

## How to Draw a Picture (I)

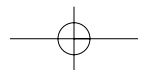
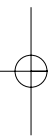
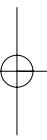
*Start with a blank surface. It doesn't have to be paper or canvas, but I feel it should be white. We call it white because we need a word, but its true name is nothing. Black is the absence of light, but white is the absence of memory, the color of can't remember.*

*How do we remember to remember? That's a question I've asked myself often since my time on Duma Key, often in the small hours of the morning, looking up into the absence of light, remembering absent friends. Sometimes in those little hours I think about the horizon. You have to establish the horizon. You have to mark the white. A simple enough act, you might say, but any act that re-makes the world is heroic. Or so I've come to believe.*

*Imagine a little girl, hardly more than a baby. She fell from a carriage almost ninety years ago, struck her head on a stone, and forgot everything. Not just her name; everything! And then one day she recalled just enough to pick up a pencil and make that first hesitant mark across the white. A horizon-line, sure. But also a slot for blackness to pour through.*

*Still, imagine that small hand lifting the pencil . . . hesitating . . . and then marking the white. Imagine the courage of that first effort to re-establish the world by picturing it. I will always love that little girl, in spite of all she has cost me. I must. I have no choice.*

*Pictures are magic, as you know.*



# 1—My Other Life

i

My name is Edgar Freemantle. I used to be a big deal in the building and contracting business. This was in Minnesota, in my other life. I learned that my-other-life thing from Wireman. I want to tell you about Wireman, but first let's get through the Minnesota part.

Gotta say it: I was a genuine American-boy success there. Worked my way up in the company where I started, and when I couldn't work my way any higher there, I went out and started my own. The boss of the company I left laughed at me, said I'd be broke in a year. I think that's what most bosses say when some hot young pocket-rocket goes off on his own.

For me, everything worked out. When Minneapolis—St. Paul boomed, The Freemantle Company boomed. When things tightened up, I never tried to play big. But I did play my hunches, and most played out well. By the time I was fifty, Pam and I were worth forty million dollars. And we were still tight. We had two girls, and at the end of our particular Golden Age, Ilse was at Brown and Melinda was teaching in France, as part of a foreign exchange program. At the time things went wrong, my wife and I were planning to go and visit her.

I had an accident at a job site. It was pretty simple; when a pickup truck, even a Dodge Ram with all the bells and whistles, argues with a twelve-story crane, the pickup is going to lose every time. The right side of my skull only cracked. The left side was slammed so hard against the Ram's doorpost that it fractured in three places. Or maybe it was five. My memory is better than it used to be, but it's still a long way from what it once was.

3

## STEPHEN KING

The doctors called what happened to my head a contracoup injury, and that kind of thing often does more damage than the original hit. My ribs were broken. My right hip was shattered. And although I retained seventy per cent of the sight in my right eye (more, on a good day), I lost my right arm.

I was supposed to lose my life, but didn't. I was supposed to be mentally impaired thanks to the contracoup thing, and at first I was, but it passed. Sort of. By the time it did, my wife had gone, and not just sort of. We were married for twenty-five years, but you know what they say: shit happens. I guess it doesn't matter; gone is gone. And over is over. Sometimes that's a good thing.

When I say I was mentally impaired, I mean that at first I didn't know who people were—even my wife—or what had happened. I couldn't understand why I was in such pain. I can't remember the quality of that pain now, four years later. I know that I suffered it, and that it was excruciating, but it's all pretty academic. It wasn't academic at the time. At the time it was like being in hell and not knowing why you were there.

*At first you were afraid you'd die, then you were afraid you wouldn't.* That's what Wireman says, and he would have known; he had his own season in hell.

Everything hurt all the time. I had a constant ringing headache; behind my forehead it was always midnight in the world's biggest clock-shop. Because my right eye was fucked up, I was seeing the world through a film of blood, and I hardly knew what the world was. Nothing had a name. I remember one day when Pam was in the room—I was still in the hospital—and she was standing by my bed. I was extremely pissed that she should be standing when there was a thing to sit on right over in the cornhole.

"Bring the friend," I said. "Sit in the friend."

"What do you mean, Edgar?" she asked.

"The *friend*, the *buddy*!" I shouted. "Bring over the fucking *pal*, you dump bitch!" My head was killing me and she was starting to cry. I hated her for that. She had no business crying, because she wasn't the one in the cage, looking at everything through a red blur. She wasn't the

## DUMA KEY

monkey in the cage. And then it came to me. “Bring over the chum and sick *down!*” It was the closest my rattled, fucked-up brain could come to *chair*.

I was angry all the time. There were two older nurses that I called Dry Fuck One and Dry Fuck Two, as if they were characters in a dirty Dr. Seuss story. There was a candystriper I called Pilch Lozenge—I have no idea why, but that nickname also had some sort of sexual connotation. To me, at least. When I grew stronger, I tried to hit people. Twice I tried to stab Pam, and on one of those two occasions I succeeded, although only with a plastic knife. She still needed a couple of stitches in her forearm. There were times when I had to be tied down.

Here is what I remember most clearly about that part of my other life: a hot afternoon toward the end of my month-long stay in an expensive convalescent home, the expensive air conditioning broken, tied down in my bed, a soap opera on the television, a thousand midnight bells ringing in my head, pain burning and stiffening my right side like a poker, my missing right arm itching, my missing right fingers twitching, no more Oxycontin due for awhile (I don’t know how long, because telling time is beyond me), and a nurse swims out of the red, a creature coming to look at the monkey in the cage, and the nurse says: “Are you ready to visit with your wife?” And I say: “Only if she brought a gun to shoot me with.”

You don’t think that kind of pain will pass, but it does. Then they ship you home and replace it with the agony of physical rehabilitation. The red began to drain from my vision. A psychologist who specialized in hypnotherapy showed me some neat tricks for managing the phantom aches and itches in my missing arm. That was Kamen. It was Kamen who brought me Reba: one of the few things I took with me when I limped out of my other life and into the one I lived on Duma Key.

“This is not approved psychological therapy for anger management,” Dr. Kamen said, although I suppose he might have been lying about that to make Reba more attractive. He told me I had to give her a hateful name, and so, although she looked like Lucy Ricardo, I named her after an aunt who used to pinch my fingers when I was small if I didn’t eat all my carrots. Then, less than two days after getting her,

## STEPHEN KING

I forgot her name. I could only think of boy names, each one making me angrier: Randall, Russell, Rudolph, River-fucking-Phoenix.

I was home by then. Pam came in with my morning snack and must have seen the look on my face, because I could see her steeling herself for an outburst. But even though I'd forgotten the name of the fluffy red rage-doll the psychologist had given me, I remembered how I was supposed to use it in this situation.

"Pam," I said, "I need five minutes to get myself under control. I can do this."

"Are you sure—"

"Yes, now just get that hamhock out of here and stick it up your face-powder. I can do this."

I didn't know if I really could, but that was what I was supposed to say. I couldn't remember the fucking doll's name, but I could remember *I can do this*. That's clear about the end of my other life, how I kept saying *I can do this* even when I knew I couldn't, even when I knew I was fucked, I was double-fucked, I was dead-ass-fucked in the pouring rain.

"I can do this," I said, and God knows how I looked because she backed out without a word, the tray still in her hands and the cup chattering against the plate.

When she was gone, I held the doll up in front of my face, staring into its stupid blue eyes as my thumbs disappeared into its stupid yielding body. "What's your name, you bat-faced bitch?" I shouted at it. It never once occurred to me that Pam was listening on the kitchen intercom, she and the day-nurse both. Tell you what, if the intercom had been broken they could have heard me through the door. I was in good voice that day.

I began to shake the doll back and forth. Its head flopped and its synthetic *I Love Lucy* hair flew. Its big blue cartoon eyes seemed to be saying *Oouuu, you nasty man!* like Betty Boop in one of those old cartoons you can still see sometimes on the cable.

"What's your name, bitch? What's your name, you cunt? What's your name, you cheap rag-filled whore? Tell me your name! Tell me your name! *Tell me your name or I'll cut out your eyes and chop off your nose and rip out your—*"

## DUMA KEY

My mind cross-connected then, a thing that still happens now, four years later, down here in the town of Tamazunchale, state of San Luis Potosí, country of Mexico, site of Edgar Freemantle's third life. For a moment I was in my pickup truck, clipboard rattling against my old steel lunchbucket in the passenger footwell (I doubt if I was the only working millionaire in America to carry a lunchbucket, but you probably could have counted us in the dozens), my PowerBook beside me on the seat. And from the radio a woman's voice cried "*It was RED!*" with evangelical fervor. Only three words, but three was enough. It was the song about the poor woman who turns out her pretty daughter as a prostitute. It was "Fancy," by Reba McEntire.

"Reba," I whispered, and hugged the doll against me. "You're Reba. Reba-Reba-Reba. I'll never forget again." I did—the following week—but I didn't get angry that time. No. I held her against me like a little love, closed my eyes, and visualized the pickup truck that had been demolished in the accident. I visualized my steel lunchbucket rattling against the steel clip on my clipboard, and the woman's voice came from the radio once more, exulting with that same evangelical fervor: "*It was RED!*"

Dr. Kamen called it a breakthrough. He was excited. My wife seemed a good deal less excited, and the kiss she put on my cheek was of the dutiful variety. I think it was two months later that she told me she wanted a divorce.

## ii

By then the pain had either lessened or my mind had made certain crucial adjustments when it came to dealing with it. The headaches still came, but less often and rarely with the same violence; it was no longer *always* midnight in the world's biggest clock-shop between my ears. I was always more than ready for Vicodin at five and Oxycontin at eight—could hardly hobble on my bright red Canadian crutch until I'd swallowed those magic pills—but my rebuilt hip was starting to mend.

Kathi Green the Rehab Queen came to Casa Freemantle in Mendota

## STEPHEN KING

Heights on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I was allowed an extra Vicodin before our sessions, and still my screams filled the house by the time we finished up. Our basement rec room had been converted into a therapy suite, complete with a handicap-accessible hot tub. After two months of torture, I was able to make it down there on my own in the evenings to double up on my leg exercises and begin some abdominal work. Kathi said doing that stuff a couple of hours before bed would release endorphins and I'd sleep better.

It was during one of these evening workouts—Edgar in search of those elusive endorphins—when my wife of a quarter-century came downstairs and told me she wanted a divorce.

I stopped what I was doing—crunches—and looked at her. I was sitting on a floor-pad. She was standing at the foot of the stairs, prudently across the room. I could have asked her if she was serious, but the light down there was very good—those racked fluorescents—and I didn't have to. I don't think it's the sort of thing women joke about six months after their husbands have almost died in accidents, anyway. I could have asked her why, but I knew. I could see the small white scar on her arm where I had stabbed her with the plastic knife from my hospital supper tray, and that was really the least of it. I thought of telling her, not so long ago, to get that hammock out of here and stick it up her face-powder. I considered asking her to at least think about it, but the anger came back. In those days what Dr. Kamen called *inappropriate anger* was my ugly friend. And hey, what I was feeling right then did not seem inappropriate at all.

My shirt was off. My right arm ended three and a half inches below the shoulder. I twitched it at her—a twitch was the best I could do with the muscle that was left. "This is me," I said, "giving you the finger. Get out of here if that's how you feel. Get out, you quitting birch."

The first tears had started rolling down her face, but she tried to smile. It was a pretty ghastly effort. "Bitch, Edgar," she said. "The word is *bitch*."

"The word is what I say it is," I said, and began to do crunches again. It's harder than hell to do them with an arm gone; your body wants to pull and corkscrew to that side. "I wouldn't have left *you*, that's the



## DUMA KEY

point. I wouldn't have left *you*. I would have gone on through the mud and the blood and the piss and the spilled beer."

"It's different," she said. She made no effort to wipe her face. "It's different and you know it. I couldn't break you in two if I got into a rage."

"I'd have a hell of a job breaking you in two with only one amp," I said, doing crunches faster.

"You stuck me with a knife." As if that were the point. It wasn't, and we both knew it.

"A plastic rudder knife is what it was, I was half out of my mind, and it'll be your last words on your fucking beth-dead, 'Eddie staffed me with a plastic fife, goodbye cruel world.'"

"You choked me," she said in a voice I could barely hear.

I stopped doing crunches and gaped at her. The clock-shop started up in my head; bang-a-gong, get it on. "What are you saying, I choked you? I never choked you!"

"I know you don't remember, but you did. And you're not the same."

"Oh, quit it. Save the New Age bullshit for the . . . for the guy . . . your . . ." I knew the word and I could see the man it stood for, but it wouldn't come. "For that bald fuck you see in his office."

"My therapist," she said, and of course that made me angrier: she had the word and I didn't. Because her brain hadn't been shaken like Jell-O.

"You want a divorce, you can have a divorce. Throw it all away, why not? Only go do the alligator somewhere else. Get out of here."

She went up the stairs and closed the door without looking back. And it wasn't until she was gone that I realized I'd meant to say crocodile tears. Go cry your crocodile tears somewhere else.

Oh, well. Close enough for rock and roll. That's what Wireman says.

And I was the one who ended up getting out.

Except for Pam, I never had a partner in my other life. Edgar Freeman-tle's Four Rules for Success (feel free to take notes) were: never borrow

## STEPHEN KING

more than your IQ times a hundred, never borrow from a man who calls you by your first name on first acquaintance, never take a drink while the sun's still up, and *never* take a partner you wouldn't be willing to embrace naked on a waterbed.

I did have an accountant I trusted, however, and it was Tom Riley who helped me move the few things I needed from Mendota Heights to our smaller place on Lake Phalen. Tom, a sad two-time loser in the marriage game, worried at me all the way out. "You don't give up the house in a situation like this," he said. "Not unless the judge kicks you out. It's like giving up home field advantage in a playoff game."

I didn't care about home field advantage; I only wanted him to watch his driving. I winced every time a car coming the other way looked a little too close to the centerline. Sometimes I stiffened and pumped the invisible passenger brake. As for getting behind the wheel again myself, I thought never sounded about right. Of course, God loves surprises. That's what Wireman says.

Kathi Green the Rehab Queen had only been divorced once, but she and Tom were on the same wavelength. I remember her sitting cross-legged in her leotard, holding my feet and looking at me with grim outrage.

"Here you are, just out of Death's Motel and short an arm, and she wants to call it off. Because you poked her with a plastic hospital knife when you could barely remember your own name? Fuck me til I cry! Doesn't she understand that mood-swings and short-term memory loss following accident trauma are *common*?"

"She understands that she's scared of me," I said.

"Yeah? Well, listen to your Mama, Sunny Jim: if you've got a good lawyer, you can make her pay for being such a wimp." Some hair had escaped from her Rehab Gestapo ponytail and she blew it back from her forehead. "She *ought* to pay for it. Read my lips: *None of this is your fault.*"

"She says I tried to choke her."

"And if so, being choked by a one-armed invalid must have been a pants-wetting experience. Come on, Eddie, make her pay. I'm sure I'm stepping way out of my place, but I don't care. She should not be doing what she's doing."

## DUMA KEY

“I think there’s more to it than the choking thing and the butter-knife thing.”

“What?”

“I can’t remember.”

“What does *she* say?”

“She doesn’t.” But Pam and I had been together a long time, and even if love had run out into a delta of passive acceptance, I thought I still knew her well enough to know that yes—there had been something else, there was *still* something else, and that was what she wanted to get away from.

## iv

Not long after I relocated to the place on Lake Phalen, the girls came to see me—the young women. They brought a picnic hamper. We sat on the piney-smelling lakeporch, looked out at the lake, and nibbled sandwiches. It was past Labor Day by then, most of the floating toys put away for another year. There was also a bottle of wine in the hamper, but I only drank a little. On top of the pain medication, alcohol hit me hard; a single beer could turn me into a slurring drunk. The girls—the *young women*—finished the rest between them, and it loosened them up. Melinda, back from France for the second time since my argument with the crane and not happy about it, asked me if all adults in their fifties had these unpleasant regressive interludes, did she have that to look forward to. Ilse, the younger, began to cry, leaned against me, and asked why it couldn’t be like it was, why couldn’t we—meaning her mother and me—be like *we* were. Lin told her this wasn’t the time for Illy’s patented Baby Act, and Illy gave her the finger. I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Then we all laughed.

Lin’s temper and Ilse’s tears weren’t pleasant, but they were honest, and as familiar to me as the mole on Ilse’s chin or the faint vertical frown-line, which in time would deepen into a groove, between Lin’s eyes.

Linnie wanted to know what I was going to do, and I told her I

## STEPHEN KING

didn't know. I'd come a long distance toward deciding to end my own life, but I knew that if I did it, it must absolutely look like an accident. I would not leave these two young women, just starting out in their lives, carrying the residual guilt of their father's suicide. Nor would I leave a load of guilt behind for the woman with whom I had once shared a milkshake in bed, both of us naked and laughing and listening to the Plastic Ono Band on the stereo.

After they'd had a chance to vent—after a *full and complete exchange of feelings*, in Dr. Kamen-speak—my memory is that we had a pleasant afternoon, looking at old photo albums and reminiscing about the past. I think we even laughed some more, but not all memories of my other life are to be trusted. Wireman says when it comes to the past, we all stack the deck.

Ilse wanted us all to go out to dinner, but Lin had to meet someone at the Public Library before it closed, and I said I didn't feel much like hobbling anywhere; I thought I'd read a few chapters of the latest John Sandford and then go to bed. They kissed me—all friends again—and then left.

Two minutes later, Ilse came back. "I told Linnie I forgot my keys," she said.

"I take it you didn't," I said.

"No. Daddy, would you ever hurt Mom? I mean, now? On purpose?"

I shook my head, but that wasn't good enough for her. I could tell by the way she just stood there, looking me in the eye. "No," I said. "Never. I'd—"

"You'd what, Daddy?"

"I was going to say I'd cut my own arm off first, but all at once that seemed like a really bad idea. I'd never do it, Illy. Leave it at that."

"Then why is she still afraid of you?"

"I think . . . because I'm maimed."

She hurled herself into my arms so hard she almost knocked us both onto the sofa. "Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry. All of this is just so *sucky*."

I stroked her hair a little. "I know, but remember this—it's as bad as it's going to get." That wasn't the truth, but if I was careful, Ilse would never know it had been an outright lie.

## DUMA KEY

A horn honked from the driveway.

“Go on,” I said, and kissed her wet cheek. “Your sister’s impatient.”

She wrinkled her nose. “So what else is new? You’re not overdoing the pain meds, are you?”

“No.”

“Call if you need me, Daddy. I’ll catch the very next plane.”

She would, too. Which was why I wouldn’t.

“You bet.” I put a kiss on her other cheek. “Give that to your sister.”

She nodded and went out. I sat down on the couch and closed my eyes. Behind them, the clocks were striking and striking and striking.

v

My next visitor was Dr. Kamen, the psychologist who gave me Reba. I didn’t invite him. I had Kathi, my rehabilitation dominatrix, to thank for that.

Although surely no more than forty, Kamen walked like a much older man and wheezed even when he sat, peering at the world through enormous horn-rimmed spectacles and over an enormous pear of a belly. He was a very tall, very black black man, with features carved so large they seemed unreal. His great staring eyeballs, ship’s figurehead of a nose, and totemic lips were awe-inspiring. Xander Kamen looked like a minor god in a suit from Men’s Warehouse. He also looked like a prime candidate for a fatal heart attack or stroke before his fiftieth birthday.

He refused my offer of refreshment, said he couldn’t stay, then put his briefcase aside on the couch as if to contradict that. He sank full fathom five beside the couch’s armrest (and going deeper all the time—I feared for the thing’s springs), looking at me and wheezing benignly.

“What brings you out this way?” I asked him.

“Oh, Kathi tells me you’re planning to bump yourself off,” he said. It was the tone he might have used to say *Kathi tells me you’re having a lawn party and there are fresh Krispy Kremes on offer*. “Any truth to that rumor?”

## STEPHEN KING

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Once, when I was ten and growing up in Eau Claire, I took a comic book from a drugstore spin-around, put it down the front of my jeans, then dropped my tee-shirt over it. As I was strolling out the door, feeling jacked up and very clever, a clerk grabbed me by the arm. She lifted my shirt with her other hand and exposed my ill-gotten treasure. “How did *that* get there?” she asked me. Not in the forty years since that day had I been so completely stuck for an answer to a simple question.

Finally—long after such a response could have any weight—I said, “That’s ridiculous. I don’t know where she could have gotten such an idea.”

“No?”

“No. Sure you don’t want a Coke?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

I got up and got a Coke from the kitchen fridge. I tucked the bottle firmly between my stump and my chest-wall—possible but painful, I don’t know what you may have seen in the movies, but broken ribs hurt for a long time—and spun off the cap with my left hand. I’m a south-paw. Caught a break there, *muchacho*, as Wireman says.

“I’m surprised you’d take her seriously in any case,” I said as I came back in. “Kathi’s a hell of a physical therapist, but a headshrinker she’s not.” I paused before sitting down. “Neither are you, actually. In the technical sense.”

Kamen cupped an enormous hand behind an ear that looked roughly the size of a desk drawer. “Do I hear . . . a ratcheting noise? I believe I do!”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s the charmingly medieval sound a person’s defenses make when they go up.” He tried an ironic wink, but the size of the man’s face made irony impossible; he could only manage burlesque. Still, I took the point. “As for Kathi Green, you’re right, what does she know? All she does is work with paraplegics, quadriplegics, accident-related amps like you, and people recovering from traumatic head injuries—again, like you. For fifteen years Kathi’s done this work, she’s had the opportunity to watch a thousand maimed patients reflect on how not even a single sec-

## DUMA KEY

ond of time can ever be called back, so how could she *possibly* recognize the signs of pre-suicidal depression?”

I sat in the lumpy easy chair across from the couch and stared at him sullenly. Here was trouble. And Kathi Green was more.

He leaned forward . . . although, given his girth, a few inches was all he could manage. “You have to wait,” he said.

I gaped at him.

He nodded. “You’re surprised. Yes. But I’m not a Christian, let alone a Catholic, and on the subject of suicide my mind is open. Yet I’m a believer in responsibilities, I know that you are, too, and I tell you this: if you kill yourself now . . . even six months from now . . . your wife and daughters will know. No matter how cleverly you do it, they’ll know.”

“I don’t—”

He raised his hand. “And the company that insures your life—for a very large sum, I’m sure—they’ll know, too. They may not be able to prove it . . . but they’ll try very hard. The rumors they start will hurt your girls, no matter how well-armored against such things you may think they are.”

Melinda was well-armored. Ilse, however, was a different story. When Melinda was mad at her, she called Illy a case of arrested development, but I didn’t think that was true. I thought Illy was just tender.

“And in the end, they may prove it.” Kamen shrugged his enormous shoulders. “How much of a death-duty that might entail I couldn’t guess, but I’m sure it would erase a great deal of your life’s treasure.”

I wasn’t thinking about the money. I was thinking about a team of insurance investigators sniffing around whatever I set up. And all at once I began to laugh.

Kamen sat with his huge dark brown hands on his doorstep knees, looking at me with his little *I’ve-seen-everything* smile. Except on his face nothing was little. He let my laughter run its course and then asked me what was so funny.

“You’re telling me I’m too rich to kill myself,” I said.

“I’m telling you not now, Edgar, and that’s all I’m telling you. I’m also going to make a suggestion that goes against a good deal of my own practical experience. But I have a very strong intuition in your case—

## STEPHEN KING

the same sort of intuition that caused me to give you the doll. I propose you try a geographical.”

“Beg pardon?”

“It’s a form of recovery often attempted by late-stage alcoholics. They hope that a change of location will give them a fresh start. Turn things around.”

I felt a flicker of something. I won’t say it was hope, but it was something.

“It rarely works,” Kamen said. “The old-timers in Alcoholics Anonymous, who have an answer for everything—it’s their curse as well as their blessing, although very few ever realize it—like to say, ‘Put an asshole on a plane in Boston, an asshole gets off in Seattle.’”

“So where does that leave me?” I asked.

“Right now it leaves you in suburban St. Paul. What I’m suggesting is that you pick someplace far from here and go there. You’re in a unique position to do so, given your financial situation and marital status.”

“For how long?”

“At least a year.” He looked at me inscrutably. His large face was made for such an expression; etched on King Tut’s tomb, I believe it might have made even Howard Carter consider. “And if you do anything at the end of that year, Edgar, for God’s sake—no, for your *daughters*’ sake—make it look good.”

He had nearly disappeared into the old sofa; now he began to struggle up again. I stepped forward to help him and he waved me away. He made it to his feet at last, wheezing more loudly than ever, and took up his briefcase. He looked down at me from his height of six and a half feet, those staring eyeballs with their yellowish corneas made even larger by his glasses, which had very thick lenses.

“Edgar, does anything make you happy?”

I considered the surface of this question (the only part that seemed safe) and said, “I used to sketch.” It had actually been a little more than just sketching, but that was long ago. Since then, other things had intervened. Marriage, a career. Both of which were now going or gone.

“When?”

“As a kid.”



## DUMA KEY

I thought of telling him I'd once dreamed of art school—had even bought the occasional book of reproductions when I could afford to—and then didn't. In the last thirty years, my contribution to the world of art had consisted of little more than doodles while taking telephone calls, and it had probably been ten years since I'd bought the sort of picture-book that belongs on a coffee table where it can impress your friends.

"Since then?"

I considered lying—didn't want to seem like a complete fixated drudge—but stuck to the truth. One-armed men should tell the truth whenever possible. Wireman doesn't say that; I do. "No."

"Take it up again," Kamen advised. "You need hedges."

"Hedges," I said, bemused.

"Yes, Edgar." He looked surprised and a little disappointed, as if I had failed to understand a very simple concept. "Hedges against the night."

## vi

A week or so later, Tom Riley came to see me again. By then the leaves had started to turn color, and I remember the clerks putting up Halloween posters in the Wal-Mart where I bought my first sketchpads since college . . . hell, maybe since high school.

What I remember most clearly about that visit is how embarrassed and ill-at-ease Tom seemed.

I offered him a beer and he took me up on it. When I came back from the kitchen, he was looking at a pen-and-ink I'd done—three palm trees silhouetted against an expanse of water, a bit of screened-in porch jutting into the left foreground. "This is pretty good," he said. "You do this?"

"Nah, the elves. They come in the night. Cobble my shoes, draw the occasional picture."

He laughed too hard and set the picture back down on the desk. "Don't look much like Minnesota, dere," he said, doing a Swedish accent.

## STEPHEN KING

"I copied it out of a book," I said. I had actually used a photograph from a Realtor's brochure. It had been taken from the so-called "Florida room" of Salmon Point, the place I had just leased for a year. I had never been in Florida, not even on vacation, but that picture had called to something deep in me, and for the first time since the accident, I felt actual anticipation. It was thin, but it was there. "What can I do for you, Tom? If it's about the business—"

"Actually, Pam asked me to come out." He ducked his head. "I didn't much want to, but I didn't feel I could say no. Old times' sake, you know."

"Sure." Tom went back to the days when The Freemantle Company had been nothing but three pickup trucks, a Caterpillar D9, and a lot of big dreams. "So talk to me. I'm not going to bite you."

"She's got herself a lawyer. She's going ahead with this divorce business."

"I never thought she wouldn't." It was the truth. I still didn't remember choking her, but I remembered the look in her eyes when she told me I had. And there was this: once Pam started down a road, she rarely turned around.

"She wants to know if you're going to be using Bozie."

I had to smile at that. William Bozeman III was a dapper, manicured, bow-tie-wearing sixty-five, wheeldog of the Minneapolis law-firm my company used, and if he knew Tom and I had been calling him Bozie for the last twenty years, he would probably have suffered an embolism.

"I hadn't thought about it. What's the deal, Tom? What exactly does she want?"

He drank off half his beer, then put the glass on a bookshelf beside my half-assed sketch. His cheeks had flushed a dull brick red. "She said she hopes it doesn't have to be mean. She said, 'I don't want to be rich, and I don't want a fight. I just want him to be fair to me and the girls, the way he always was, will you tell him that?' So I am." He shrugged.

I got up, went to the big window between the living room and the porch, and looked out at the lake. Soon I would be able to go out into my very own "Florida room," whatever that was, and look out at the Gulf of Mexico. I wondered if it would be any better, any different, than looking out at Lake Phalen. I thought I would settle for different, at least to begin with. Different would be a start. When I turned back, Tom

## DUMA KEY

Riley didn't look himself at all. At first I thought he was sick to his stomach, and then I realized he was struggling not to cry.

"Tom, what's the matter?" I asked.

He tried to speak and produced only a watery croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Boss, I can't get used to seeing you this way, with just the one arm. I'm so sorry."

It was artless, unrehearsed, and sweet: a straight shot to the heart. I think there was a moment when we were both close to bawling, like a couple of Sensitive Guys on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

That idea helped me get myself under control again. "I'm sorry, too," I said, "but I'm getting along. Really. Now drink your damn beer before it goes flat."

He laughed and poured the rest of his Grain Belt into the glass.

"I'm going to give you an offer to take back to her," I said. "If she likes it, we can hammer out the details. Do-it-yourself deal. No lawyers needed."

"Are you serious, Eddie?"

"I am. You do a comprehensive accounting so we have a bottom-line figure to work with. We divide the swag into four shares. She takes three—seventy-five per cent—for her and the girls. I take the rest. The divorce itself . . . hey, Minnesota's a no-fault state, after lunch we can go out to Borders and buy *Divorce for Dummies*."

He looked dazed. "Is there such a book?"

"I haven't researched it, but if there isn't, I'll eat your shirts."

"I think the saying's 'eat my shorts.'"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"Never mind. Eddie, that kind of deal is going to trash the estate."

"Ask me if I give a shit. Or a shirt, for that matter. I still care about the company, and the company is fine, intact and being run by people who know what they're doing. As for the estate, all I'm proposing is that we dispense with the ego that usually allows the lawyers to swallow the cream. There's plenty for all of us, if we're reasonable."

He finished his beer, never taking his eyes off me. "Sometimes I wonder if you're the same man I used to work for," he said.

"That man died in his pickup," I said.

## STEPHEN KING

vii

Pam took the deal, and I think she might have taken me again instead of the deal if I'd offered—it was a look that came and went on her face like sunshine through clouds when we had our lunch to discuss the details—but I didn't offer. I had Florida on my mind, that refuge of the newly wed and the nearly dead. And I think in her heart of hearts, even Pam knew it was for the best—knew that the man who had been pulled out of his ruined Dodge Ram with his steel hardhat crushed around his ears like a crumpled pet-food can wasn't the same guy who'd gotten in. The life with Pam and the girls and the construction company was over; there were no other rooms in it to explore. There were, however, doors. The one marked SUICIDE was currently a bad option, as Dr. Kamen had pointed out. That left the one marked DUMA KEY.

One other thing occurred in my other life before I slipped through that door, though. It was what happened to Monica Goldstein's Jack Russell Terrier, Gandalf.

viii

If you've been picturing my convalescent retreat as a lakeside cottage standing in splendid isolation at the end of a lonely dirt road in the north woods, you better think again—we're talking your basic suburbia. Our place by the lake stood at the end of Aster Lane, a paved street running from East Hoyt Avenue to the water. Our closest neighbors were the Goldsteins.

In the middle of October, I finally took Kathi Green's advice and began to walk. These were not the Great Beach Walks I took later, and I came back from even these short outings with my bad hip crying for mercy (and more than once with tears standing in my eyes), but they were steps in the right direction. I was returning from one of these walks when Mrs. Fevereau hit Monica's dog.

I was three-quarters of the way home when the Fevereau woman went

## DUMA KEY

past me in her ridiculous mustard-colored Hummer. As always, she had her cell phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other; as always she was going too fast. I barely noticed, and I certainly didn't see Gandalf dash into the street up ahead, concentrating only on Monica, coming down the other side of the street in Full Girl Scout. I was concentrating on my reconstructed hip. As always near the end of my short strolls, this so-called medical marvel felt packed with roughly ten thousand tiny points of broken glass.

Then tires yowled, and a little girl's scream joined them: "*GANDALF, NO!*"

For a moment I had a clear and unearthly vision of the crane that had almost killed me, the world I'd always lived in suddenly eaten up by a yellow much brighter than Mrs. Fevereau's Hummer, and black letters floating in it, swelling, getting larger: **LINK-BELT**.

Then Gandalf began to scream, too, and the flashback—what Dr. Kamen would have called *a recovered memory*, I suppose—was gone. Until that afternoon in October four years ago, I hadn't known dogs *could* scream.

I broke into a lurching, crabwise run, pounding the sidewalk with my red crutch. I'm sure it would have appeared ludicrous to an onlooker, but no one was paying any attention to me. Monica Goldstein was kneeling in the middle of the street beside her dog, which lay in front of the Hummer's high, boxy grille. Her face was white above her forest-green uniform, from which a sash of badges and medals hung. The end of this sash was soaking in a spreading pool of Gandalf's blood.

Mrs. Fevereau half-jumped and half-fell from the Hummer's ridiculously high driver's seat. Ava Goldstein came running from the front door of the Goldstein house, crying her daughter's name. Mrs. Goldstein's blouse was half-buttoned. Her feet were bare.

"Don't touch him, honey, don't touch him," Mrs. Fevereau said. She was still holding her cigarette and she puffed nervously at it.

Monica paid no attention. She stroked Gandalf's side. The dog screamed again when she did—it *was* a scream—and Monica covered her eyes with the heels of her hands. She began to shake her head. I didn't blame her.

## STEPHEN KING

Mrs. Fevereau reached out for the girl, but changed her mind. She took two steps back, leaned against the high side of her Hummer, and looked up at the sky.

Mrs. Goldstein knelt beside her daughter. "Honey, oh honey please don't."

Gandalf lay in the street, in a pool of his spreading blood, howling. And now I could also remember the sound the crane had made. Not the *meep-meep-meep* it was supposed to make (its backup warning had been broken), but the juddering stutter of its diesel engine and the sound of its treads eating up the earth.

"Get her inside, Ava," I said. "Get her in the house."

Mrs. Goldstein got an arm around her daughter's shoulders and urged her up. "Come on, honey. Come inside."

"Not without *Gandalf!*" Monica was eleven, and mature for her age, but in those moments she had regressed to three. "Not without my *doggy!*" Her sash, the last three inches now sodden with blood, *thwapped* against the side of her skirt and a long line of blood spattered down her calf.

"Monica, go in and call the vet," I told her. "Say Gandalf's been hit by a car. Say he has to come right away. I'll stay with your dog while you do."

Monica looked at me with eyes that were more than grief-stricken, more than shocked. They were crazy. I knew that look well. I'd seen it often in my own mirror. "Do you promise? Big swear? Mother's name?"

"Big swear, mother's name. Go on."

She went with her mother, casting one more look back over her shoulder and uttering one more bereft wail before starting up the steps to her house. I knelt beside Gandalf, holding onto the Hummer's fender and going down as I always did, painfully and listing severely to the left, trying to keep my right knee from bending any more than it absolutely had to. Still, I voiced my own little cry of pain, and I wondered if I'd be able to get up again without help. It might not be forthcoming from Mrs. Fevereau; she walked over to the lefthand side of the street with her legs stiff and wide apart, then bent at the waist as if bowing to royalty, and vomited in the gutter. She held the hand with the cigarette in it off to one side as she did it.

## DUMA KEY

I turned my attention to Gandalf. He had been struck in the hindquarters. His spine was crushed. Blood and shit oozed sluggishly from between his broken rear legs. His eyes turned up to me and in them I saw a horrible expression of hope. His tongue crept out and licked my inner left wrist. His tongue was dry as carpet, and cold. Gandalf was going to die, but maybe not soon enough. Monica would come out again soon, and I didn't want him alive to lick her wrist when she did.

I understood what I had to do. There was no one to see me do it. Monica and her mother were inside. Mrs. Fevereau's back was still turned. If others on this little stub of street had come to their windows (or out on their lawns), the Hummer blocked their view of me sitting beside the dog with my bad right leg awkwardly outstretched. I had a few moments, but only a few, and if I stopped to think about what I was doing, my chance would be lost.

So I took Gandalf's upper body in my arms and without a pause I'm back at the Sutton Avenue site, where The Freemantle Company is getting ready to build a forty-story bank building. I'm in my pickup truck. Reba McEntire's on the radio, singing "Fancy." I suddenly realize the crane's too loud even though I haven't heard any backup beeper and when I look to my right the part of the world that should be in that window is gone. The world on that side has been replaced by yellow. Black letters float there: **LINK-BELT**. They're swelling. I spin the Ram's wheel to the left, all the way to the stop, knowing I'm too late. The scream of crumpling metal starts, drowning out the radio and shrinking the inside of the cab right to left because the crane's invading my space, *stealing* my space, and the pickup is tipping. I'm trying for the driver's-side door, but it's no good. I should have done that right away but it got too late real early. The world in front of me disappears as the windshield turns to frozen milk shot through with a million cracks. Then the building site is back and still turning on an axle as the windshield pops out. Pops out? It *flies* out bent in the middle like a playing-card, and I'm laying on the horn with the points of both elbows, my right arm doing its last job. I can barely hear the horn over the crane's engine. **LINK-BELT** is still moving in, pushing the passenger door, closing the passenger-side footwell, splintering the dashboard in tectonic chunks

## STEPHEN KING

of plastic. The shit from the glove-compartment floats around, the radio goes dead, my lunchbucket is tanging against my clipboard, and here comes **LINK-BELT**. **LINK-BELT** is right on top of me, I could stick out my tongue and lick the fucking hyphen. I start screaming because that's when the pressure starts. The pressure is my right arm first pushing against my side, then spreading, then splitting open. Blood douses my lap like a bucket of hot water and I hear something breaking. Probably my ribs. It sounds like chickenbones under a bootheel.

I held Gandalf against me and thought *Bring the friend, sit in the friend, sit in the fucking PAL, you dump bitch!*

And now I'm sitting in the chum, sitting in the fucking *pal*, it's at home but home doesn't feel like home with all the clocks of Europe ringing inside my cracked head and I can't remember the name of the doll Kamen gave me, all I can remember is boy names: Randall, Russell, Rudolph, River-fucking-Phoenix. I tell her to leave me alone when she comes in with the fruit and the fucking college cheese, I tell her I need five minutes. *I can do this*, I say, because it's the phrase Kamen gave me, it's the out, it's the *meep-meep-meep* that says watch it, Pammy, Edgar's backing up. But instead of leaving she takes the napkin from the tray to wipe the fret off my forehead and while she's doing that I grab her by the throat because in that moment it seems to me it's her fault I can't remember my doll's name, *everything* is her fault, including **LINK-BELT**. I grab her with my good left hand. For a few seconds I want to kill her, and who knows, maybe I try. What I do know is I'd rather remember all the accidents in this round world than the look in her eyes as she struggles in my grip. Then I think *It was RED!* and let her go.

I held Gandalf against my chest as I had once held my infant daughters and thought, *I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.* I felt Gandalf's blood soak through my pants like hot water and thought, *Go on, you sad fuck, get out of Dodge.*

I held Gandalf and thought of how it felt to be crushed alive as the cab of your truck eats the air around you and the breath leaves your body and the blood blows out of your nose and those snapping sounds as con-



## DUMA KEY

sciousness flees, those are the bones breaking inside your own body: your ribs, your arm, your hip, your leg, your cheek, your fucking skull.

I held Monica's dog and thought, in a kind of miserable triumph: *It was RED!*

For a moment I was in a darkness shot with that red; then I opened my eyes. I was clutching Gandalf to my chest with my left arm, and his eyes were staring up at my face—

No, past it. And past the sky.

"Mr. Freemantle?" It was John Hastings, the old guy who lived two houses up from the Goldsteins. In his English tweed cap and sleeveless sweater, he looked ready for a hike on the Scottish moors. Except, that was, for the expression of dismay on his face. "Edgar? You can let him go now. That dog is dead."

"Yes," I said, relaxing my grip on Gandalf. "Would you help me get up?"

"I'm not sure I can," John said. "I'd be more apt to pull us both down."

"Then go in and see if the Goldsteins are okay," I said.

"It is her dog," he said. "I was hoping . . ." He shook his head.

"It's hers," I said. "And I don't want her to come out and see him like this."

"Of course, but—"

"I'll help him," Mrs. Fevereau said. She looked a little better, and she had ditched the cigarette. She reached for my right armpit, then hesitated. "Will that hurt you?"

It would, but far less than staying the way I was, so I told her no. As John went up the Goldsteins' walk, I got a grip on the Hummer's bumper. Together we managed to get me back on my feet.

"I don't suppose you've got anything to cover the dog with?"

"As a matter of fact, there's a rug remnant in the back."

"Good. Great."

She started around to the rear—it would be a long trek, given the Hummer's size—then turned back. "Thank God it died before the little girl got back."

"Yes," I said. "Thank God."

## STEPHEN KING

ix

It wasn't far back to my cottage at the end of the lane, but getting there was a slow chug just the same. By the time I arrived, I had developed the ache in my hand that I thought of as Crutch Fist, and Gandalf's blood was stiffening on my shirt. There was a card tucked in between the screen and the jamb of the front door. I pulled it out. Below a smiling girl giving the Girl Scout salute was this message:

A FRIEND FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD CAME TO SEE YOU  
WITH NEWS OF DELICIOUS GIRL SCOUT COOKIES!  
ALTHOUGH SHE DIDN'T FIND YOU IN TODAY,  
*Monica* WILL CALL AGAIN!  
SEE YOU SOON!

Monica had dotted the *i* in her name with a smiley-face. I crumpled the card up and tossed it into the wastebasket as I limped to the shower. My shirt, jeans, and blood-spotted underwear I tossed into the trash. I never wanted to see them again.

x

My two-year-old Lexus was in the driveway, but I hadn't been behind the wheel of a vehicle since the day of my accident. A kid from the nearby juco ran errands for me three days a week. Kathi Green was also willing to swing by the closest supermarket if I asked her, or take me to Blockbuster before one of our little torture sessions (afterward I was always too wiped out). If you had told me I'd be driving again that fall, I would have laughed. It wasn't my bad leg; the very idea of driving put me in a cold sweat.

But not long after my shower, that's what I was doing: sliding behind the wheel, keying the ignition, and looking over my right shoulder as I backed down the driveway. I had taken four of the little

## DUMA KEY

pink Oxycontin pills instead of the usual two, and was gambling they'd get me to and from the Stop and Shop near the intersection of East Hoyt and Eastshore Drive without freaking out or killing anyone.

I didn't tarry at the supermarket. It wasn't grocery shopping at all in the normal sense, just a quick bombing-run—one stop at the meat-case followed by a limping jaunt through the ten-items-or-less express lane, no coupons, nothing to declare. Still, by the time I got back to Aster Lane I was officially stoned. If a cop had stopped me, I never would have passed a field sobriety test.

None did. I passed the Goldsteins' house, where there were four cars in the driveway, at least half a dozen more parked at the curb, and lights streaming from every window. Monica's mom had called for backup on the chicken-soup hotline, and it looked like plenty of relatives had responded. Good for them. And good for Monica.

Less than a minute later I was turning in to my own driveway. In spite of the medication, my right leg throbbed from switching back and forth between the gas and the brake, and I had a headache—a plain old-fashioned tension headache. My main problem, however, was hunger. It was what had driven me out in the first place. Only hunger was too mild a word for what I was feeling. I was ravenous, and the leftover lasagna in the fridge wouldn't do. There was meat in it, but not enough.

I lurched into the house on my crutch, head swimming from the Oxycontin, got a frypan from the drawer under the stove, and slung it onto one of the burners. I turned the dial to HIGH, barely hearing the *flump* of igniting gas. I was too busy tearing the plastic wrap from a package of ground sirloin. I threw it in the frypan and mashed it flat with the palm of my hand before scrabbling a spatula out of the drawer beside the stove.

Coming back into the house, shucking my clothes and climbing into the shower, I'd been able to mistake the flutters in my stomach for nausea—it seemed like a reasonable explanation. By the time I was rinsing away the soap, though, the flutters had settled into a steady low rumble like the idle of a powerful motor. The drugs had damped it down a little bit, but now it was back, worse than ever. If I'd ever been this hungry in my life, I couldn't remember when.

## STEPHEN KING

I flipped the grotesquely large meat-patty and tried to count to thirty. I figured a thirty-count on high heat would be at least a nod in the direction of what people mean when they say “cooking meat.” If I’d thought to flip on the fan and vent the aroma, I might have made it. As it was, I didn’t even get to twenty. At seventeen I snatched a paper plate, flipped the hamburger onto it, and wolfed the half-raw ground beef while I leaned against the cabinet. About halfway through I saw the red juice seeping out of the red meat and got a momentary but brilliant picture of Gandalf looking up at me while blood and shit oozed from the wrecked remains of his hindquarters, matting the fur on his broken rear legs. My stomach didn’t so much as quiver, just cried impatiently for more food. I was hungry.

Hungry.

## xi

That night I dreamed I was in the bedroom I had shared for so many years with Pam. She was asleep beside me and couldn’t hear the croaking voice coming from somewhere below in the darkened house: “*Newly wed, nearly dead, newly wed, nearly dead.*” It sounded like some mechanical device stuck in a groove. I shook my wife but she just turned over. Turned away from me. Dreams mostly tell the truth, don’t they?

I got up and went downstairs, holding the banister to compensate for my bad leg. And there was something odd about how I was holding that familiar length of polished rail. As I approached the bottom of the staircase, I realized what it was. Fair or not, it’s a rightie’s world—guitars are made for righties, and school desks, and the control panels on American cars. The banister of the house I’d lived in with my family was no exception; it was on the right because, although my company had built the house from my plans, my wife and both our daughters were right-handers, and majority rules.

But still, my hand was trailing down the banister.

*Of course, I thought. Because it’s a dream. Just like this afternoon. You know?*

## DUMA KEY

*Gandalf was no dream*, I thought back, and the voice of the stranger in my house—closer than ever—repeated “*Newly wed, nearly dead*” over and over. Whoever it was, the person was in the living room. I didn’t want to go in there.

*No, Gandalf was no dream*, I thought. Maybe it was my phantom right hand having these thoughts. *The dream was killing him*.

Had he died on his own, then? Was that what the voice was trying to tell me? Because I didn’t think Gandalf had died on his own. I thought he had needed help.

I went into my old living room. I wasn’t conscious of moving my feet; I went in the way you move in dreams, as if it’s really the world moving around you, streaming backward like some extravagant trick of projection. And there, sitting in Pam’s old Boston rocker, was Reba the Anger-Management Doll, now grown to the size of an actual child. Her feet, clad in black Mary Janes, swung back and forth just above the floor at the end of horrible boneless pink legs. Her shallow eyes stared at me. Her lifeless strawberry curls bounced back and forth. Her mouth was smeared with blood, and in my dream I knew it wasn’t human blood or dog’s blood but the stuff that had oozed out of my mostly raw hamburger—the stuff I had licked off the paper plate when the meat was gone.

*The bad frog chased us!* Reba cried. *It has TEEF!*

## xii

That word—*TEEF!*—was still ringing in my head when I sat up with a cold puddle of October moonlight in my lap. I was trying to scream and producing only a series of silent gasps. My heart was thundering. I reached for the bedside lamp and mercifully avoided knocking it on the floor, although once it was on, I saw that I’d pushed the base halfway out over the drop. The clock-radio claimed it was 3:19 AM.

I swung my legs out of bed and reached for the phone. *If you really need me, call me*, Kamen had said. *Any time, day or night*. And if his number had been in the bedroom phone’s memory, I probably would’ve. But as reality re-asserted itself—the cottage by Lake Phalen, not the house

## STEPHEN KING

in Mendota Heights, no croaking voice downstairs—the urge passed.

Reba the Anger-Management Doll in the Boston rocker, and grown to the size of an actual child. Well, why not? I *had* been angry, although at Mrs. Fevereau rather than at poor Gandalf, and I had no idea what toothy frogs had to do with the price of beans in Boston. The real question, it seemed to me, was about Monica's dog. Had I killed Gandalf, or had he just expired?

Or maybe the question was why I'd been so hungry afterward. Maybe that was the question.

So hungry for meat.

"I took him in my arms," I whispered.

*Your arm, you mean, because now one is all you've got. Your good left.*

But my memory was taking him in my *arms*, plural. Channeling my anger

*(it was RED)*

away from that foolish woman with her cigarette and cell phone and somehow back into *myself*, in some kind of crazy closed loop . . . taking him in my arms . . . surely a hallucination, but yes, that was my memory.

Taking him in my *arms*.

Cradling his neck with my left elbow so I could strangle him with my right hand.

Strangle him and put him out of his misery.

I slept shirtless, so it was easy to look at my stump. I only had to turn my head. I could wiggle it, but not much more. I did that a couple of times, and then I looked up at the ceiling. My heartbeat was slowing a little.

"The dog died of his injuries," I said. "And shock. An autopsy would confirm that."

Except no one did autopsies on dogs that died after being crushed to bones and jelly by Hummers driven by careless, distracted women.

I looked at the ceiling and I wished this life was over. This unhappy life that had started out so confidently. I thought I would sleep no more that night, but eventually I did. In the end we always wear out our worries.

That's what Wireman says.