



RESTORATION

GREG F. GIFUNE

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First Edition

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

If it hadn't been for the rain, I would have seen him. Crossing less than a block away, hurrying across slick streets on a rickety old bicycle, probably worrying his mother would be upset that he was late for dinner, he never saw me either. I thought a lot about what must have been going through that kid's head right before the bullet caught him in the neck and sent him spinning, crashing to the pavement in a tangle of metal and flesh. The sickening sounds of

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his head slapping concrete, the bike frame scraping and skidding along the curb. And then, my eyes straining through the curtains of rain, watching the rear tire spin, the chain dangling like a broken limb, the kid, face down in the street, a halo of blood fanning out around him and mixing with water escaping into gutters.

It seemed so quiet right then, as if I'd killed the only other living soul on Earth. Even the din generally associated with the city vanished, leaving me alone in the rain, the 9mm still in my hand, chest heaving, hair plastered to my skull.

A horrifying scream cut the night, echoing through the alleys, and it wasn't until I'd sprinted across the street and crouched next to the boy that I realized the scream was my own.

Sixteen years I gave the depart-

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ment. Sixteen fucking years. Two marriages and three kids later, I was still a beat cop. Just like my old man, and his old man before him. No gold shield detectives or politicians in our family, just stick-swinging flatfoots working the Italian neighborhoods we'd grown up in ourselves.

And in one night, chasing a spike addict who'd ripped off a convenience store, it all ended. The clerk had told me he showed her a piece, so I'd drawn mine and taken off in the direction she said he'd headed. I'd closed the gap quickly, and found a man matching her description crossing one of the parks near the Boston Common. His casual stroll turned into a full run when I shouted to him, and the chase was on.

Blocks later, with still no sign of backup, my lungs burning and eyes tearing, the rain became more violent,

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and as the perp darted onto a side street off of Washington, he stopped and raised his gun. A bit off balance, but convinced the sonofabitch was going to shoot me, I fired.

I missed him, and in seconds a ten-year-old kid named Jamaal Thompson was dead in the street. The spike addict bolted and was never found. Since he never fired a shot and there was no evidence to suggest I'd even encountered him, several political groups in the city assumed I'd mistaken this poor black kid for the perp and shot him by accident.

Amidst allegations of racism, the use of unnecessary deadly force and outright negligence, I was suspended, the situation was investigated, and a few months later I was cleared of any criminal charges and quietly retired at the age of thirty-six.

I found a shit security guard gig at

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a used car lot in West Roxbury a while later, where I spent my nights watching a bunch of cars no one would want anyway for near minimum wage. My days were spent hanging at Sallie's, a bar a block from my apartment in the old neighborhood. But no matter how much vodka I pumped into my veins, the vision of that little kid never left me. The guilt—the fucking unrelenting guilt—never left me, and I replayed that night over and over, falling asleep more often than not reworking endless scenarios that somehow might have made it right.

A year later everything changed.
When I started seeing him again.

Located across from a vacant, garbage-strewn lot, the car dealership was sandwiched between a strip

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mall and a fast food restaurant along a stretch of road less than a mile from the state highway junction. My shift started at ten and wrapped at six in the morning when the owner showed and opened for business.

Except for my occasional rounds of the property, I spent the majority of the shift at a salesman's desk positioned in the front window, which, on a clear night, gave me a perfect view of the entire lot as well as most of the street beyond. It wasn't an armed detail, which was good, because since the shooting I'd packed every gun I owned away in a lockbox I kept in a closet in my apartment. I carried a baton and a handheld company two-way, and passed the time listening to late night talk shows on a portable radio I brought with me, or, if my head was clear enough to concentrate, I'd read a paperback. If shit

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went down, I wasn't there to save the day anyway, just to call it in and wait for the cops to handle it. Goddamn babysitter with a cheap tin badge and a rented uniform is all I was.

The company supervisor only showed for a few minutes twice a week, and always on the same nights, so I started bringing a handful of nips with me. The vodka helped pass the time too, helped me to forget all that had happened and all that my life had become.

But even the booze couldn't rid me of the things that started coming to me that night, because unlike the memories and nightmares, this was different. This was real.

It was nearly three in the morning when I saw him. A heavy fog had blanketed the area, rolling in off the water and making visibility only a few feet at most. The street was quiet,

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I hadn't seen a car pass in more than half an hour, and I was rummaging through my gym bag for a fresh nip when I noticed movement from the corner of my eye.

I stood up, leaned over the desk and peered into the fog, a small lamp on the corner of the desk providing the only interior light. Two powerful beams positioned on the showroom roof cut a path through the fog, illuminating portions of the lot and the rows of shit-boxes. Just beyond the edge of the property was a boy—a boy on a bicycle—just sitting there, small arms folded across his chest; tendrils of slow-moving fog swirling around him, embracing him like gray fingers.

Dropping the nip back into the bag, I moved around the side of the desk and forced myself closer to the window. The boy was looking right

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at me, his face partially masked in night and mist. I told myself it was just some kid out riding his bike in the middle of the night, but even that first time, despite what my mind insisted could not be true, I knew exactly who he was.

And from the look in the boy's dark eyes, he recognized me too.

Hands slick with sweat, knees trembling, I forced myself to the door, eyes still locked on his. I felt cool metal in my hand, heard the click as I disengaged the deadbolt, the sound somehow signaling I had dropped my defenses. And still, the kid sat there, the bike between his legs, arms folded across his narrow chest.

The nightstick gently slapped my thigh, reminding me of its continued presence as I pushed the door open and stepped into the fog. The air was brisk, a bit cooler than it should have

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been, and the fog seemed to dissipate somewhat. A loud and steady thud distracted me, and I casually dropped a hand down to the nightstick. I had taken three more steps into the lot, slowly closing the gap between us, before I realized the sound was my own heart hammering against the walls of my chest.

Too much vodka, I told myself. Too many sleepless nights. Too many nightmares.

"Hey, kid," I heard myself say, my voice anything but forceful, "you all right?"

The boy continued to stare.

"There a problem? What're you doing out here this time of night?"

The slightest trace of what might have been a smile twitched across his lips, and he slowly unfolded his arms, raised a hand and pointed at me. The finger held fast for several seconds

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before curling back, beckoning me.

My gut clenched and my throat constricted, nearly caused me to gag. I broke eye contact long enough to make a quick sweep of the lot. Maybe this was a robbery and the kid was the decoy. But the lot and street beyond was empty, still as a graveyard. My eyes found him again, and I blinked rapidly until they focused.

"It ain't him," I mumbled. "It ain't him."

I continued the mantra under my breath, still clutching the nightstick at my side, my palm slick with sweat and my bowels feeling as if they might let loose at any moment. "You're on private property, son. No loitering."

The kid grabbed the handlebars and spun the bike in the opposite direction. Before he pedaled off, he looked back over his shoulder at me,

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and motioned with his head for me to follow him.

I stood there, a shell of the man I'd once been, and hating myself for it. Without a word, the boy pushed his bike forward and slipped away into the fog, glimpses of him visible through the pockets along the road before he vanished completely around a bend.

I spent the rest of my shift at my desk, watching the lot like a hawk, chain smoking and powering through the nips still left in my bag. By the time dawn began to break over the city, I'd started to relax again, to convince myself all that had happened was no more than an exhausted and tortured mind conjuring demons and specters where none existed. A kid

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on a bike, that's all, not *the* kid, just *a* kid. My imagination had provided the rest.

By seven I was back at my apartment, a two-story I'd called home for more than a year. The first floor had once been rented out to a used bookstore, but they'd closed a few months prior, so I had the building all to myself. The second-floor apartment wasn't anything special, but it was good enough for my needs, basically a studio with a full bath and a functioning kitchenette. Once back in the neighborhood — my neighborhood — a place I'd grown up in, where everyone knew me, and not for all the wrong reasons, I felt a lot more comfortable.

Determined to get some sleep, I stripped down to my boxer shorts and grabbed a fresh bottle of vodka from the cabinet above my stove. I

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stopped near my bed and studied the framed pictures on my nightstand like I did every morning, remembering times when I was a part of something, something with meaning. A family.

My second wife Audry smiled back at me beneath glass. On either side of her stood our kids, Vincent and Nina. Audry had met a mailman not long after she'd left me and subsequently married him. The kids went with her, and I only saw them now on holidays or special occasions, if I was lucky. They'd sided with her. Their mother the saint, their father the sinner, that's how they saw things, and on most days, I couldn't blame them.

I turned my back on what had once been, cracked the bottle and killed nearly half of the fucker in one shot. Sleep. Sleep would make ev-

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everything all right.

I pulled the shade on one window, then moved to the second, which faced the street. Gripping the bottom, I gave a slight tug, raising it slowly and letting the gentle morning rays of sunshine slip into the room.

On the street below, perched on the curb, sat the boy on the bicycle. He was looking up at the apartment, his eyes focused right on me.

Startled, I yanked the shade back down, holding it there and trying to regain control of my breathing. My heart was racing with such force I had chest pains. I slammed my eyes shut and drew several slow, deep breaths. I plunked the vodka bottle on the bureau to my right, my other hand still clutching the shade, and did the best I could to convince myself I was hallucinating. It's finally happened, I told myself, my mind's snapped and

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I'm fucking certifiable. None of this is happening — none of it.

Convinced I had regained control of myself, I gave the shade a tug and raised it again.

Standing on the fire escape, small palms pressed against the thin pane of glass separating us stood the boy, sorrowful eyes boring right through me.

I recoiled and staggered back, a muffled grunt that should have been a scream dying in the base of my throat as I fell back to the floor. Scrambling and crawling, I rolled over and went for the closet. I pulled open the door and in one motion reached for the top shelf, pulling down the lock box and nearly everything else up there along with it.

As various items showered down around me, scattering across the floor, I fumbled with the padlock on

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the box, only to realize the key was on my ring, which I kept in the top drawer of my bureau.

Turning, forcing myself to look at the window again, I gave a defiant scream of both rage and fear, prepared to lunge for the bureau. But the boy was gone.

I struggled back to my feet and approached the window hesitantly, certain something would materialize before me. But nothing did. The fire escape was empty, the street below now crowded with neighborhood folk milling about, going to work, hailing cabs, drinking coffee, checking watches, hurrying to begin their day.

I ran a shaking hand over my face. My boxers were stuck to me, my inner thighs soaked, and a growing puddle of urine was collecting around my bare feet.

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Sinking slowly to the floor like a deflating balloon, the tears quickly transformed from sobs to a violent force that overtook me, choking my entire body like unseen hands throttling a rag doll.

There on the floor, my body twisted into a fetal position, lying in my own filth and tears and sweat, I understood for the first time that which I feared most had come to fruition. I was completely insane.

And then another thought slithered into what was left of my mind.

Maybe I was damned.

My brother Nicky had always been the pride of the family, and even though our parents had died within months of each other a few years before, the feeling of having

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always been their “other” son remained with me. It wasn’t Nicky’s fault; we’d just gone in different directions. I went to the police academy; he went to the seminary. I’d followed in my old man’s footsteps, but nothing topped being a priest—your own flesh and blood hand-selected by God Himself—at least not in a Catholic Italian family. Third generation Americans still practicing the “three P’s” that had been associated with our people since we’d crossed at Ellis Island all those years before: Politics, Police and Priesthood.

After stints in upstate New York and Maryland, Nicky was assigned to Saint Rita’s, the parish in our old neighborhood, where he’d served as pastor for nearly a decade. We weren’t as close as we should have been—as we both would’ve liked—and since the incident and my retirement from

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the force, we rarely saw each other except occasionally in church, or now and then when we happened to pass each other on the street.

But after all that had happened, I knew I had to sit down and talk to someone. Nicky was a priest, and I respected that, but he was still my little brother, and when I looked at him it was hard to see the sanctity of his position. Instead, I saw the same kid I taught to hit a baseball, the same little runt with a runny nose and chocolate ice cream smeared all down the front of him, following me around and trying to be just like me. At least until his calling, then it all changed.

Just the same, he was a priest, a man of God, and someone who had known me his entire life, through thick and thin. If nothing else, I could trust him.

I splashed some water on my

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face, dressed, and walked the four blocks to the rectory, my eyes trained straight ahead for fear I might see the boy on the bicycle again. But the four blocks came and went without incident, and I found Nicky in his office doing some paperwork for an upcoming wedding.

"Mike," he said, eyes peering at me over his half-glasses.

"Hey, Nick."

He sat up quickly, tossed the paperwork aside and pulled his glasses off. "Mike, my God, are — are you all right?"

I moved deeper into the office and closed the door behind me. "I need to talk to you."

Nick slowly rose to his feet, moved out from behind the desk and embraced me. "You don't look so good," he whispered.

I gave a feeble attempt at a hug

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then nearly collapsed into a plastic chair. He sat on the front corner of his desk, an expression of concern and vague disappointment etched across his otherwise handsome face. "You've been drinking again," he said, more statement than question. "You look like shit."

"You shouldn't use that language," I sighed. "You're a priest, for Christ's sake."

"I'm also your brother." He rubbed his eyes and offered a sigh of his own. "What can I do for you, Mike?"

"I need to ask you some questions. Some strange stuff has been going on lately, and...I'm not sure what to think."

Nicky nodded, folded his arms. "All right."

"Do you think...Nicky, do you think there's such a thing as ghosts?"

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He rolled his eyes and moved over to a small coffee maker on a table against the far wall. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Nick, I'm —"

"When's the last time you slept? You can't keep doing this. Drunk this time of day, it's —"

"Listen to me, goddamn it!"

The volume of my voice startled him, and he turned slowly, looked back over his shoulder at me, a Styrofoam cup in each hand. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." I watched him blur through the tears filling my eyes and struggled for control. "I've been... *seeing* things. Things that aren't supposed to be there, that *can't* be there, you understand?"

Nicky filled both cups with coffee and handed me one. "You've got a serious alcohol problem. These things

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happen after a while. Why don't you let me make a few calls, I know some good programs where — "

"It ain't the booze."

"You expect me to believe you're seeing ghosts?"

"You're my little brother. I expect you to believe me period." I sipped the coffee, felt it burn the back of my throat as I swallowed. "I've been seeing the kid."

Nicky stared at me for a moment, then it dawned on him and his expression softened. "The Thompson boy?" He waited until I nodded before speaking again. "You need to go see someone, Mike. You need to get some help."

"When I see him," I said, dismissing his statement, "he wants me to follow him. I...I think he's trying to tell me something."

He took a swig of coffee and

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seemed to think about what I'd said for a moment. "Could these just be dreams? Nightmares you're having?"

Figuring there was no other way I could get an opinion out of him, I played along. "I think they might be. What if they are? Could he be trying to communicate with me?"

"Well," Nicky said, assuming his priest's tone, "I'm certainly not representing the church when I say this, but I personally believe God often speaks to us through dreams."

The coffee was making me sick to my stomach, so I lit a cigarette and used it for an ashtray. The vision of the kid gawking at me through the window with that dead stare flashed across my mind, and I clenched shut my eyes in an attempt to ward it off. "What about the Devil?"

"What about him?"

"Do you believe he does the same

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thing?"

"It's possible, I suppose." Nicky put his cup aside and crouched down next to me, a hand on my knee. "Mike, listen to me. Sometimes God tries to direct us, do you understand? Sometimes, He wants to reach us and to guide us to where we need to be. You have tremendous guilt regarding that whole...incident...but—"

"You think I'm being punished maybe for what I did?"

"If so, only by yourself. It was a terrible tragedy, certainly, but you didn't intentionally shoot that child, Mike. Forgiveness is like love. In order to love others, we have to learn to also love ourselves. Well, forgiveness works on the same idea. Before you can forgive Audry for leaving you, before you can forgive that heroin addict who put you in this position in the first place, you have to

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learn to forgive yourself. I can tell you God has already forgiven you, Mike."

"You think that's what God's trying to tell me?"

"Could be." He stood up and moved his hand from my knee to my shoulder. "When you have these dreams, and the boy asks you to follow him, what do you do?"

"Nothing, I—"

"Maybe you ought to try following him and see where he leads you." Nicky smiled. "After all, it's only a dream. It can't hurt you, Mike, but maybe it can shed some light on things for you. You need to look within is what I'm trying to tell you, and maybe these dreams will give you that opportunity. You've allowed this to destroy your entire life, your marriage—everything—don't you think it's time you stopped killing yourself

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over it and took a long hard look at things?"

I dropped my cigarette into the coffee and it died with a quick hiss. "Thanks, Nicky."

"Just remember, Mike. Forgiveness, that's the key." He walked me to the door, an arm draped loosely over my shoulder. "You sure you're all right?"

I knew now what I had to do. "Yeah," I said. "I'm fine, I...I just needed to talk is all."

"Any time. I'm always here for you, okay?"

"Okay, Nick."

He gave me another hug, then looked me in the eye. "I'll pray for you. You try it, too. Ask God to give you wisdom, direction, and He will. Get some rest, and if you think you might want to talk with a...you know, a professional, let me know, I know

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several good people."

"I'll see you around, kid." I opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"And Mike?"

I looked back at him.

"Lay off the bottle for a while, you hear me?"

"Yeah," I said, forcing a smile. "I hear you."

And as I left the rectory, I wondered who else was listening.

The idea of sitting alone in my apartment was less than appealing, so I stopped at Sallie's, had a couple drinks then forced myself to go home. If the kid showed again, I was determined to follow him.

I choked down a sandwich, sat in my recliner, and waited. Dusk was

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settling over the city, and the neighborhood was quiet. Half an hour later nothing had happened, and I began to wonder if Nicky was right. Maybe the booze was to blame; maybe the whole thing had been a bad dream. I switched on my radio and settled deeper into the recliner, figuring I'd ride the night out.

"Okay, open lines tonight," the host said. "Let's go to line one, and Jaamal. What's on your mind, Jaamal?"

I sat forward, staring at the radio.

"I know where he is," said a small voice, a boy's voice.

"You hear that, Mike?" the host said. "He knows where he is."

Lurching forward, I switched off the radio, my heart pounding. My eyes shifted to the window. Nothing. I swallowed so hard it was audible, and reached for the knob with a trem-

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bling hand. Static.

I pushed myself out of the chair, grabbed my key ring from the bureau, then staggered to the closet. The lock box held three guns, but my eyes immediately focused on the 9mm. I found a full clip and slammed it home.

The static broke, several stations battling for the position on the dial, voices coming and going interspersed with occasional music. And then, that same tiny voice. *I know where he is.*

I slid the gun into my belt and concealed it with my shirttails. A thin film of sweat had covered every inch of me, and I blinked a bead from my eyes as I approached the radio. I switched it off and looked around, my eyes sweeping the ceiling, the floors, and each corner of the apartment. "Show me."

Minutes later I was on the street,

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walking, roaming, looking for any sign of the kid. I moved through the neighborhood, then left it behind and headed into Chinatown, suddenly feeling as if I knew exactly where I was headed.

Once I'd left the bright lights of Chinatown, I found myself on a corner near the state highway. The neighborhood was desolate, the streets littered mostly with abandoned buildings. I held my ground, lit a cigarette.

And then, on the porch of a burned out two-story tenement, I saw him. Our eyes met and I offered a subtle nod. The kid leaned his bicycle against the front wall, stepped through the archway that had once been the front door, then looked back at me.

I felt myself moving across the street, as if I no longer had complete control over myself. Night had come,

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bringing with it uncertainty mixed with a steady cool breeze.

By the time I'd climbed the rotting steps, the kid had already slipped inside. I forced my hand to the gun, pulled it free, and moved over a pile of rubble and garbage. I was greeted with impenetrable darkness and an array of gut-wrenching smells. I fumbled for my lighter with my free hand, and traced what little light the flickering flame provided. Graffiti covered the walls and the floors were thick with debris. A faint scratching, then scurrying noise I recognized as rats momentarily distracted me, so I swept the flame around. Down a narrow hallway I saw a small glint of light but no sign of the boy.

The lighter had started to burn my fingers, so I shut it off, dropped it back into my pocket and carefully crossed the room, following the light

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at the end of the hallway. It led to another room that was in even worse shape. I stopped in what was left of the doorway, saw a single candle burning on an overturned milk crate, a filthy mattress tossed against one wall, garbage strewn from one corner to the next, and the unmistakable stench of human waste.

I moved into the room. A dark form was sitting on the floor, back against the wall, a dirty syringe, spent book of matches and a blackened spoon scattered across its lap. My eyes shifted; I saw the boy standing in the far corner, sad eyes staring at me.

Sinking deeper into madness, I closed the gap between myself and the man on the floor. His head lolled to the side, eyes glazed as a trickle of drool spilled from his mouth and dangled from his bottom lip. He was

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a bit older than I remembered, a lot closer to death, emaciated and grisly. But it was him. That face had never left me.

"What do you want?" he mumbled, eyes trying desperately to focus.

"Do you know me?" I asked.

"Get the fuck outta here, this is my place."

I reached out with the gun, placed the barrel under his chin and lifted his head. "You ruined my life."

"Shit," the man muttered, his body stiffening as the realization hit him. "I-I—look, man, I—Jesus, Jesus, I—"

I stole a quick glance at the boy, who was still staring at me from the corner of the room. For the first time his stoic face revealed emotion, but it wasn't what I'd expected. His eyes were trying to tell me something.

The man shifted his position, star-

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ting me, and I quickly returned my attention to him, pressing the 9mm harder against his cheek. "Don't you fucking move, you piece of shit."

"O-Okay, man, okay, just—just don't—come on, man, please, please!"

Standing there, my knees shaking but my gun hand disturbingly steady, a stream of disjointed images flashed through my mind's eye. Like a movie running from start to finish—the night I chased him, to the shot striking Jaamal, to Audry and the kids leaving me, the investigation, the accusations, the madness, all the goddamn madness—images blending together, bursting through me like rapid and violent explosions.

"Do you know me?" I asked him again.

"No," he cried.

"You're lying."

"No, man, I—"

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I jammed the barrel at his lips, confusion and fear slowly giving way to rage. "Open wide, motherfucker." His body bucking as he cried, the man complied, and I pushed the gun into his mouth until he gagged, his eyes tearing and bulging. "You killed that kid as much as I did."

The addict's eyes bounced back and forth, straining to see as much of the dimly lit room as he could. They returned to me, puzzlement now accompanying his terror.

I looked in the corner. The boy was still there, his dark eyes brimming with tears.

So much pain, so much horror.

I jammed the 9mm deeper and the man gagged again. "Say my name." He stared at me, glistening orbs pleading, chest heaving with each labored breath. "Michael DeStefano. Fucking say it." He said something

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unintelligible, choking on the barrel. "Jaamal Thompson," I said. "Say it."

He was trying when I pulled the trigger.

The discharge was deafening in such a small room, but it was the blood and bits of skull and brain matter spraying the wall behind him, the floor, and both of us that held my attention. His body slumped and fell as I blinked his blood from my eyes, and wiped a spattering of it from my face with the back of my hand.

I staggered back a bit, the world turning foggy, reality oddly pliant. My hands began to shake as I understood what I'd done, and I turned to the boy, looking for some sign, some answer or recognition that I had done the right thing. But he was gone.

Bile exploded from my gut up into the back of my throat. I vomited down the front of me and struggled

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to remain on my feet. The candle flickered, sending dancing shadows and quick patches of light across the walls.

Written in the man's blood behind his destroyed body was a single word: *No*.

Words, voices, something gnawing at my brain, fighting to break free from the sudden bedlam raging through my mind...Nicky...Nicky.

Just remember, Mike. Forgiveness, that's the key.

My question had been answered. I was damned—I had damned myself—making the wrong decision again. The boy had led me here for noble purposes, healing purposes for us all—and I had used it for revenge, an outlet for my wrath.

"Jaamal?" I called. "Jaamal?"

I was alone with the dead man, and I knew that now. I raised the gun

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to my temple, closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. *Click.*

Crying uncontrollably, I pressed it harder against the side of my head, and with mindless repetition, pulled the trigger again and again.

I stood in the back of the church, watching Nicky as he lit a candle, knelt before the altar and bowed his head in prayer. Beneath the mournful gaze of faces etched in stained glass, the rows of empty pews seemed fitting somehow. I knew I didn't belong there, had no right there, but I needed to see my brother, even in all this pain; I needed to see him one more time. I could see him whenever I wanted to, but I knew now it wouldn't be right. There was no reason to put him through that, and besides, I'd already

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made enough bad decisions. It was time to move on, and, for those of us who still could, to heal.

Nicky's tears, his lips moving in silent, desperate prayer, were too much for me to handle. I glanced down at the last pew where he'd dropped the newspaper just seconds before, and read the headline again.

Former Cop and Homeless Man Found Dead in Apparent Murder/Suicide.

Once outside, standing on the granite steps, I took one last look at the neighborhood. Across the street I saw the boy, sitting atop his bicycle. As in life, we were on different sides of the street. He offered a timid wave, and I returned it, knowing this would be the last time I'd see him as well.

I nodded to those gathered at the bottom of the church steps, those waiting for me with their piercing

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black stares and unholy smiles. Those like me — like what I had become — no longer a helpless voyeur peering into the world behind what others perceived as reality, rather an active participant in it.

Only a phantom at the edge of darkness now, slipping past the shadows in the back of your mind, perhaps beckoning, perhaps not, seeking acknowledgement...forgiveness...restoration, I descended the steps and moved into the welcoming arms of the damned.

The Bleeding Season (Excerpt)

"One of the best writers of his generation" —Roswell Literary Review

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Evil is a state of mind

**THE BLEEDING
SEASON**

CHAPTER 1

I didn't know it then, but it was impossible to survive the darkest corners of his mind without first surviving the darkest corners of my own. I was headed for the same depths of Hell he had descended to, and though we passed through those flames for different reasons, our journeys are forever entwined. His story cannot be told without also telling mine, and maybe that's the way it should be. After all, Goodness is a state of grace.

Evil, is a state of mind.

* * *

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There was a sudden intrusion to the darkness. A brief orange glimmer and the quiet hiss of a lit match faded quickly, leaving behind the scent of sulfur and a single burning ember like a dot on an otherwise murky horizon. I looked back at the silhouette on the bed, the cigarette dangling from her lips; fingers of smoke circling, caressing, and wondered if perhaps this time there was good reason to fear the dark.

Tired and still disoriented, I turned from her and attempted to focus the whirlwind of thoughts blurring my mind...

I guess I thought we'd be friends forever. Even then, it still seemed that way, like we were all joined at the cosmic hip, like somehow our lives existed as extensions or offshoots of one another. Whether we wanted them to or not.

Originally there had been five of us. Tommy was killed early on in high school. We'd hopped off the bus, not paying any attention as we walked into the road. The woman who hit Tommy later claimed she hadn't seen the flashing lights and the stop sign on the side of the bus. One minute we were talking and laughing, the next there was

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a dull thud so unnatural that it didn't register until I saw Tommy fly into the air, suspended in space while the car rushed past, so close I thought for a split-second it had struck me too. And then I staggered back as the body twisted and turned like some gymnast in the throes of demonic possession, the car screeching to a halt in time for Tommy to land against the hood. The braking motion launched him back into midair, a human cannonball soaring soundlessly above the ground, finally cart-wheeling across asphalt, his head striking, neck bending at an impossible angle, body tumbling and flopping about as if boneless, set to the chorus of flesh slapping pavement.

Life support kept his body alive for two days following the incident, but I knew Tommy was dead the moment he came to rest along the side of the road. Those quiet eyes staring blankly at a curiously beautiful sky, a trickle of blood seeping free from somewhere above his blond hairline, the deep crimson just one more contrast painting a face even then frozen in a knowing smirk.

Tommy died the same way he'd lived, like nothing was worth taking too seriously, like maybe you had all the time in the world,

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or maybe, just around the corner, your time was up. Like in the end none of it really mattered anyway. Ironically, there had always been something undeniably spiritual about him, like he'd been told something the rest of us hadn't, and had then been sworn to secrecy.

Years later, even though life moved forward, as it always does, those visions—pictures of his face that day, of a casket draped in white carried to and placed before an altar of polished wood and sparkling gold—never left me.

I never mentioned to anyone that within days of Tommy's death I began to feel his presence all around me. Maybe it was survivor guilt; maybe it was Tommy saying goodbye the only way he could. Maybe it was all in my head. Regardless, Tommy's death served as a milestone in our lives. We went our separate ways for a while, like most people do once high school ends and real life begins. Bernard joined the Marines, Donald went to college, Rick wound up in prison, and I married my high school sweetheart. But within a year Bernard was home from the Marines, having badly injured his knee in an ill-timed drop from a training platform,

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and had a job selling cars. Rick had served his time on an assault and battery conviction; Donald had dropped out of college, and I was already working the same low-paying security guard job I'd held since not long after graduation. What had been a bunch of inseparable high school kids had become a group of young men struggling with the past, the present, and whatever the future had planned. Through good, bad, and the often-indifferent detachment tedium breeds, we remained close.

When I married Toni, Donald was my best man and Bernard and Rick served as ushers. That was the closest the three of them ever got to another wedding. Although Rick lived with one of his girlfriends for a few years, he found it impossible to remain faithful, and the relationship eventually dissolved. The others remained bachelors. Marriage wasn't in the cards for Donald, and Bernard had never had much success with the opposite sex. He'd always been aloof when it came to his social life beyond our group, and although he often spoke of conquests we never actually saw any of them, and tended to write his stories off as just that. He lived at home with his mother until her death, and the bank

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had foreclosed on the property not long after. Bernard became detached and horribly depressed. He moved into the cellar apartment of his cousin's house in New Bedford, about half an hour away, and due to the distance and Bernard's increasingly dejected behavior, we began to see less and less of him.

Back in high school we had all purchased identical silver satin jackets and dubbed ourselves: *The Sultans*, the only gang in Potter's Cove, Massachusetts; an otherwise quiet and unassuming working-class town nestled along the coast south of Boston. It was a joke, really, but it signified that we were one. Friends for life, always there for each other, the same blood brothers we'd become years before as kids, huddled in a tree house in Tommy's backyard, nicking our thumbs and sharing blood like in the B-Westerns.

Nineteen years out of high school I found myself standing in our bedroom holding that old *Sultans* jacket and wondering how we'd all managed to go so wrong.

Frustrated...marking time...

And now, we were only three.

I slipped the jacket back onto its plastic hangar, slid the closet door shut and moved to the window. My hands were trembling.

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I never heard her get out of bed, only felt the sudden warmth of her as she embraced me from behind. Her voice filtered through those whispering in my head; distracted me from memories and the beginnings of a sunrise.

“Why did he do it?” I heard myself ask. “Why didn’t he come to one of us?”

I replayed the moment the phone rang, jarring us from sleep, my startled and angry middle-of-the-night “Hello!” answered by Donald’s voice—cracked, uncertain, vodka-slurred and void of the confidence that often bordered on arrogance in his tone. *Alan, I’m – Christ, I’m sorry to wake you, but – Alan, something terrible has happened.*

No longer worried she might see the tears in my eyes I looked at her and realized she was trying to comfort me, trying to be there for me, doing her best.

Her brown, doe-like eyes blinked, cleared. “You going to be OK?”

I touched her shoulder, so delicate beneath a plaid flannel nightshirt. Reminded of the nightmare Donald’s phone call had interrupted—one horror replaced with another—I drew a deep breath and tried to sort my thoughts. Bernard was dead and the world

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hadn't even noticed. *We* hadn't even noticed.
"I have to meet Donald and Rick in an hour."

She padded silently to the bed, plucked her cigarette from an ashtray on the nightstand and took a final drag before slipping her feet into a pair of slippers shaped like floppy-eared bunny rabbits.

I wanted to turn back to the window. I wanted to watch the sun come up, to wander into the living room, to slip the stereo headphones on and listen to *The Mamas & The Papas* sing about California and dreams and dancing in the streets while a thick and sloppy rain bled from gray skies. I wanted to forget the whole goddamn thing.

"You were having a nightmare," Toni said suddenly, as if she'd just remembered. "I was about to wake you when the phone rang."

I clenched shut my eyes. In those few short and blurred seconds before I'd escaped sleep and answered the phone, I'd already known Bernard was dead.

"He's been dead for five days." I focused on the slush sluicing along the window, rain becoming snow, night becoming day. "He didn't even leave a note."

"Come on," she said, gently taking my

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hand, "I'll make some coffee."

On our way down the hallway, Toni
promised everything would be all right.

She lied.

CHAPTER 2

We stood near the tracks talking; the whistle from an approaching train blaring in the distance as an icy wind blew through the tall grass surrounding us. The snow had again become a light though slushy rain.

Nothing seemed real.

Donald flashed an annoyed look through bloodshot eyes. "Is there some point to being out here?"

"Privacy." Rick gazed through the grass, across the parking lot separating us from the diner, then considered his watch. "Besides,

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they don't open for a couple minutes anyway."

Fumbling through the pockets of his raincoat for cigarettes and a lighter, Donald rolled his eyes and sighed, his breath already converted to smoky plumes wafting about and tangling with ours like warring apparitions. "For Christ's sake, it's freezing out here."

"Don't be such a pussy, Donny." Rick puffed his chest up like a rooster and folded his arms across it. "So what did his cousin say, exactly?"

I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket, shuffled my feet, and exchanged glances with Rick, who seemed unaffected by the weather. Our individuality was more evident at that moment somehow, and I found myself wondering how we had managed to stay so close despite our glaring differences.

Pieces of the whole, Tommy had said back in high school. Our original leader, long dead now, at some point replaced by Rick, the ultimate Alpha Male, always so happy to remind the rest of us how inadequate we were, how we were half the men we'd once been, yet always there to save us, to defend

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us if need be.

Donald struggled to light the cigarette against a mounting breeze. His eyes, saddled with heavy black bags, seemed more sunken than usual; his complexion more pallid, his frame thinner, bordering on emaciated. "I called him about ten o'clock." He finally got the cigarette going. "I'd had a few drinks and I didn't realize it was quite so late. I think I woke his cousin up, he sounded groggy when he answered. Bernard had called me a few times, left messages on my machine, but I hadn't had the chance to get back to him and I wanted to see how he was."

The train interrupted him, rushing past, its whistle deafening. We turned and watched the seemingly endless procession of boxcars until they had snaked off around a bend in the tracks. "Trash train," Rick announced, as if this common knowledge was something only he possessed.

Donald's wiry frame swayed with the wind as he smoothed his thinning hair with long, narrow fingers. "When I asked for Bernard," he continued, "his cousin didn't answer, and I thought for a moment maybe the line had gone dead. But then I could hear him breathing and I knew — I *knew* something

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was wrong. He finally said he was sorry and that Bernard had passed away. Those were the words he used, *passed away*."

"I still can't believe it." Rick shook his head, drawing attention to the blue bandana covering it and the small gold cross dangling from his ear. With his swarthy good looks and athletic, muscular build, he looked younger and better than Donald and I did, and he knew it. He'd stayed in shape playing various sports and lifting weights, still had all his hair, didn't smoke and rarely drank. Vanity, competition, sex with young women—those were Rick's vices, and his job as a bouncer at a local club gave him the opportunity to pursue all three.

"I asked what happened," Donald said flatly, smoking his cigarette with mechanical repetition. "He said he found Bernard Tuesday afternoon."

"Jesus," Rick sighed. "He was dead since then and we didn't even know."

Donald looked away. "When he didn't offer anything more, I asked again what had happened. That's when he said Bernard had hanged himself."

I ignored the vision of a limp body suspended from rafters as it flashed across my

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mind's eye. I considered mentioning the nightmare I'd had, but decided against it.

"It's state law that an autopsy be performed in all cases of unattended death," Donald explained. "Of course, Bernard's death was ruled a suicide, but apparently his cousin didn't have the funds to provide for funeral arrangements and Bernard was broke, so —"

"Why didn't this asshole call one of us?" Rick snapped. "Did you ask him that?"

Donald dropped his cigarette, crushed it beneath the sole of his shoe then hugged himself and shook his head in the negative. "I was in shock, I—I just wanted to get off the phone. I didn't want to hear anymore."

"So where is he?" I asked.

"The state covered the cost of his burial. Absolute minimum, I'm sure. His cousin said they have a section of one of the public cemeteries in the city for this kind of thing, and that's where Bernard was buried. He doesn't even have a headstone."

Rick put hands on hips and assumed an unintentional heroic-like pose that would have been comical under different circumstances. "We'll take care of that down the road. I know a guy. Now, what about his

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things?"

"I don't imagine Bernard had much left." Donald motioned with his chin to the diner. The lights had come on. "Let's get out of the rain."

Normally the diner was hopping first thing in the morning, but since most of the clientele didn't work weekends, Saturdays got off to a slower start. But for two elderly and grizzled regulars already slumped on stools at the counter, swapping stories and sipping coffee, we were alone.

Donald and I slipped into a booth near the back while Rick grabbed a toothpick from a cup on the counter, rolled it into the corner of his mouth and chatted briefly with the waitress. He ambled down the aisle separating the rows of booths and joined us a moment later. "Ordered some coffees," he said, dropping across from me, next to Donald. "I worked last night, haven't been to bed yet, but I'm too wired to sleep now anyway. I say we take a ride to New Bedford and have a talk with Bernard's cousin."

"Look, we don't know this guy at all," I said. "He might not want us around."

"Who gives a shit what he wants?"

Donald scrambled for his cigarettes.

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"What's the point?"

"I want to know what happened."

"For Christ's sake, I just told you what happened."

The waitress interrupted just in time, placed steaming mugs of coffee in front of us and asked if we planned to order breakfast. Through a forced smile I told her the coffee would be sufficient. Once she was out of ear-shot Rick leaned forward and zeroed in on me, forearms on the table between us. "What do you think?"

I warmed my hands on the side of the mug and gazed at the rain. "Bernard's gone, man. Doesn't make a damn bit of difference what we do."

Rick flopped back against the bench. "Fine, you guys do whatever you want. I'm going over there."

"Why?" Donald asked. "For what purpose, exactly?"

"One," Rick snapped, "I want to know where they buried him. Two, I want to know if he has any stuff left. Might be nice to have something of his, right? Like, remember when Tommy died and his mother sent us stuff?"

I did remember. Specifically, an illustra-

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tion Tommy had made in elementary school his mother had given me not long after his death. I still had it tucked neatly away in my desk at home, and though I hadn't looked at it in years, the knowledge that it was there — some palpable piece of him, his history — was somehow comforting. I glanced at Donald, who was twisting a napkin in his hands as if it had done something to offend him. "We *do* need to know where he's buried."

"I don't even know where the house is," Donald said.

Rick threw back some coffee. "I do. We went out for lunch a couple weeks ago. I picked him up out in front."

"Was that the last time you saw him?" I asked. Rick gave a nod and looked away. An uncomfortable silence fell for what seemed an eternity, amplifying the sound of the rain. Flashes of the nightmare slithered through me, summoning a chill that began at the nape of my neck. "I hadn't seen him in about a month," I finally said.

"Me either." Donald threw the napkin aside. "I should've called him back sooner, I—"

"Don't do that to yourself, man." Rick cracked his knuckles with a loud pop; a ner-

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vous habit he'd possessed since childhood. "This ain't our fault. Bernard had some hard times—just like the rest of us—and he made a decision. That's it."

I sipped my coffee. "Why would he do it? Jesus, why would he—"

"Fucking cowardly if you ask me."

Donald glared at him. "No one asked."

"He didn't even have the balls to leave a note."

Donald crushed his cigarette in a small glass ashtray and slid it away with disgust. "Sometimes you are *such* an asshole. Do you think maybe we could mourn for a while before you start passing your usual lofty judgements? Don't we owe him that much?"

"We were his friends. We're like brothers. He should've come to us if it got that bad. He should've—"

"Did he call you in the two weeks since you saw him last? Did he? He called me. I know he called Alan, did he call you too, Rick? Did he?"

"I never called him back either," I admitted. "I kept meaning to but..."

Rick took a gulp of coffee and returned the mug to the table with a violent slam. "Fuck this. Things got tough and Bernard

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checked out. He took the easy way out, man, that's all I'm saying."

"The easy way," Donald said through a mock chuckle. "Is there such a thing?"

I reached across the table, grabbed Donald's pack of cigarettes and shook one free. I'd quit a few months prior, but now, recognizing a stressful and sorrowful time, the addiction was beckoning, calling to me once again. I rolled the cigarette between my fingers. "If we're going to do this let's get it the hell over with."

"You don't need that." Rick reached across the table, snatched the cigarette and crushed it in his hand. "Took you months to quit, why blow it now?"

Donald's jaw dropped. "Yeah, crush the whole pack, it's not like I have to pay for them or anything."

"Like I give a shit. Those things are killing us." Rick opened his hand, emptied the torn paper and loose tobacco onto the table then scrambled out of the booth. "Come on." He dug a wad of bills from his pocket, peeled off a few singles and tossed them over the mess he'd made. "We'll take my Jeep."

* * *

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Rain drummed the roof, struggled with the squealing cadence of windshield wipers for attention. The interior of Rick's Jeep Cherokee was neurotically immaculate, and since he didn't allow smoking, Donald, who was already fidgeting about in back, leaned forward and poked his head between the bucket seats. "What the hell is he doing in there?"

I squinted through the blurred window. "Looks like he's talking with the attendant."

"Christ, pay for the gas and get on with it." Donald sat back and crossed his legs, jeans squeaking against leather. "Sometimes, Alan, I could strangle the bastard."

"It's just Rick's way. You know he doesn't mean anything by it."

"Well I'm getting tired of *Rick's way*. God forbid he shows any emotion other than happiness or anger. Wouldn't be sufficiently butch, apparently."

I adjusted my position so I could look into the back. "That's Rick, always has been, always will be. He's as torn up over this as we are, he'll just never show it."

"Just like when Tommy died. The sonofabitch never shed a tear," Donald said in an

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almost absent tone. "It doesn't surprise me two of us ended up dead before we hit forty, only which two. I never thought I'd outlive any of you. Makes you wonder if life isn't arbitrary after all."

"Maybe you're just indestructible, you miserable prick."

Our eyes met, and somewhere behind the bloodshot roadmaps and dark circles I caught a glimpse of the past in Donald's expression, one of impish humor and biting exuberance, his trademark in years past, before the booze, before the darkness.

It seemed an inappropriate time for laughter, but we laughed anyway.

It faded quickly; absorbed by the din of a relentless rain.

* * *

The grating voice of a local sportscaster droned from the car stereo. The Bruins were struggling for a playoff spot and had lost the night before. Normally I would have been interested, but I focused instead on the hiss of tires against wet pavement and the fast-approaching cityscape of New Bedford.

"Fucking Bruins," Rick moaned. "You

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ask me, they need to goon it up, drop the gloves and throw some fists. All these fucking do-gooders are ruining the game."

I turned from the window long enough to glance at him and offer a quick nod, hopeful he would take my cue and be quiet before Donald let loose on him.

"It's even changed at the high school level," Rick said. "Shit, when we played we got the job done — and we played like fucking men. Remember the game against —"

"If I give you a dollar," Donald said from the back, "will you stop talking?"

Rick grinned. "You're just jealous because you never played."

"Yes, positively green with envy."

"Sure, make jokes, you know it's true."

"Can we talk about something else?" I said quickly.

Donald scoffed. "How about nothing at all?"

Rick tightened his grip on the wheel and decreased speed as we left the highway and veered along the Downtown New Bedford Exit. "Same thing with football," he said. "I was one of the best players our school ever had, but you always made it out like it was no big deal. Guys like you always do, be-

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cause you got no talent for it."

"Guys like me. Interesting."

"You know what I mean, don't go getting all politically correct on me."

Donald poked his head between the seats. "I'm glad you found such satisfaction in playing your games, Rick, really I am. But you're pushing forty, maybe it's time to focus on something a tad more adult."

"You're just bitter. All that fancy bullshit—books and classical music and all that poof-poof crap—none of it mattered in the long run. You can recite a poem some guy wrote a hundred fucking years ago, and you know all about plays and paintings and all that crap. So what? You ended up ditching college and living in Potter's Cove working a regular job just like the rest of us. At least I got—"

"Both of you just shut the fuck up, all right?"

Donald disappeared into the back and Rick looked at me with genuine surprise. I turned away but heard him mutter something unintelligible, and from the corner of my eye saw him shake his head.

We headed into the south end of the city, one of the rougher areas of New Bedford.

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Even in such weather, the streets seemed unusually empty, the city unnaturally quiet, as if in anticipation of our arrival.

"Nice neighborhood," I mumbled.

"Fucking shit-bin."

"As Melville said, '*Such dreary streets*,'" Donald offered quietly. "Such a historically significant city, such decent, diverse, hard-working people, yet still so dreary in some parts. I wonder what Herman would think of her now."

"Drugs, that's the goddamn problem," Rick said, turning onto a side street. "Drugs are ruining this country, and let me tell you —"

"Is there anything you *don't* have an opinion on?" Donald asked. "The city's been on the rise for quite some time now."

"I got your *rise* right here, swinging." The Jeep slowed and Rick pulled over into the only vacant space, a spot near the top of the block. The narrow street consisted of two-story tenements with tiny fenced-in yards and side driveways. Most were dilapidated and in various stages of disrepair, and even bathed in steady rain, strewn garbage and assorted filth defiantly clogged gutters and stained sidewalks. It seemed darker here; as if night had not yet fully released the

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city like it had the outskirts and beyond, as if the dreary streets Melville had written about in *Moby Dick* could still be conjured more than 150 years later. Rick pointed over my shoulder. "That's it."

The building stood on the corner; the front yard cordoned off by a rusted chain-link fence, the tiny section of grass beyond unkempt, cluttered with toys and other debris. I felt my stomach clench as I noticed a small window along the base of the tenement. Somewhere on the other side of that grimy pane of glass one of my best friends had lived out the final days of his life and eventually killed himself. My eyes shifted to the windows on the first floor. One facing the street was filled with light.

How could anyone continue to live there after what Bernard had done?

I tried to picture him walking this block, moving through the rickety gate and going inside. I tried to picture him alive here, but all I could see, all I could sense, was death.

"Let's go."

Rick's gruff tone snapped me back, and I was out of the Jeep and standing in the rain before I'd even thought about it. Donald, looking nauseous and pale, stepped out just

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as Rick rounded the front of the vehicle and set the alarm with a push of a button on his key chain. We all stood there a moment, watching the building like children staring down the local haunted house.

The next street over emptied into an enormous vacant and weed-infested lot, beyond which loomed one of the more infamous housing projects the city had to offer. I vaguely remembered cruising that project nearly two decades before while still in high school, searching for a quick pot buy before heading off to a party in nearby Westport.

This seemed like another life entirely, and maybe it was.

"OK," I heard Donald say through a lengthy sigh. "Let me do the talking."

With Donald in the lead we moved through the gate and huddled near the front door. I could sense the ocean nearby, its smells and sounds and physical presence always evident, watching and whispering reminders that it was still the pulse of the city, and like an audacious child, it would not be ignored. Despite having lived my entire life within walking distance of the Atlantic Ocean, I was reminded how oddly uncomfortable it made me. Like the living thing

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it is, the sea had always seemed ominous and threatening to me, a malevolent sentry eager to swallow me whole if only given the chance. The idea of drowning, of dying at sea was terrifying, and unlike most residents of southeastern Massachusetts, I was not an avid swimmer, only set foot on a boat if I absolutely had to, and wouldn't eat seafood with a gun to my head. The ocean had always been something I found fascinating but beautiful only in a fatalistic sense—much the way a tornado or a particularly violent storm could be beautiful—that by its very nature and power its magnificence was inherent. But it was also something I wanted to experience only from a comfortable and presumably safe distance. Living here meant that the ocean was always with you—always close—and even when you couldn't see or hear or smell it, you could *feel* it.

Why I was so focused on the ocean at that point I don't know, but death was on my mind, sharing space with the first sensations of fear. Beyond the door, somewhere in the bowels of this slowly decaying building, Bernard had died—*had been dead*—and no matter what was or wasn't said or done, we were too late.

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Donald rapped on the door and the sound brought me back around. When no one answered, Rick gave it a try and seconds later we heard locks disengaging. I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly as the door swung partially open to reveal a tired-looking, slightly overweight woman. Her dark eyes narrowed a bit at the sight of us. From deep within the apartment behind her I heard a child's voice interspersed with sounds of a television. She stared at us questioningly.

"Hi there." Donald forced a smile. "Is Sammy in, by any chance?"

The woman nodded, held up a finger then closed the door.

"The bitch even speak English?" Rick mumbled.

Before Donald could argue with him or I could tell them both to knock it off the door opened a second time, this time fully, and a large man in a tank top and a pair of Dickey's stood before us. With thick and well-muscled arms covered in tattoos, a shock of dark bushy hair and more than a day's growth of beard, he was imposing and seemed anything but pleased with our presence on his steps. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry to bother —"

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"What do you want? I know you?"

From his expression I knew Rick felt challenged and planned to respond. He opened his mouth but Donald spoke before he had the chance. "I'm Donald LaCroix, I spoke with you late last night on the phone."

The man relaxed a bit. "Oh, you Bernard's friend?"

"Yes, we spoke last night."

"Right, right, OK."

Donald motioned to Rick and me. "Rick Brisco and Alan Chance."

He gave a quick nod, a genuine smile, and shook our hands in turn. "Bernard talked about you guys all the time, come on in out of the rain. Sorry, we don't get a whole lot of people coming to the door this time of morning, especially on a Saturday. Never know today, right?"

As he stepped back and let us pass, we all moved into a cramped and dim foyer. An adjacent hallway emptied into a well-lit kitchen near the rear of the building. To our immediate right was a modestly furnished den where two young girls sat in front of a console television eating cereal, and to the left was a closed door I knew without being told led to the basement.

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Sammy closed the door, turned the dead-bolt. "So what can I do for you guys?"

"I apologize for hanging up so abruptly last night," Donald said, "I was just—well—at any rate, we thought we'd stop by and see if there was anything we could do."

"Appreciate that," he said. "I wanted to call one of you guys but I didn't know your numbers or nothing, so I figured you'd get a hold of me eventually. There really ain't nothing left to be done." He looked into the den. His wife had joined the girls there, and all three seemed preoccupied with the TV. "Like I told you last night," he continued, "they buried him across town in one of the plots the state puts aside for people who can't pay. He ain't got no stone or nothing, but if you go to the office the cemetery workers can show you where he's at. I feel bad about it and all, I mean I wish I could've done more but you guys know how it is. I work two jobs, my old lady works; we got two kids, rent; the car. Money only goes so far every month and funerals are expensive."

"No," Donald said, "please don't think you have to explain any of this to us, we understand completely. I'm only sorry we couldn't have helped."

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Sammy folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "To be honest, I figured the military would take care of everything. If a guy's a veteran and dies broke they cover the funeral and burial costs — all of it."

"Bernard was in the Marines for a year before he got hurt," I said.

"That was bullshit."

We all stood there silently, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Bernard lied," he finally said. "They got no record of him. He was never a Marine."

"How could that be?" I looked to the others for some sort of confirmation. "He joined up right after we graduated from high school."

"That's what he told you guys but it never really happened."

"So how'd he hurt his knee?" Rick asked. "He said he lost his balance on a training platform, wrecked his knee and that's why he got the early discharge."

"He went somewhere for a year," I said.

"Well it wasn't the Marines." Sammy shrugged. "It's nuts, I know. I was confused when they told me too. I mean, Bernard always claimed he'd been a Marine, and hey, I don't mean to disrespect the dead or noth-

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ing, but it just wasn't true—that simple. To be honest, we weren't all that close. You guys probably knew him a hell of a lot better than we did. Our family is so small, there ain't many of us left, and I felt bad for Bernard because he didn't really have anybody, no wife or girlfriend or nothing. It was kind of sad the way he always lived at home, you know? And when Aunt Linda died he was never the same. Bernard was a strange guy, kind of secretive, and lots of times I was never sure if he was telling the truth or not. He had problems, you guys know what I mean."

I suddenly wondered if we did.

"When he lost his job things got bad, and by the time the bank took the house he was a mess. Like I say, we weren't never that close, but he was family, and he was being put out on the street, what could I do? He asked if I'd put him up until he got back on his feet, so I let him move into the cellar." His eyes again shifted to the den before returning to us. "If I'd known what he was gonna do I never would've...I mean, what if one of my kids had found him, you know what I'm saying? Christ."

"Well," Donald said, "we just wanted to stop by to see if there was anything we could

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do."

"That's real nice of you guys, but it's over and done with and I just want to move on, you know? The girls," he said softly, "they don't even know he died here. It's bad enough my old lady knows, still freaks her out. Me too, but what can you do?"

"Did Bernard leave anything behind?" Rick asked suddenly.

Sammy looked at him without bothering to mask his suspicion. "How do you mean? He didn't have no money if that's what you're asking. I already told you he was broke."

"Yeah, I heard you," Rick answered. "I didn't mean money, I was just wondering—"

"The only thing was his car, that old Buick he had, and a duffel bag he had his stuff in when he moved in. The car I sold to a guy at work. Didn't get much, it was a piece of shit, but it paid for the suit they buried him in anyway. The duffel bag I went through the day after he died but there wasn't no cash in it. Had all of two bucks in his wallet. I didn't charge him no rent or nothing, but we'd have him up for dinner when he was around, which wasn't that much. Still, he needed money for gas and shit, and toward the end he was totally broke. He hit me up a couple

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times, twenty here, ten there, but I ain't exactly a bank, right? I got bills." Sammy turned back to Donald, the pissing contest with Rick apparently over for the moment. "Why, you guys looking for something?"

"No," Donald said, "we just thought there might be some personal mementos he left behind. None of us have anything of Bernard's and sometimes it's nice to have—"

"I know what you mean." Sammy's eyes shifted between the three of us, lingered on Rick the longest then returned to Donald. "The duffel bag is still downstairs. I been meaning to run it over to the Salvation Army bin but I haven't had the chance. You guys can go through it if you want. Ain't nothing special, some clothes and stuff, that's about it, but if there's any of that shit you want—whatever—you know, you're welcome to it."

Even as he moved to the door I knew he didn't plan to simply go into the basement and retrieve the bag. Something in his eyes, in the way he sauntered to the door and hesitated, the knob in his hand, told me we'd be accompanying him into the cellar.

"Come on," he said, "it's down here."

The door opened and I forced a swallow. Donald glanced at me; he was on the verge of

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a major panic. I looked to Rick. He offered a quick wink and moved to the front of the line, but I could see through his cavalier routine, he was just as uncomfortable—if not more so—than Donald and I were. Yet like he so often did, Rick led the way, stepping through the doorway, old stairs creaking beneath his weight as he disappeared into darkness.

* * *

A musty odor filled my nostrils before I'd reached the bottom. Sammy flipped a switch from somewhere behind me, and the small section of basement Bernard had converted to a living area appeared. There was no fixture, only a single but powerful light bulb at the end of a thick wire dangling directly from the ceiling. Once we reached the bottom of the stairs I realized that the cellar had been divided into two separate areas. Directly in front of us another door stood closed, concealing what was undoubtedly the larger of the two areas.

Sammy was the last one down the stairs, but hesitated at the foot, bent forward and pointed to an old cot against the far cinderblock wall. "Bernard stayed there," he

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said, his voice distorted and unfamiliar as it bounced along the tomb-like cement cell. "We use the rest of the basement for storage."

At the head of the cot was a makeshift nightstand fashioned from a cranberry crate turned on end. The blankets he must have used were folded neatly at the foot, and as my eyes panned across the tiny cellar, I ignored the beams overhead and instead focused on the lone small window I had seen outside. The idea of living in these cramped and dingy quarters for any amount of time was nearly beyond belief, but nothing indicating the remnants of life resided here. It looked and felt and smelled like death, like a dungeon of sorts, a chamber where one might be sent to wither away and die, and that's exactly what Bernard had done. Yet I had no specific sense of him here, no trace of his or anyone else's presence, as if he'd never really been there at all, or perhaps it was this place itself that was void of even the echo of anything alive or vibrant.

Sammy pointed to a canvas bag propped against the wall next to the stairs. "That's his duffel there." He leaned further into the room without leaving the staircase and leveled a finger at a particular rafter perhaps a

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yard from where I was standing. "I found him right there."

Rick crossed the room in two strides and grabbed the duffel. Donald and I stayed where we were; it felt good to have a little elbowroom. We'd been cramped from the moment we'd entered the house, and the claustrophobic feel had only worsened upon descending into the basement.

"He'd already been dead a while when I found him," Sammy added.

"You sure you want to go through that here?" I asked Rick.

"It's OK, I'll be upstairs. Come on up when you're done. Just make sure you shut the light off and lock the door behind you."

He left us, and I wished I could've joined him. There was something final about the way he closed the door behind him, and again, the nightmare I'd had began to play in my mind. I forced it away. "Come on, man," I said to no one in particular, "let's get the hell out of here."

"What was that shit about the Marines?" Rick asked. "How could Bernard lie about being a Marine and us not know it?"

"Let's talk about this later, OK?"

"Don't go getting all spooky now."

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"Bernard died here, man. Right fucking here. I want to leave, this place is creeping me out."

"I know it's freaky, but it's no different than standing in a hospital," he said. "People die in them all the time."

"I hate hospitals."

"My God," Donald whispered as if mesmerized. "What an awful place."

"Hurry the fuck up," I muttered.

Rick defiantly hoisted the duffel onto the cot, pulled it open and emptied the contents. Mostly dirty clothes tumbled free, wrinkled and old, many of them I remembered Bernard wearing at one point or another. I did my best to zero in on the contents of the bag, but noticed Donald gazing apprehensively at the rafters. His eyes brimmed with tears, so I pretended I hadn't seen him.

"Hey," Rick said, crouching over the items, "check this out, Alan."

My legs felt like they'd been filled with lead but I forced myself over to him. He held up an aged photograph that had been taken at my wedding. Rick, Donald, Bernard, and myself, together at the reception, smiling, holding up drinks or beer bottles, broad smiles spread across our faces. We looked so

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young. "I remember when that was taken," I said.

"Me too." Rick resumed rummaging through the pile.

The photograph trembled and I realized my hands were shaking again. "I remember that moment...that exact moment."

"He's got a bunch of them." Rick handed me a small stack and continued his search.

I rifled through them—six in all—four from my wedding and one of Tommy's high school yearbook picture, wallet-size. The sixth was of a woman I didn't recognize. I handed the rest to Donald. "Who is this?"

Rick glanced up and shrugged. "Dunno, some broad he knew I guess. A relative, maybe?"

There was something that told me she wasn't a relative. There was casualness in the woman's posture and facial expression that signaled she might have been more to whoever took the picture. She had a medium complexion, thick auburn hair to her shoulders, and dark eyes. Her lips were curled into a combination smile/smirk, like an inside joke had been cracked just before the picture was snapped. The shot was from the waist up, and she wore a low cut shirt knot-

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ted just above her navel. Something about her seemed overtly sexual. The smile was more than a friendly one, the glint in her eyes telling yet mysterious. The picture had been taken in what appeared to be a kitchenette of sorts; the woman leaned against a counter. The setting was not familiar. I showed the picture to Donald. "You know who she is?"

He took it and studied it a moment, then shook his head in the negative.

Rick found an old Walkman and a handful of cassettes amidst the clothing. "Anybody want these?"

"This is just *too* morbid," Donald sighed.

"Yeah, please, Rick. I'm begging you, man, let's roll." I felt like a buzzard picking through a carcass, gnawing scraps of meat from human bones.

He tossed the items aside and began stuffing everything back into the duffel when a small package fell free. We watched as it bounced soundlessly along the mattress, and as it came to rest, Rick scooped up a shopworn nylon appointment book and planner. After a quick inspection, he realized it was zipped shut, but as he opened it several papers and things fell free. "Jesus, it's stuffed."

"Probably left over from his job," I said.

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Rick smiled and it struck me as obscene to do that here. But I saw that one of the things drawing his attention was a sports card in a plastic holder that had fallen free. He picked it up and looked at it a while. "It's his Bobby Orr rookie," he said. "I'm surprised douche bag upstairs didn't snag it and sell it. He must've missed it."

Rick stuffed the miscellaneous papers back into the planner and zipped it shut, but his eyes remained locked on the card. For the first time there was something in Rick's eyes beyond the usual. "Hey, you guys mind if I keep this?"

Before I could answer Donald dropped a hand on Rick's shoulder and said, "I'm sure Bernard would've wanted you to have it."

Rick held his smile and gave a slow nod.

"Definitely," I agreed. "Now please, let's go, all right?"

Rick stuffed the card in his jacket and Donald hung onto the photographs. It was then that I realized I had nothing, so I grabbed the planner, tucked it under my arm and explained I'd just as soon go through it later.

In a way, leaving that cellar was like saying goodbye to Bernard for the first

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time. Since it was something none of us had been given the opportunity to do except in dreams, we stood quietly at the foot of the stairs, finally able to take it all in, even the rafter he'd been found hanging from. Now that we understood its finality, for the first time it seemed like it was truly over, like Bernard really was dead and gone, and the time for quiet mourning and contemplation, fond memories and moving on had arrived.

In our own ways, we made our peace with that horrible little cellar, then headed back up the stairs. But like the tangible entity it often is, darkness followed.

It was far from finished with us.

CHAPTER 3

Nobody said much on the way back to Potter's Cove, and that was probably best. The rain continued to pour from dark skies while the three of us, together yet apart, retreated into ourselves for the ride. I considered bringing up the lie Bernard had told about being a Marine but there seemed little point, and along with the nightmare, I pushed it away and remembered happier times instead.

Before I knew it, we were back in the diner parking lot.

Rick parked but left the engine running

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and the wipers going. "I gotta get home and get some sleep."

"Me too," Donald said softly.

I believed Rick but knew Donald would first stop at a bar or package store and hide out with a bottle for a while. Had he leveled with me I'd have joined him, but since he didn't I tucked the planner inside my jacket and prepared for the sprint to my car. "I'll call you guys," I said absently.

"Why do you suppose he stayed in the basement?"

Rick glanced at me, then away, just before I looked over the seat at Donald. "What do you mean?"

"Why didn't he stay upstairs?" Donald stared at me as if I knew the answer and had refused to share it with him. "Why would you have your own cousin sleep in that terrible little space when you could just as easily put him up on the couch?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe it was just easier to —"

"Why? Why would you do that?"

"Donald, I don't know."

"I didn't like that fucker," Rick said.

"You don't like anybody," I reminded him.

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He shook his head, the dangle earring dancing as if alive. "Nah, there was something about him, something not right. Almost like the whole thing with Bernard scared him."

"Well shit, finding someone hanging in your basement is frightening stuff," I said.

"I don't mean like that. It was like he was scared having Bernard living there, so he put him down in the cellar, out of the way."

"Why would he be afraid of Bernard? No one was afraid of Bernard."

"What about this business with the Marines?" Donald asked suddenly. "Why would Bernard lie about such a thing? It makes no sense, I can't figure it out."

Neither could I, but I was relatively certain we wouldn't solve it right then and there. I rubbed my eyes, a vague headache had settled behind them. "Listen, we all need some rest."

"Yeah, I haven't slept since yesterday afternoon and I have to work tonight," Rick sighed. "Let's hook up in a couple days and have dinner or something."

"Sounds good." I looked into the back. "You going to be OK, Donald?"

His eyes darkened and I wasn't sure if

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I'd unintentionally struck a nerve or if there was something he wanted to tell me but for whatever reason couldn't. "Of course."

"Drive carefully," Rick said. "Nasty out there."

"See you guys soon." I pushed open the door and darted into the rain.

* * *

A coastal town south of Boston, Potter's Cove had once been a prosperous mill town, but as with the rest of its storied past, the economic affluence the town had once enjoyed was now little more than a vague memory.

Main Street housed an array of inexpensive eateries, independently owned shops and a number of empty storefronts. Several enormous buildings sat boarded up along the northern part of town—reminders of a former status only the elderly could recall with clarity. A clothing manufacturer and a national department store giant employed more than five hundred residents, but Potter's Cove was mostly comprised of working-class folks who had no choice but to seek employment elsewhere.

I drove across town, turned onto the main

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drag and parked behind a local pizza joint. Once out of the car, I hesitated and looked out at the train tracks and water beyond – *the* cove, as it were. I watched a pair of ducks glide along the surface, oblivious to the rain, and was suddenly confronted with the memory of my mother. Before her death several years prior, we'd stood together on that very spot countless times, feeding the ducks and talking quietly about whatever came to mind.

I thought of her often in winter.

I climbed the battered staircase at the rear of the building and slipped into the apartment. The building itself was a two-story zoned for both commercial and residential occupants. One half of the first floor housed the most popular pizza place in town; the other had sat vacant for more than three years. Our apartment constituted the entire second floor, and while it was safe and passably comfortable, we'd lived there for more than a decade. It was to be our "first" apartment. Twelve years later we still hadn't moved into our second, and unless we hit the lottery the idea of ever having an actual house was, at best, a wild fantasy.

The apartment was dark but for a lamp

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on an end table in the den. I put Bernard's planner on the coffee table, shook rainwater from my jacket, hung it in the closet and went looking for Toni.

I found her in the kitchen standing at the sink, staring through the double windows overlooking the fire escape. I wasn't certain she knew I was there, so I moved deeper into the room, my weight causing the floor to creak. Shadows wrestled with the sparse bright patches filtering through the windows, cloaking her profile in alternate bands of light and dark. She still hadn't turned to look at me, but I could tell from her expression that she knew I was there. Her eyes blinked slowly; gazed at the row of clay pots on the fire escape.

"In a few weeks it'll be spring," she said, wiping her hands with a dishrag.

"Can't come fast enough."

"For me either." She draped the folded towel over the faucet. "I'm going to plant some herbs this year. Parsley maybe. It's been so long I can't even remember what it's like to have a yard...an actual garden, but..."

As her voice trailed off into silence I went to the cupboard, grabbed a mug and poured myself some coffee from what was left in the

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pot. "I can't believe you're giving me shit today. I do the best I can, Toni."

She finally turned from the window and leaned back against the sink. "That wasn't a slam." Suddenly she was wide-eyed and innocent. "Not everything is, you know."

I sipped my coffee. Lukewarm piss. "Think I'll take a shower."

"Do you want breakfast?" she asked. "I have to run to the store but we have some eggs."

I glanced at my watch. It was only a little after eleven but seemed much later. "No, I'm all set. I just want to get clean and sit down, go through some of Bernard's things I brought home."

"Everything all right?"

"We've got some questions, but I suppose that's always the case when someone takes their own life." I reached around her and poured the coffee into the sink then put the mug on the counter. She smelled vaguely of coconut and some other soap-induced scent I couldn't quite put my finger on. "You're not surprised he did it, are you?"

She recognized it as more statement than question but responded with a subtle nod anyway. "I'm sorry he did it," she said softly,

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"but not surprised."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes life is harsh. Not everyone's cut out for it."

"You never really liked Bernard much."

"I didn't know him that well."

I studied her eyes. "You're an awful liar."

She left the counter and strolled to the table. "Let's not do this, OK?"

"You knew him for years too."

"And I'm sorry he died, Alan." She snatched her purse from one of the kitchen chairs, slung it over her shoulder and faced me. "But you asked me if I was surprised. No, I'm not. Bernard was a strange guy. He lived at home with his mother until she died, he never had a girlfriend or any sort of relationship I know of with a woman—a man or anything else for that matter. He sold cars for a living without ever seeming to realize he was a walking caricature of a used car salesman, and while he could be sweet and was never anything but nice to me we both know he had a penchant for stretching the truth and being evasive. There was something inherently creepy about him, Alan."

She was right and I could think of nothing to say in his defense.

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"He was also very sad," she continued. "You could see it in his eyes, if you bothered to look for it."

"Right," I said, glaring at her now. "If only I'd bothered." The nightmare had crept back into my mind and I was weakening against its resolve. I'd always had nightmares—even as an adult—but nothing like this, nothing that refused to let go even once I was fully awake. My hands were shaking again and I felt for a moment like I might collapse. I gripped the counter as casually as I could and felt my weight shift against it. Toni stood staring at me with those big brown eyes, the natural curves of her figure concealed beneath a baggy cotton sweat suit.

"You're finding an argument behind every word I say." She moved closer long enough to give me a peck on the cheek. "Take a nice hot shower and try to get some rest. I'll be back in a bit, OK?"

Before I could agree or disagree, go along or scream for help, she was gone.

* * *

I'd washed my face and thrown on jeans and a sweater but hadn't bathed before I left

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to meet Rick and Donald, so the hot water pulsing from the showerhead felt great. Wrapped in curtains of steam, I threw back my head and let the water cascade across my face and shoulders, savoring the quiet time, the peace.

It was short-lived.

The nightmare was back, replaying in my mind, and this time I allowed it to come, lost in the hypnotic warmth and resonance of surging water.

The ticking of that damn clock is driving me insane. It's one of those fancy desk clocks, the kind with a sketch of the double globes on it; you know the type. It's at least ten feet from the bed but in the small room it overpowers everything else, even the faint traces of traffic in the streets below and the occasional sounds trickling in from beyond the confines of my bedroom. A headache has settled behind my eyes and is making me nauseous. That damn ticking only makes it worse, as if the clock is counting off the gongs throbbing through my temples. I move my arm from across my forehead, my eyes focus on the low ceiling overhead and a hint of him at the edge of my peripheral vision. Folding my arms over my chest like a corpse, I draw a deep breath and slide shut my eyes. Returning to the darkness is easier some-

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how. I hear the floor shift as he moves deeper into the room, hesitating just inside the doorway. He is looking at me now – I can feel it – waiting to be acknowledged. My mouth is bone dry and I know sitting up will only make my headache worse, but I do it anyway. With one quick heave I swing my feet around and settle into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. I rub my temples, look at him, then look away. He just stands there staring at me with those sad eyes. He looks...not sick exactly, but...he doesn't look like himself. Pale. He looks pale and pasty, like he hasn't slept in a very long time. I finally ask him what he's doing there. He smiles, and it's the saddest goddamn smile I've ever seen, and says he came to say goodbye, that they allowed him a few minutes to come and say goodbye. It's only Bernard...why am I so frightened? Because he's no longer alive, or because I sense he's not alone? I clear my throat, reach for a small cup of water on the nightstand and take a quick sip. I nod to Bernard and tell him I'm sorry about what happened. I try to explain just how sorry I am but he smiles that sad smile again and holds up a hand like...like he's telling me there's no need for explanations.

I know the others are nearby, and just the thought of them stirs a terror in me the depth of which I have never before experienced. Tangible,

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choking fear, the kind I don't want to explore because I know it is bigger and stronger and deadlier than I can ever be. Like some monster in a box. If I let it out, it's over. I keep talking, babbling now in the hopes that maybe this will quell my terror. Again, Bernard holds up a hand, so this time I stop talking. I notice his hand is dirty, the nails a bit too long and caked with soil. He tells me he came to say goodbye and that he has to go. He kind of sighs and leans against the doorframe, like he might fall over if he doesn't. I just stand there stupidly by the bed, watching him, not sure what to think. Then...they come. They just file into the room from behind him. My palms are sweating and my heart is thudding so hard I can hear it smashing against my chest. This is my bedroom and I don't want them here, I don't know any of them, they – they don't look familiar to me at all. There are four of them; three men and one woman, and they all just walk in like they belong here.

Bernard tells me it's OK but I'm so frightened. They scare me, these...people. They scare me because I know what they are. They never say a word, they just stand there staring at me with their black eyes, and Bernard never explains, but I know, I – I just know what they are and why they're there. Bernard smiles again, but this time his lips crack and crumble like hardened clay,

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leaking blood and saliva and dirt in one hideous string of drool as his eyes turn cold like the others. I hear a scream but it dies quickly, strangled to silence before I realize it's my own.

I turned the shower off and braced my hands against the porcelain, head bowed, body dripping as the drain gurgled and swallowed. My heart was racing but I felt that if I could just lie down for a while I'd sleep for days. As the last of the water and soapsuds vanished down the drain, I forced open my eyes and pulled back the curtain. The mirror was fogged over and sheets of heavy steam filled the bathroom. Rain hammered the lone window, shook the casing.

Through the mist the full-length mirror on the back of the door revealed my reflection. My hair seemed thinner every day. I needed a shave but liked the way my five o'clock shadow looked. It better defined my chin and brought out the light blue in my eyes. I continued to study myself as curls of steam rose gently toward the ceiling. Funny how age sneaks up on you, I thought. Gradually, softly — like any good seduction — it had a hold of you before you even realized it. I wasn't yet forty — was three years away from it, in fact — but felt decidedly older most

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days. Somewhere within the reflection staring back was the man I'd once been, a man who'd never imagined he could be so tired, so worn down. Not at thirty-seven, anyway.

And yet sometimes it seemed like that man was a total stranger, a detached and isolated character in someone else's story; someone I barely recognized.

I stood there dripping, until the mirror fogged completely over, then I stepped from the shower and snatched a towel from the counter. My headache had subsided but my muscles ached. I dried myself then tossed the towel over my shoulder, opened the door and stepped into the cool bedroom air. I rolled onto the bed, stretched out and nestled deeper against my pillow as my eyes slid shut. The nightmare had receded, and darkness took me quickly.

My eyes popped open. My back was tight and my stomach was in mid-growl. Had I fallen asleep? If I had, something had jolted me awake in a less than normal manner. I lay there a moment, listening, eyes staring at the faded ceiling and numerous hairline cracks traversing the plaster.

The weather had grown worse from the sounds. Wind whipped angrily outside,

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rattled the windows. My eyes immediately darted to the source of the sound, and although I recognized the cause it bothered me nonetheless.

Another sound crept in from the den, only this time I wasn't certain wind had been the culprit. I remained perfectly still and strained to listen, but all I heard was the wind and rain. "Hello?"

I wondered if Toni had locked the door on her way out. She usually did, why would this time be any different? Yet something didn't seem right. I didn't *feel* alone. Slowly, I pushed myself up into a sitting position and slid down to the foot of the bed. "Toni?" I called. "Toni, are you home?"

I sat quietly for a few seconds. Although I heard no other noises, the relaxation portion of my day had clearly come and gone. I stood up; reached for the towel I'd brought with me and wrapped it around my waist. The bedroom door was slightly ajar, just enough to reveal a sliver of the den beyond, and as I moved silently across the carpeted floor, I suddenly realized what was wrong.

Due to the weather it was much darker than normal, and Toni had left lights on in the den and kitchen. Lights I didn't re-

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member shutting off before getting into the shower. "Hello?" A chill caused my body to visibly shudder.

And then the phone rang.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, staggered back and scrambled around the end of the bed to the phone on the nightstand. The receiver was in my hand and pressed to my ear before it could ring a second time.

"Alan," a voice on the other end sobbed.
"Alan, I—"

"Donald?"

"Alan, I'm..."

"What's wrong?" I stared at the door.
"Where are you?"

"I'm home," he said, voice cracking.
"I'm sorry, I've been drinking."

"It's OK. Listen, let me call you back in—"

"I wanted to say something today, I wanted to, but—"

"Listen—"

"I couldn't do it, I just— Alan, I'm having nightmares."

I nodded into the phone. "It'll be all right. I've—"

"You've had it too, haven't you?"

Something in his tone caught my atten-

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tion, shifted it from the darkened den to the sound of his voice. "It?"

"The nightmare you can't get out of your mind, that won't leave you alone."

I could hear him crying, sobbing openly, and I knew he was not only drunk but utterly terrified. "I've had *a* nightmare."

"Did Bernard say goodbye to you in it? Were those *things* with him?"

My grip tightened on the phone and my legs trembled so violently I thought I might collapse. "How — How the hell do you know that?"

"I'm scared, Alan. Christ, I'm so fucking scared."

"*How* did you know that?"

"They never said anything but I knew — I *know* — just like you, I know what it was all about. They were taking him to Hell. There's more to this than we know. Why were they taking him to Hell, Alan? Why would they take Bernard to —"

"Answer me, goddamn it! How did you know!"

Donald gagged and coughed. "Because that's the only difference between our nightmares," he said in a near whisper. "In mine, Bernard told me he'd been to see you first."

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* * *

I sped through the streets of town ignoring the black clouds perched overhead, the rain, and a level of darkness generally reserved for the dead of night. My mind raced, my palms were moist with perspiration, and I felt an odd detachment, as if I were more a passive observer of the reality surrounding me than an active participant in it.

Donald's cottage was less than two miles from our apartment and located in a small settlement of mostly summer cabins nestled into a heavily wooded bluff overlooking the largest stretch of beach in town. I turned onto the dirt road and followed it through the forest. In summer, this corner of Potter's Cove was bustling with campers and summer people, the cottages occupied, yards cluttered with lawn furniture and barbecues, people young and old following the dirt paths down to the beach while music played from boom boxes and car radios. But the summer season was still a couple months away, and as the area only housed a handful of year-round residents, most cottages were boarded up and abandoned. A seasonal

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ghost town of sorts, in dismal weather and at this time of year, it seemed a fitting location for recalling the past and exorcising the demons found there.

I pulled up in front of Donald's cottage. His old Volkswagen was parked in a narrow side driveway, and faint light bled through the sheer curtains in the front windows.

The front door was open, so I gave a quick knock and let myself in, stepping directly into the living room. It was modestly furnished and somewhat disheveled, and it hadn't occurred to me until that moment just how long it had been since I'd visited Donald at home. Magazines and paperbacks were strewn about, overflowing ashtrays, crumpled cigarette packs and empty vodka bottles littered most available coffee or end table space, and although the small kitchen at the rear of the cottage was clean, other than for the refrigerator, it was obviously seldom used. The bathroom and bedroom constituted the remaining area. Both were quiet and dark.

A television in the corner was on but muted, which explained the sparse light, and in a recliner on the opposite side of the room Donald had collapsed in a drunken heap, an

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ashtray balanced precariously on his knee, an empty bottle of vodka on the floor just beyond his dangling hand. His other hand still clutched the phone, which had since gone from dial tone to an annoying buzz. I pulled it free and hung it up. His eyelids fluttered a bit, then I noticed the cigarette he'd apparently been smoking when he'd nodded off had burned well into the filter and was still smoldering on the lip of the ashtray. "Christ," I sighed, butting it out, "one of these days you're going to burn this place down with you in it."

His eyes opened, and he struggled to raise his head. "Alan."

"You all right, man?"

Dry, chapped lips parted slowly. "I don't know," he said groggily. "Are you?"

I crouched next to the recliner. "How could we have the same dream?"

His eyes rolled about for a moment, then he blinked rapidly and seemed to focus somewhat. "I never believed in an afterlife, Alan, you know that. I...I never believed in any of it. You did but not me, not me...But...but this—I don't...I don't understand what's happening." He tried to sit up and nearly passed out. He wouldn't be conscious much

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longer. His bottom lip quivered. "I don't even quite know why but I...I'm frightened."

"So am I." I looked at the near-hysteria in his bloodshot eyes and wondered if mine looked the same. "It'll be all right. There's a reasonable explanation, we just have to find it."

"You didn't have to come over, I—I shouldn't have called you like that, I...I'm sorry I—"

"Take it easy, man, it's all right." Past experience with Donald's binges told me he'd only have limited memory of all this anyway.

He struggled to smile, but the alcohol and exhaustion took him, leaving him slumped forward in deep sleep.

I grabbed an old afghan from the back of the couch and gently covered him with it, then went to the phone and dialed our apartment. Toni answered on the second ring.

"It's me."

"Where are you?"

"I had to come over to Donald's for a minute."

"Is everything all right?"

"He had a little too much to drink, just wanted to make sure he was OK."

"Something new." When I offered no

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response, she said, "I thought you'd be here when I got back from the store."

"So did I." An old black and white movie flickering from the TV set distracted me. "I'll be home in a few minutes, all right? Just heading out now."

I quickly tidied up the living room and brought the ashtrays into the kitchen. As I emptied them into the wastebasket, I noticed the stack of pictures Rick had found in Bernard's duffel bag fanned out across the counter. They looked as if they'd been frantically shuffled through several times. The photograph of the woman none of us knew was on top. I don't know why, but I tucked it into my jacket pocket and returned to the living room.

Though Donald was out cold he was breathing normally. Even in alcohol-induced sleep his face bore an emotional torment that never fully left his expression, but he looked about as peaceful as he was likely to get.

Satisfied he'd be all right I quietly headed for the door.

* * *

The aroma of roasting chicken wafted

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about the apartment, reminding me I hadn't eaten since the day before, and that, coupled with a lack of sleep and the events of the day thus far, had left me in a less than jovial mood.

While Toni prepared a salad to go with dinner, I took up position at the kitchen table and explained the situation as best I could. Donald and I had somehow shared a nightmare, and even before we realized we'd had the same dream, it had taunted us both as much while we'd been awake as it had in the throes of sleep. She listened patiently; refraining from comment until I'd finished. For what seemed an eternity, she sliced a cucumber and added it to the bed of lettuce, nibbling her bottom lip throughout, a signal I had come to recognize meant she did in fact have a response but was thinking it through before voicing it. Eventually, she looked over at me, brow knit. "Alan, when Dad died I had that dream about him, remember? And a few days later when I spoke to my mother I found out she'd dreamt about him too."

"This is different," I insisted. "You both had dreams—but you didn't have the *same* dream."

"Honey, neither did you and Donald."

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"I'm telling you—"

"Listen," she said, "in my dream my father came to me, talked with me and told me everything would be all right. The dream Mom had was essentially the same. He came to her, they talked, he promised he was fine and everything was going to be OK. It's the same with you and Donald. You were both close to Bernard, you both dreamed of him in very similar ways, as if he were contacting you. It's not an uncommon occurrence at all. People dream of loved ones after they die all the time, particularly soon after death."

"This isn't the same thing, this—"

"Have you spoken to Rick about it?"

"No, not about this specifically, but I doubt—"

"Maybe the dreams people have—yours included—really are those who have died making contact. Was it really my father who came to me in that dream? I'd like to think so—it's comforting—and I believe in an afterlife, so assuming that's true, why would a visitation through dreams be outside the realm of possibility? It wouldn't." She smiled. "Maybe that was the only way Bernard could say goodbye."

"Fine. Then if that's true why couldn't

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we have had the same dream?"

"Essentially, you did."

"Not *essentially*."

Toni smiled. "Alan, first of all Donald's account is unreliable because of his condition. When someone drinks the way he does you can't—"

"It's not like I told him about my dream and in some drunken stupor he claimed to have had the same one. I never even brought it up. Donald told *me* about the nightmare first—and before I said anything he already knew I'd had the same one."

"OK, then what did he say when he described the nightmare? What were his exact words?"

I stared at her; already aware of the direction in which her questions were headed, and suddenly skeptical of my own certainty. "He mentioned a few particulars that sounded exactly the same as my dream," I said, "but I didn't question him on every little detail."

"Well, there you go." She raised her hands, palms up, then let them fall and slap against the outside of her thighs. "You both had a dream where Bernard came to visit you. In both, he wasn't alone. In both, he had come to say goodbye, and in Donald's he

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said he had gone to see you. Is that the size of it or did I leave something out from what you've told me?"

"No," I sighed, "that's it."

"Just like lots of other people, you had similar dreams. *Similar*, Alan, not identical—and I'm not saying that isn't sometimes a little unsettling in itself—but there's nothing unique or even unusual about it." She returned to the counter to fuss with the salad. "Besides, when you two discussed this Donald was blasted out of his mind. Add to that the fact that you're exhausted and haven't slept or eaten and the two of you are still dealing with the shock and stress and emotional turmoil of the death of someone you loved, and you've got a situation that would almost certainly blur your sense of what's real—or more importantly, *accurate*—and what isn't."

"You're—yeah, I guess you're right. It's just..." I shook my head both in confusion and in the hopes of clearing it a bit. "Neither of us had a good feeling about it. It wasn't like a nice, reassuring dream. This was a nightmare."

"Well if one of your best friends was dead in it, of course it's a nightmare, sweetie."

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"That's not what I mean." I was wringing my hands without even realizing it; my palms had again begun to perspire. "There was a darkness to it, a sense of—I know this sounds silly, but—a sense of *evil* to it. It was like Bernard was going to Hell."

Toni covered the salad with plastic foil and slid it into the refrigerator. "Honey, Bernard committed suicide, and it was a total shock to you guys. What's worse, he didn't even leave a note explaining or maybe shedding some light on why he did it. It's a horrible and hideous and painful thing." She looked at me, compassion in her eyes. "You probably feel some guilt—which is wrong but inevitable—and you have confusion and anger and God knows how many other emotions all boiling to the surface at once. What happened *is* a dark and evil thing, and you're dealing with it, working through it, trying to make sense of it. That's all, Alan—and that's enough—but that's all."

Something similar to a smile twitched across my lips. "Not bad."

"Can't work for a shrink for ten years and not learn a couple things." She grinned, but it left her quickly. "Death is a huge factor in a lot of the cases Gene sees."

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Toni worked as a secretary for a psychiatrist in town with a private practice, and had learned quite a bit about human nature in her tenure there. Unlike my rent-a-cop gig, which I loathed, she had a job she genuinely enjoyed, where she got along with and was respected by her boss. Still, if there had ever been a person who should have continued their education beyond high school, it was Toni. She'd always had tremendous interest in psychology, and though I'd encouraged her to take some courses over the years, she never had. Whatever small bit of extra money we had always went directly into the "house fund," a savings account she'd set up right after our honeymoon. It grew at such an anemic rate we were consistently three or four hundred years away from ever owning a home, but she never closed it out or lost faith. In many ways it reminded me of our marriage, and why despite our failings, she remained with me.

Certainly her physical beauty had lured me originally, and although we were the same age she looked considerably younger than I did and had maintained not only her figure but a good deal of the vibrancy of her teenage years. Still, her visceral advantages

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aside, it was the genuine connection between us that kept our relationship afloat. I knew better than anyone that I had not become the provider she'd expected—that I was trapped in the same lowly security guard job I'd held since right after high school—and that after twelve years of marriage odds were I probably wouldn't ever do anything else. For Toni, that was a realization she had accepted and learned to deal with long before I had, and at the end of the proverbial day, she'd chosen to stay.

It was something neither of us had ever voiced, but we were both somewhat disappointed in each other, in the often-monotonous routine our lives had become and in the robotic patterns we executed day in and day out. But there was comfort here, safety, trust, and there was something to be said for those things. Familiarity and reliability had replaced the passion that weakened after the first few years of marriage, and instead of panting lovers we were steady companions, friends, sound and dependable roommates who now and then made love, as if mistakenly.

"Not everyone can handle death," I heard her say. "Most can't. But it touches us

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all.”

That was true, of course, but I’d come to believe Death had his favorites. In my thirty-seven years, death had not only visited my life far too frequently, it had been there from the very start, as if gleefully lying in wait for the carnage to begin, when my father, a mason, was killed in a construction accident only weeks after I was born. While still in high school, Tommy had been struck by a negligent driver and killed right before my eyes. Toni’s parents had both died while still in their fifties, her father from a sudden heart attack and her mother from the same only a year later. My mother had suffered a series of strokes and died in my arms not long after. And now Bernard had taken Death’s hand and stepped off the edge as well. It all seemed so pointless—*arbitrary*—as Donald had called it, yet I had to believe that somewhere a cogent reason, a plan of sorts *did* exist amidst the mayhem.

“Look, dinner’s not going to be ready for a while yet,” Toni said. “Why don’t you go lay down and get some rest?”

I stood up, took her by the waist and pulled her close. Her arms found my shoulders and she looked up at me with a smile,

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but I could feel the tension in her body rise. I was willing to at least entertain what she'd said as fact—I was exhausted and my judgement probably was fogged—but I still couldn't shake the fear. "I just have a strange feeling about all this."

"You're probably worried about Donald," she said, stroking my neck with warm fingers.

"Well, that too." I held her tight. "I love you."

"I love you, too." After another quick kiss, she removed my hands and flashed a *behave-yourself* smile. "Now go take a nap."

* * *

This time my sleep was dreamless. I barely remembered crawling onto the couch, but that's where I was when Toni woke me more than an hour later. I emerged from the dark gradually, like a diver rising toward the surface in a slow and steady glide through murky water. For the first time in recent memory I slipped away from sleep as if unnoticed, instead of being jolted then torn from its grip. Still, it felt foreign to come up out of sleep without feeling the warmth of

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Toni's body against my own. In those few seconds before I truly understood where I was, I reached out blindly for her but caught only air and a quick glimpse of her as she moved away, back toward the kitchen.

I lay there a moment, eyes again closed. Toni had turned the stereo on and was playing a CD; tranquil piano tunes tinkling softly from nearby speakers. A steady wind and periodic bursts of rain spraying the windows distracted me from the concert, but it was the sudden vision of Bernard—his face gawking at me as if pasted to the inside of my eyelids—that forced me into a sitting position. I drew a slow breath, released it, and pawed at my eyes.

We ate at the kitchen table; small talk interspersed with the occasional clang of silverware against plates, the muted sound of chewing and the seemingly endless downpour drenching the world outside. The meal was delicious, the conversation somewhat guarded. We were both reluctant to pursue the topics we'd discussed earlier, though I'm sure for different reasons. Toni was able to stay removed from it all—and no doubt found it easier that way—while I felt *too* connected, more level-headed than

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before, perhaps, but still unable to evade the fear, despite her solutions and explanations. Something was happening, or was about to happen, or perhaps had already happened, but something *was* going on; there was more to the nightmares and unshakable sensations of dread than Toni was willing to consider or I was able to realize. Of that much, I was certain.

After dinner Toni curled up on the couch with a novel and I went off to the bedroom with Bernard's planner and the photograph of the woman I had taken from Donald's apartment. Sitting on the foot of the bed, I went through the planner, searching the scribbles and notes for anything unusual, anything that might stand out. I found nothing out of the ordinary, and other than the photograph, nothing that would raise even remote suspicion. I slipped the picture inside the planner, zipped it shut and put it on my nightstand.

"Was that Bernard's?"

I saw Toni in the doorway. She'd changed into her bunny slippers and a pair of satin pajamas. The light from a lamp on the nightstand cast her in a subtle yellow glow. "Yeah."

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She looked beyond me to the window.
“Is this rain ever going to stop?”

I’d always loved rain, found it more peaceful than depressing. “I hope not.”

“You’re so weird.” She smiled, revealing great teeth.

“Yeah, but you love me.”

She shrugged. “You’re OK.”

I laughed, and it felt wonderful. Like the nightmares, it was disruptive, but in a positive way. A dull and uninteresting life suddenly interrupted by death, suicide, bad dreams, or nothing more than simple heart-felt laughter, existence seemed so easily jarred, so amazingly fragile. I watched her there in the doorway, beautiful and alive, and wondered if I was losing my mind. “Come here.”

Her smile drifted away. “We’re both tired, Alan.”

My heart sank, as it always did, and I could only hope my expression hadn’t betrayed me. “Awful early to sleep.”

“You need to rest.”

“I need...” My voice faded into oblivion.

Toni moved across the room with a purposeful stride, crossed to the other side of the bed and turned down the blankets. “Come

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on, let's snuggle a while."

It felt nice beneath the covers, our bodies cuddled together, arms and legs and fingers and toes touching; her cheek nestled against me in the curve where neck meets shoulder, her breath a warm and steady pulse on my chest. With the wind and rain raging so near, we lay still, silent and undisturbed in the serene eye of the storm. Like lovers.

Dim, but not wholly dark, the room was still awake too, shadows and phantom lights gliding along its walls and ceiling, writhing ghosts slinking from hiding places, beckoning night.

Toni shifted and let out a soft mewling sound. I slid my hand from her back to her shoulder, then down across her breast. She tensed immediately. "Alan, don't ruin it."

I stroked her hair instead, brushing renegade strands back and away from her forehead, my eyes closed, welcoming memories of the night my mother died.

We'd been in this same bed, in this same room, probably in this same position, until I'd slipped down between her breasts, nuzzling and kissing them, in need of that warmth. But when I took one of her nipples between my lips, Toni pushed me away. "Stop," she'd

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whispered, as if someone might hear. "For God's sake — *now?*" What had never occurred to her, what she'd never understood, was that at that moment, that exact and spontaneous moment, I needed to feel strong and masculine and sexual and alive. For her, making love was somehow inappropriate just hours after the death of my mother. For me, it was an essential expression of enduring love, *our* love, the love that would survive and define and support and protect us both.

Our sex life had not been the same since. Now, more often than not, Toni was disinterested, preferring to snuggle, as if anything more was distasteful, a destroyer of an otherwise wonderful moment. And when we did make love, it was almost always as studied as the other routines we'd come to know so well. Where the sexually charged woman I'd married had gone, I couldn't say. She wasn't talking. And I'd stopped asking long ago.

She sat up a bit, looking back at me with an angelic glow. "Tomorrow morning we'll do something, OK? But tonight let's just —"

I pulled her close, nibbled her neck. As her head fell back against the pillow she slammed shut her eyes, and I knew I'd lost her. Had never really had her, I suppose. I

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kissed her gently, without passion, and felt her body relax.

"When did we become these people?" I asked.

She gazed at me with what could only be devotion, stroked the dark hair in the center of my chest and whispered, "Go to sleep, my love."

And when I did, Bernard was waiting for me.

If you've enjoyed the excerpt of *The Bleeding Season*, purchase the entire novel for only \$2.99 at Amazon (for a limited time only).

The Bleeding Season (Kindle Edition)

About The Author

The son of teachers, Greg F. Gifune was educated in Boston and has lived in various places, including New York City and Peru. His work has been published all over the world, has been translated into several languages, and has garnered attention from Hollywood, and his novels and novellas have been consistently praised by readers and critics internationally. He has been called “one of the finest writers of his gen-

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eration” by both *The Roswell Literary Review* and author Brian Keene, and “Among the finest dark suspense writers of our time” by legendary author Ed Gorman. Greg’s novel *The Bleeding Season* is considered by many to be a classic in the genre. Also an accomplished editor, Greg resides in Massachusetts with his wife Carol, their dogs Dozer and Bella, and a bevy of cats. For more information on Greg and his work visit his official website www.gregfgifune.com or stop by and see him on Facebook.

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