one came crawling through my window one night. I walked into my living room late one night after hearing a noise. I had lit a candle to walk with, and when he saw me standing there by the open window, he panicked, grabbed something he had pilfered from my home and tried to run past me. The young idiot hit the candle, knocking it to the floor, catching the drapes on fire. Before long my house had been hollowed by the flames and my precious book was gone."

"Neil."

"Yes, the boy caused me some grief in his exploits, but I trust he will come in handy when I need him." The old man now looked back into Alexander's eyes "now that you have heard the story and have a tale that is better than any book, I must insist on having the book back. It is of no use to you, you do not know how to use it. You do not know the ways of magick."

"Well, it was a great story and I am sure I will enjoy telling it to anyone who enquires about the origins of such a marvellous piece of my collection, but I am not giving up the book. You may be hundreds of years old or more, but your present body shows its age. You cannot very well take it from me, can you?"

The old man became furious now, walking around the room in a mad pace. "You do not understand the powers with which you are playing. I am the only one who knows

the truth of the book. I need the book." He stared at Alexander with a gleam of enjoyment in his eye.

"Look, unless you have something else to add, besides ranting around my living room, I will have to ask you to leave."

The old man stopped, turned to him, and coldly spoke. "Very well then. I will leave now, but I will be returning. You have had your chance to hand over the book, but you chose not to do so. It is your choice." The man walked to the door. "We will see each other again soon, and I will take back what is mine." With this said, the man grabbed Alexander's hand, creating a surge up through his arm and body, up into his brain. Alexander saw many different people, many different times flash through his mind's eye. Visions of different women, different reflections of different men as if they were his own face. He saw what the old man had been talking about. It was all true. Alexander fell down on his cold hardwood floor as the man released his hand. "When I return, you will not survive my quest for the book." He watched the man walk away from his house and turn down the street, but he could not speak.

Alexander read the book through several times. It was true. All of it was true. What he saw when the old man touched his arm yesterday was no trick. There was no way Blake could deceive him into seeing those things and feeling the surge through his mind. The stranger was telling the truth: He held, in his hands, the only known path to eternal existence. His heart had been racing since the revelation had occurred the night before. The old man had shown him the images in order to frighten him, but it only

convinced him of the power he now held. There was fate involved in his having received such a book. His recent thoughts on life and death, on growing older and leaving this world with nothing accomplished were all in preparation for this. The book held all of the answers he needed. His mind seemed to swim in the world that had opened to him. He had read enough of these spell-books to know what to do. He could use the book himself to start over. To have a new life, and yet save the knowledge of his years. He could be a teenager once again. Young. Impulsive. Free.

It was another day before Neil came to Alexander's house once again. Alexander had called him up and offered to talk to him about the book. He told Neil that he was keeping the book, and that he should come over for his reward. It was another dark evening and a heavy mist clouded the air. Neil knocked on the door and was greeted by Alexander who immediately opened the door.

"Good evening, Neil. Please, step in."

The boy stepped across the threshold and out of the way of the already closing door. He looked at Alexander. "You said that you had my money for the book."

"Yes, yes. But first come sit down. I want to talk about the book."

"Like what?" They both entered the sitting room and took the chairs that remained across from each other from two nights ago.

"Well, I know what happened on the night of the fire, and I just want to know your side." Neil began to stand again to leave, but Alexander reassured him. "I'm not going to call the police on you, or turn you in. I just want to hear what you have to say. I will still keep the book and pay you for it. I just want to know the story."

"You said you already know the story."

"I know a story. Not your story."

Neil shifted back into his seat and began to scan the room. He looked very nervous, as if something were about to jump out of the walls and grab him. "How much do you know?"

"I know that you went inside the house and started the fire as you tried to escape."

"It was an accident! The old man was holding the candle too close to me. I never meant to burn him up. A friend of mine told me that he had seen the old man with the book, and that it looked like one of the ones I was telling him about. The creepy look. I thought I could get into the house and be out before he even noticed. An old man, I thought he'd be sleeping that late at night. He came in the room so quietly. I jumped and panicked. I ran past him so fast, I didn't even notice hitting the candle. I looked back quickly and saw the flames catching on the drapes, and kept running. I thought the old guy would be able to put it out. I didn't mean to burn him. I didn't mean for him to die."

"Well, you can rest assured that you did not kill the old man. He was the one who came looking for the book."

Neil's eyes turned directly to Alexander's. There was something behind them that surfaced in fear. "What do you mean?"

"It was not the old man's son, but the old man himself that came for the book."

"But I saw him catch fire in the house. Outside, I could see him through the window, spinning in a ball of flame. I was sure he was as good as dead."

"Well, he's a little worse for wear, but still standing. I assure you it was the same man. How do you think I know the story behind you starting the fire? And I don't think you need to worry about him calling the police. He is as afraid of them as you."

Neil still did not seem relieved. "So why are you keeping the book if it's his?"

"There comes a time in a man's life, Neil, when things become more important than rules and morals. Why should I give him that book back? If he wishes to have it returned, I have told him to go to the police and ask them to come to me for it. How can I even be sure he is the rightful owner of the book. Even if he is, he has no one to whom he can prove it. I have the book now."

Neil stood now rigidly, staring coldly at Alexander. "Fine. Whatever. You got the book, now give me the money."

Alexander stared blankly at the fireplace as if he had not noticed the boy even rise from the chair. He spoke in a tone of nostalgia. "You know, I always wanted to play the piano. I never had the chance. It takes years of practice. Determination. Time. I was never interested as a child, and never had the time as an adult. I think I'm going to start."

"C'mon, just give me the money. I want to go."

"Ah, yes. The reward for the book. Come this way." Alexander rose from his chair and began walking toward his kitchen. "You know, Neil, you have to grab hold of as much life as you can." He stepped up to the basement door. " Life is short." He opened it and stood back for Neil. "After you."

Neil stepped forward and peered down the basement stairs. "Why did you..."

The frying pan struck the back of Neil's head hard, knocking him forward and down the stairs. He lay at the bottom and could see Alexander with the pan descending the stairs and standing above him just before everything went black.

Alexander pulled Neil across the basement floor to the centre of the room. There was not a great deal of space left, with all of his books displayed in their cases so perfectly across the length of the basement. He had hit Neil hard enough to cause him to lose consciousness, but there was no blood and Neil was still breathing.

Alexander let go of his feet and looked around. He would definitely need more room than what he had now. The circle had to be large enough to fit himself kneeling, and right now the display cases were taking up too much space. Alexander quickly grabbed the first case and pushed it over. The wooden object fell on its side, the force of its own fall breaking the glass and spreading it across the floor behind it. Without looking at the damage he had done, Alexander flipped the next case, and the next, until all of the cases were lying on their sides, spewing glass onto the rest of the floor. A wide, clean path extended from the bottom of the stairs to the concrete wall, barricaded at the edges by the wooden cases which seemed to hold back the army of glass shards on each side. Alexander grabbed Neil's feet once more, pulling his body to the wall, turning him so that he could be sat up against the concrete. There was not a lot to be done to Neil, the vessel to receive him. He had to prepare himself for the ceremony. He used a piece of rope to tie Neil's hands behind him and a piece of cloth to gag him. He knew it would

make it hard for him to escape once he had transferred his soul into Neil's body, but there would be a knife close by for him to use to cut the rope.

There was still not a great deal of space for him to work in, but it would do. Alexander grabbed a red can of paint he had placed under the stairs, opened it, and in the centre of the room began to make a circle. Once finished he painted the three symbols within the circle. It was the spot where he would soon kneel to commence the ceremony. He had done almost everything which the book had told him. His heart was pounding as if it were trying to tear itself from the chest of his aging body and also become part of the new youth. He knew his time was running low, and so decided to prepare himself for the last step.

Alexander went up the stairs; excitement and nervousness were beginning to make him sick. His bowels were beginning to cramp, and his stomach was tightening into a knot. He would be young again, but he would also lose himself in the process. He would still be the same person, but how was he going to react when he started waking up in the night, going to the washroom mirror, and seeing another face staring back at him. To make things worse, it would be the face of the boy that he murdered staring at him from the darkened mirror, not his own. His own would be buried deep in the ground, a deserted shell rotting away from his own sight. He would never see his own face again. He would never see his son, tell him why his father never visited, never tried to contact him. He would no longer have his job. He would have to start over. He could not even stay in the same area. Neil's father would be looking for him (and he did not want to live with Neil's father). He had to leave town as soon as possible so as to avoid running into

people Neil would know. It was a strange thought. It was all happening so suddenly that he could hardly think about the psychological repercussions of such an act. He did not want to think about such things now. He wanted to thrive on his excitement. He walked over to the counter and slid one of the knives out of its holder. He then turned around, grabbed the book (which he had placed on a chair in the kitchen earlier) and headed for the basement door.

As he walked down the steps he thought about his new face. At least the boy was a handsome teenager. He did not want to be stuck with an unattractive face for the next twenty or thirty years. He had already spent some time with a plain face, not unattractive, but not handsome either. Perhaps it was the reason he never became seriously involved with any women in this life. But with a face like Neil's he would have no problems with women. Then Alexander thought about Neil's other parts. He was a solid looking young man, but what about his penis? Would it be an adequate size? He did not wish to place himself in a body with small features. Should he look? Alexander felt a strange embarrassment join the knot in the pit of his stomach. It was going to be his own soon, so it was not really that perverse to look at it. No. His thoughts were beginning to become crazed. He was going to exchange bodies with this boy now no matter what. It was too late to turn back now anyway, so he could wait to see himself until after.

Neil was now stirring awake. Alexander could see the groggy stare in his eyes, trying to figure out how he had ended up in the basement, tied at the wrists, and why Alexander was standing on the other side of the room with a knife. Alexander walked

across the basement floor to the circle he had drawn, keeping his eye on Neil, who was now struggling to free himself. Alexander quickly removed his shirt, feeling kind of melancholy about leaving his body behind. It had served him well for these many years, was all he ever knew, and felt right. How would he feel in a new body? New skin? He threw his shirt across one of the overturned cases and knelt in the circle. It was time.

He placed the book in front of where he knelt, opening it to the page with the words he must speak. Pushing it a little bit further ahead of him, Alexander placed the blade across one wrist and with a deep breath quickly slashed it open. He hissed with the pain of the wound as the blood began to flow from his wrist. It had hurt more than he had imagined and he decided he should do the second before he lost his nerve. This time he grunted loudly, knowing beforehand what it would feel like as he pulled the steel across his skin. He looked at Neil who had stopped struggling and was watching Alexander with wide, frightened eyes.

Now both hands were dripping blood to the floor. He began to speak the phrases in front of him, pronouncing each word with great conviction, his voice rising in volume and force so that he did not hear the footsteps on the basement stairs. Alexander only stopped when he heard the stranger's laughter behind him.

He turned to face the old man. "Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. I could not have spoken the words better myself. Of course, I wouldn't have spoken them at all."

Alexander rose and could feel the strength leaving him already as the man walked toward Neil, knocking him back down. He reached down and picking up the knife moved towards the boy.

"You can't have him. He's mine." Alexander struggled to sit himself back up. He could hardly back up the threat he was trying to impose on the man.

"The boy–" Alexander watched as the old man knelt one knee to the floor, placed his papery hand gently on Neil's frightened face, turned it and with a swift motion, used the knife to slit the boy's throat. "–is useless."

Alexander's heart recoiled at the shock of what he was seeing. Blood quickly flowed from Neil's throat, soaking the front of his shirt. His eyes widened in a quick alarm. The old man let go of his face, and Neil's eyes soon closed as his head dropped to his shoulder. Alexander had slit his own wrists, and now his young vessel was being destroyed. He needed to get his wrists bandaged quickly. He was losing a great deal of blood.

Then his mind turned to the stranger who now stood facing Alexander. What did he want if he did not come for the boy? The book. Alexander grabbed it off the concrete floor, shutting it as he held it out to the man.

"Here, take the book. I don't want it anymore. I don't care about living forever, I just want to live."

The Stranger laughed as he took the book from his hands. Alexander noticed a scar across his wrist as he pulled it back and opened the book in his own hands. He looked through some of the pages with seemingly little interest. "It is a beautifully constructed piece of rubbish, is it not?" He smiled at Alexander who was becoming confused and very weak. He closed the book and threw it to one side. "You see, I

assembled the book to lure you to me. I have the formula memorized. The originals were destroyed long ago. I just needed you."

Alexander struggled to his feet, his knees shaking in their efforts to support him "You had Neil."

"Yes, but the boy was not part of the formula." He placed his hand on Alexander's shoulder, forcing him back down into the circle. "Relax, you have to bleed out in the circle. I cannot waste time once you have lost the proper amount of blood. Although the ceremony has slowed down the process of bleeding to death, I still will only have a small window of time." Alexander tried to struggle, his veins pumping out more blood with his fear. The Stranger continued, "One of the things I left out of your copy of the formula was the fact that the vessel had to be a direct relative of the transferor. I could not use the boy, only a descendent of myself."

"Me?" Alexander stared into the man's face. "Who are you?"

The Stranger smiled, carefully choosing his next words. "I am every male ancestor you have ever known. I am your great-grandfather, grandfather, and the man you see before you is your father."

Alexander's eyes were now blurring, but he knew they conveyed his confusion. The old man removed his coat, folding it calmly and placing on a case next to Alexander's shirt, speaking softly as he did so.

"I will become you, your son, and so on." Alexander felt an even worse dread as he heard mention of his son. "Yes I know about your son, and I will need him soon. The boy I told you I used as my first vessel was not the boy I used to help me, but my son, as

was required in the formula. I asked him to join me at my house one night to discuss the current situation between his mother and myself. I set it up similar to the way you did tonight with Neil. Once inside him, I made sure his wife became pregnant with my child and left her shortly after it was born. I watched him grow from afar, until he reached a proper age, and then I did the same to him. This continued in the same way until you were born." The man now removed his own shirt and knelt in front of the circle, his knees touching the delta of blood that was now moving past the red ring. His chest was as paper-thin as his face. Under its yellowness there was a dark brown color that seemed to almost slide around under his skin. Alexander could no longer hold himself up. He wavered to one side and fell against the concrete floor. The man reached down and pulled him more into the circle, placing his head so that he could still see him.

"I see it's almost time." He picked up Alexander's wrist and felt for the pulse further up his arm. "I was watching you grow, but then one day your mother ran, leaving everything behind. She disappeared and it took me many, many years to find her. When I did, she was dead and you were gone. Years later I finally tracked you to this city, but I was old. Much older than I had ever been. And you were old too. But you see, it is a chain. I must move into the next living link, before I can move on. It is a small leap forward, but I will soon visit your son and prepare him to serve me as well."

"Oh God." Alexander was not sure if he had actually formed the words for the man to hear. He felt his mouth move, but did the air come forward? The man continued with his story.

"I could not risk trying to overpower you in such a condition, so I had to watch you and devise some way to bring you to me. I spoke with Neil and gave him a great deal of money to assist me. He had no idea what I was doing, and did not seem to care. I just paid him to tell you the stories I had given him. The poor soul had no idea that it was coming to this, but I did. And so I created the book with part of the formula given to you so that you could prepare yourself for the ceremony. Although it was backwards. You were actually preparing yourself as the vessel. Emptying yourself of your own lifeblood. Making room for me."

The Stranger began to laugh as Alexander's vision began to dim. He began to speak in a different language as if it were his own. Alexander stared through dying eyes, paralysed; wishing that he could run, rage against the stranger and flee from this entire situation. He was not ready to die. He had so much he wanted to do with his life that he never accomplished. How could he be taken away when there was so much left undone?

Alexander watched as the man began to convulse and his skin began to split down the middle. Fear beyond fear of death coursed through his disabled body. Every last trace of energy in Alexander's corpse screamed from inside his ribcage, as something ripped free from the old man's body and surged towards Alexander, tearing into his skin.

VITA AUCTORIS

Craig Saunders was born in 1976 in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. He graduated from Pasadena Academy in 1994. From there he went on to complete an B.A. in English at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, a division of Memorial University of Newfoundland. He is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English and Creative Writing as well as a B. Ed at the University of Windsor.