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# **The Haunted House of Memory in the Fiction of Stephen King**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

**University of Glasgow  
Department of English Literature**

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**For**

**Elaine, Ethan, Zac, Alex and Brody**

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## **Declaration**

**I declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. I have consulted all of the references cited. The work has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.**

**Signed**

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**Will Napier**

## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore a set of key issues and themes in the fiction of Stephen King, and then to present, in the form of a creative extract, a demonstration of an imaginative engagement with those same literary preoccupations mapped out in that opening critical section.

This thesis is thus divided into two parts. The first part, ‘Critical Encounters’, explores through an interconnected series of close readings a selection of novels and novellas that circle around questions of suffering and survival. Chapter One, ‘Monsters by Design’, looks closely at *Carrie* (1974), *The Shining* (1977), and *Misery* (1987), among other texts, in order to define King’s human monsters and investigate the episodes of domestic violence that are among his most terrifying scenes. Chapter Two, ‘Retrospection of Abuse’, uses ‘The Body’, a novella in *Different Seasons* (1982), as a core text to examine King’s use of abuse and abusive characters as a means of defining character and assigning motivation for further violent tendencies. Chapter Three, ‘Remorse and Resurrection’, examines the influence of science and religious faith in terms of mourning the loss of loved ones. Chapter Four, ‘The Selfish Apparition’, a detailed engagement with *Bag of Bones* (1998), delves into the meanings behind the appearance of ghostly apparitions and suggests they may be less para-psychological and more psychoanalytical in nature.

The second part, ‘Creative Engagement’, demonstrates the influence King’s writing has had on my own work by providing an extract from a new novel, *Without Warning*, a sequel to my first book, *Summer of the Cicada* (Jonathan Cape, 2005). *Without Warning* is a unique experiment for me, as it has been written not only in the wake of the literary works of King – which have long exerted an influence on me as a writer and as one of his ‘constant readers’ – but in the light of a sustained period of research and reflection on King as a writer. Being in the midst of a critical and creative immersion in King, including his own accounts of his craft as well as interviews and essays by other scholars, has shaped my writing and made me meditate on my craft in a way I had not done before. This thesis then is both a study of aspects of the fiction of one of America’s foremost storytellers, and an example of an emerging writer grappling with the fiction and criticism of a major influence.

# **The Haunted House of Memory in the Fiction of Stephen King**

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## **Preface**

With a corpus as considerable as Stephen King's my initial challenge in researching his fiction was to narrow my focus to points of interest and core texts. As a 'constant reader' – King's term for those who have stayed the course with him through an enormously productive writing career – and as a fiction writer in the genre that King has made his own, it was not an easy challenge to select those texts which have most inspired my own writing and critical thoughts. However, with the recent critical interest in King's fiction, and with horror fiction in general becoming more fashionable and even academically chic, I set out to locate gaps in the study of King's fiction. My reasons for this have been both personal and professional. Find out what makes King's fiction work so well. The hardship came when I found a growing source of reference material focussing on his writing. And so my research shifted once again as I decided not to wait to write my own ideas on his fiction as I searched for gaps in what had already been written. Instead I began to look at the core texts which have inspired my own writing and picked it apart in terms of the elements and themes that matter most to me both as a constant reader and as writer cutting his teeth on similar material.

The research for this book started before my own writing career had taken off. It was originally intended to explore the writings of Stephen King through an interconnected series of close readings. In combining this with research of existing critical analysis I hoped to draw attention to questions of craft rather than dwelling on his status as a celebrated author of genre fiction. As one of

King's constant readers – as well as an aspiring writer - I have been fascinated with the way King can transcend genre and build within his fiction a universe that sees characters pass from one novel to the next, from short story to epic tale.

King mixes the horrific and the humdrum in a way that rakes in readers and dollars by the million, his movies are watched by countless arm-gripping viewers. There is a marked shift in King's fiction, notably seen with the publication of *Misery* (1987), followed by *Gerald's Game* (1992), and *Rose Madder* (1995), where his preoccupations appeared to shift from the supernatural towards a more naturalistic, social and domestic horror. This shift is apparent, but it is arguably also more a matter of emphasis than substance. From the very beginning King has been obsessed by abuse, bullying, and the fallout from childhood trauma and domestic violence. His constant readers recognise these realistic elements as crucial to King's fiction, and key to the supernatural manifestations that have made him such a celebrated author. Still, something happened from *Misery* onwards that can be seen as a turning-point insofar as the highly achieved and admired writer of horror fiction now felt able to pull the skeletons that had rattled in the closet more emphatically out into the glare of moonlight or torchlight.

In the critical encounters that follow, I look at King's use of abuse in his fiction as a means of defining character. As a naturalistic writer, King's characters are created by the world around them, by the natural elements of human violence that King believes is inherent in us all. Whether the abuse occurred in adolescence ('The Body', *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game*, *The Shining*) or in adulthood (*Misery*, *Rose Madder*) King's characters are affected and altered by

the domestic monsters of a very real world. For this reason the first two chapters in this book look at abuse and the effects of the abuse in both child and adult characters.

The two chapters that follow look at another of King's recurring themes, the catastrophic effects of loss, whether of innocence, time (aging), faith, trust, sanity, or loved ones (through death). Before *Pet Semetary* (1983) King had not focused on the aftermath of loss, choosing to lead up to the death of characters and shy away from the suffering which followed. In *Pet Semetary*, however King focuses on the suffering of those who survive. He would later revisit the theme with *Bag of Bones* (1998), and I chose to research the two as contrasting representations of the theme of suffering. While *Pet Semetary* deals with the impact of a child's death in terms of his parents' very different faiths, *Bag of Bones* bears witness to the suffering of a husband who cannot accept his wife's death and the secrets she kept from him in life. These two themes may be backdrops to the horrors present within each novel, but without these natural elements the supernatural dimension would lack the resonance and the emotional weight that the novels as a whole possess.

Following these critical essays I have included a large section of my second novel entitled *Without Warning*. My research for the critical chapters has taken place as I have written chapters for this novel and the influence is not hidden in the chapters of my own writing. The novel continues the story of Joe Pullman, the protagonist of my first novel *Summer of the Cicada* (2005), yet while my first novel dealt with the notion of violence inspired by child abuse my second sees a young man dealing with loss. Still, readers of *Summer of the Cicada* will remember Joe Pullman as a man damaged by the abuse which he

suffered at the hands of his father. This abuse makes Joe a dangerous individual. *Without Warning* sees Joe trying to come to terms with his wife's disappearance and the suspicions of a small town slowly getting to grips with his violent past. The novel was originally intended to be an exploration of small town suspicions, but the focus on loss and suffering – the backdraft of bereavement and brutality - came as a direct response my research into King's fiction.

## **Chapter One**

### **Monsters By Design: The Reality of King's Creations**

## **Monsters By Design:**

### **The Reality of King's Creations**

While King's fiction may be most readily associated with the monsters that appear in his movies as rubber imitations of childhood nightmares, it is the domestic terrors that the characters of his fiction face that often overshadow the supernatural element in the texts. The everyday and the unremarkable events that occur in his fiction offer readers a sense of reality in relation to the terrors of the unknown. Beyond the labels and brand names which he uses to set the stories in the familiar world of the here-and-now, nestled between the stories and the films of popular culture, are the stories of everyday people. The situations they become involved in allow the reader to relate to the horrors, creating a sense of plausibility in even the most unlikely of apparitions.

According to Tony Magistrale, King deploys aspects of the everyday in order to lull the reader into a false sense of security. These elements of popular culture make the horror all the more convincing:

King's landscapes are littered with the well-known brand names of corporate America for several reasons. First, he seeks to reproduce a detailed and highly visual sense of the real world – in order to subvert it. If the reader can be convinced that King's characters are actually functioning in our world, that they ingest the same foods, drive upon the same interstate highways, listen to the same rock lyrics, then the horror they experience becomes ours; and certainly that horror must

become all the more plausible and frightening as a result of this personal identification. (*Landscape of Fear*, 54)

Living in this branded America, King's flawed characters suffer from domestic failures, disease and neurosis. A ghost in a hotel is frightening in itself, but when you throw in alcoholism, a troubled marriage, and a history of violence, isolating characters during the coldest, most inhospitable season, the story becomes more claustrophobic and the terror more palpable. This framing of the supernatural within a natural world is a technique present in such classic gothic novels as *The Stepford Wives*, *Ghost Story* and *Frankenstein*. If not for the recognisable settings and characters these stories of monsters (and the monsters who create them) would likely fail to rattle the reader. With nothing for the reader to grasp as a signifier of the world in which they live the writer would likely fail to rein in the reader to the fictional world.

Catherine Belsey writes: "Even in fantasy events, however improbable in themselves, are related to each other in familiar ways. The plausibility of the individual signifiers is far less important to the reading process than the familiarity of the connections between the signifiers. It is the set of relationships between characters or events, or between characters and events, which makes fantasy plausible" (*Critical Practice*, 52). This plausibility in King's fiction not only sets the stage but also becomes, in many of his novels and short stories, the core element of the horrors. The domestic monsters and closed-door abusers are my focus in this chapter as I examine the reality – or realistic qualities – behind the most terrifying of King's characters. The four novellas comprising the *Different Seasons* collection, barring the inclusion of 'Breathing Methods',

cannot readily be classified as ‘horror’, though there are elements of horror – domestic and historical – in them.

Even when King deals with the supernatural or horror genre he is taking his inspiration from the very real and very frightening world. According to King, *The Stand* was based on fact, on his own sense of what could have happened if the wind had been blowing in another direction following a chemical waste spill in Utah that he heard about in the news. He said: “This stuff got loose that was like Agent Orange, except more deadly, and it killed a bunch of sheep because the wind happened to be blowing away from Salt Lake City and into the barrens. But on another day, if the wind had come from a different direction, it very well could have blown over Salt Lake City and things might have been entirely different” (*Bare Bones*, 23).

While *The Stand* is an example of King’s active imagination at its best it is also an apt example to consider when examining how horror fiction is based largely on the extremes of what we fear as a society – what we find most repulsive about character and situation. According to Linda J. Holland-Toll: “An apt metaphor for horror fiction is that of the warped but true carnival mirror, the mirror that sees the soul and reveals all the dis/eases, simultaneously forcing us to recognize all the hidden monster-seeds within ourselves and within our society” (“Bakhtin’s Carnival Reversed”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 132).

While the novellas in *Different Seasons* may be largely devoid of supernatural creatures, employing instead monsters created from recognisable and seemingly real human characters, the collection remains true to the American Gothic tradition, a form that holds characters captive in physical and

psychological isolation. Theresa Goddu points out that American Gothic takes what had once been an external horror and turns it inward:

Because of America's seeming lack of history and its Puritan heritage, the American gothic, it has been argued, takes a turn inward, away from society and toward the psyche and the hidden blackness of the American soul. (*Gothic America*, 9)

Yet King's writing (regardless of horror, Gothic or mainstream) has served him well. At the start of his career his editor had warned him that a second horror novel would label him as a one-genre – and possibly one-dimensional – writer. This advice has turned out to be accurate and lasting. While King was projected to fame through his first three novels, all published within the horror genre, they are all heavily weighted with the reality of a cruel world – our own world. Even as his characters find themselves faced with vampires and haunted houses it is the immediate danger they face in the form of abusive humans, often family, that makes it even more difficult for them to fight the odds.

The supernatural elements of “Breathing Methods” are not experienced by the characters within the tale, but instead are relayed to the characters in a traditional storytelling manner. It is the characters within the tale that become a first audience, with the reader being handed down the tale becoming the second audience. This structure creates a sense of timeliness, adding a layer to the historical feel of the story which mirrors the gentleman's clubs seen in *Turn of the Screw*, Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* and King's own “The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands”. This second-hand audience draws the reader in as a

participant rather than passer-by, an actor rather than an onlooker, adding a sense of connectedness within the fiction that is typical in King's work. It is a technique that at its best creates an intimate bond between the writer and the reader, though it can also smack of cosiness, coercion and complicity.

The three remaining novellas in the collection highlight King's ability to create the same sense of tension in his mainstream works as he creates in his supernatural tales. What we find in these stories is domestic horror, life-like ghouls, rather than supernatural creatures. A similar domestic horror is found in novels such as *Misery* (1987), *Dolores Clairborne* (1992), *Gerald's Game* (1992), and *Rose Madder* (1995). King's decision to depart from traditional horror does not take him entirely away from the conventions that brought him to prominence when he wrote of psychic powers sparked off by personal problems or psychological crises (*Carrie*, *The Shining*), vampires (*Salem's Lot*, "Jerusalem's Lot"), and apocalyptic flu epidemics (*The Stand*, "Night Surf"). His monsters have over time taken on a new more human form, one more familiar and more identifiable to his readers. Perhaps the Constant Reader has always been aware of this realistic dimension, while the stranger to King's fiction will expect the unexpected. The escape for his readers becomes as insular an act as the process of reading the story, as now they are no longer acting as escapists to powers and creatures of the world we do not live in, but rather watching events unfold that could easily be occurring in their own neighbourhoods.

According to Gina Wisker, "King's world highlights the paradox of the safety of the home, the threat lurking behind Middle America's values and lifestyles, so audiences can relate to his situations, characters, and events" (*Horror Fiction*, 119). As I discuss in the next chapter, King uses the recollection

of abuse at the hands of family members as a means of developing a density to his characters, often showing them to be suffering from the after-effects of trauma and thus weakening them, making them more sympathetic and susceptible to the horrors they will soon face. This is an effective means of creating tension within the text as it works on two levels. First, there is a deepening of characterisation, as the reader becomes more aware of the history of the characters which creates empathy and intimacy between character and reader. With the close connection comes a desire for the character to survive. The second level in which this technique works is that it shows to a degree that the character has the capacity to survive. Jack Torrance, for instance, was able to survive his abusive father on a physical level, yet we experience his emotional scars which, as I argue later in this chapter, are crucial to understanding his motivations in the latter part of *The Shining*.

### ***Carrie Doesn't Live Here Any More***

I speak about recollections of abuse often in this thesis as it has a strong presence in my own writing, and King is one of the writers who put my preoccupation with the subject firmly in place. It is the abuser that King uses when setting characters up to fall prey to the supernatural creatures and it is the abuser King draws on when creating his new breed of domestic monster, but the victim of abuse and trauma, having been 'monstered', can become monstrous. While these manifestations of monstrosity may be new material – it could be argued that a definitive shift took place in his fiction following the publication of *Misery* in 1987 – for his novels as central characters they have been involved in his tales

since the publication of *Carrie* in 1974 and have long been a part of Gothic literature.

On-screen violence and the mediatisation of monstrosity have changed the way society interprets what is frightening and has in turn changed the face of monsters occupying the page. Marina Warner speaks about the changes that have taken place in the genre which has seen mythical creatures morph into more human form, culminating in what is today a very real and very terrifying addition to the genre, that of the familiar (often family) monstrosity:

But above all other current manifestations of the bogeyman, the threat posed by serial killers and paedophiles today can put the phantasmagorias of the past into perspective. It is impossible to judge how deep the danger is: the cases of known child molesters and the reported high incidence of assaults on children, including infants, have inspired a climate of suspicion that now keeps children behind doors more firmly than at any time in history (*No Go the Bogeyman*, 384).

Enter Carrie White, an extreme example of the results of such severe isolation and insulation. In a very naturalistic process, typical of King's fiction, it is the fanatical mother (Margaret White) who shields her daughter from the outside world to such an extent that Carrie is unable to acquire the appropriate social skills to survive a high school setting. It is this environment that causes Carrie to break out of her shell and, when no longer safe, become a victim of cruel individuals. Away from the safety of her home Carrie is vulnerable to pranksters

and humiliation, and it is her inability to cope with the situation which allows her uncontrolled and extraordinary powers to destroy those responsible, including her mother. According to Douglas Winter, these extraordinary powers, and Carrie White's increasing willingness to use them, are a result of her surroundings:

Carrie White is the first of many of King's protagonists who reflect his naturalistic stance – she starts nothing of her own free will. The fault – the evil – is that of nature itself, and of the artificial constructs of nature (here, society and religion) that civilization has erected. (*Art of Darkness*, 37)

While the domestic terrors Carrie White faces are apparent to the reader, it is important to take into consideration the naivety of Carrie within the novel, and in doing so fathom her apparent misconception of the familial norm, though it is less a misconception than her own personal experience of what is normal. The religious fanaticism of her mother is all she has known and her sheltered upbringing has restricted her social development. What she becomes in turn is a naïve and reclusive teen and an easy target for bullies. This bullying is the result of uncertainty about what she will become, making the novel an example of the sub-genre of body horror:

*Carrie* (1974) is an example of body horror in which the disturbing power of an adolescent girl is figured as telekinetic energy. Fear and disgust of female bodily functions and

particularly the alignment of menstruation and divergence emerge in Carrie's powerful ability to control physical situations. (*Horror Fiction*, 119)

As the first instance of bullying takes place in the early shower scene we gain a harsh view of what Carrie White faces at Bates High School. The name of the school alone may create a sense of watchfulness in the more involved horror fan. Like the Bates Motel, there are eyes watching in the showers and when the blood begins to flow the beasts are realised. Our earliest indication of what kind of person Carrie is suggests she is helpless and desperate and by suggestion of her name (Carrie and not Carietta) she holds a sense of purity, a childish quality that begs for nurturing. Carrie's surname evokes innocence, suggesting that Carrie is 'white' and unblemished, but this changes with the onset of her first period - which happens in an untimely moment in the girls' showers.

Not only do these naturalistic occurrences - including the first instance of bullying in the shower scene - change how we look at Carrie, altering the perception of her from being innocent and childlike to being a victimised young woman, they also build upon one another, setting upon Carrie a growing stigma which her fellow students will feed upon and which will equally drive her mother to further extremes to 'save' her.

Douglas Keesey suggests that the onset of Carrie's menstruation in a public place is ultimately responsible for the explosive effects of her powers later in the novel:

Though never explained, it is clearly no mere coincidence that the awakening of Carrie's psychic abilities is tied to the onset of her first period: Menstruation and telekinesis are both referred to by an uncomprehending society as "the curse," and it is patriarchal society's very attempt to repress the power of female sexuality, to keep the blood hidden, that causes the defiant eruption of Carrie's paranormal powers. ("Patriarchal Mediations of *Carrie*", *Imagining the Worst*, 32)

If the bullying Carrie faces at her school is not enough she returns home to face a fanatical mother. Margaret White's fear of society corrupting her daughter is realised as Carrie begins to find acceptance of a sort in high school when Tommy Ross asks her to accompany him to the prom. It is in Carrie's rebellion against Margaret's wish that she not attend the dance, that the full extent of the beast within Margaret is released.

This is an interesting example of King's use of human/monster as Margaret is the first monster to appear in the pages of his fiction. While Carrie's abilities become apparent later in the novel, it is the constrictive and oppressive nature of her mother which first unsettles the reader. Empathy is with Carrie, and as her telekinesis develops so does the hope that she will be able to use her powers to protect herself. Female as victim continues the Gothic theme, yet King introduces a modern she-beast as well as a female slayer, albeit reluctant and morally uncertain.

The first glimpse of the monster is seen when Carrie has an exchange with Stella Horan. By setting up the scene King's narrative changes to the

perspective of Stella who describes Carrie as “pretty with pink cheeks and bright brown eyes”. She goes on to say: “Sweet is the only word that fits. Sweet and bright and innocent” (334). What follows is a dialogue that continues to demonstrate how little Carrie understands the workings of society, acceptance, and most importantly the changes her body is going through.

“What are those?”

‘I looked down and saw that my top had slipped while I was asleep. So I fixed it and said, “Those are my breasts, Carrie.”

‘Then she said – very solemnly: “I wish I had some.”

‘I said: “You have to wait, Carrie. You won’t start to get them for another... oh, eight or nine years.”

“No, I won’t,” she said. “Momma says good girls don’t.”

She looked strange for a little girl, half sad and half self-righteous. (334)

Carrie goes on to refer to Stella’s breasts as “dirtypillows”. This word is put in place to bring an almost comic moment to an otherwise disturbing scene; its use is the equivalent of the classic cat in the cupboard horror movie moment. While the viewer is at first shocked at the screaming, rushing cat they soon find levity in the ridiculousness of being frightened of the domestic animal. Who’s afraid of a small girl who calls breasts dirtypillows? At this point in the novel no one is frightened of Carrie. Both the girl and her amusing vocabulary are distractions for the building of the monster within

Margaret White. More seriously, though, like Kathy Bates in *Misery*, Carrie associates sex with dirt. Carrie's mother is instrumental in imbuing her with this sense of bodily disgust:

‘And that was when Margaret White came out of her back door and saw us.

‘For a minute she just goggled as if she couldn't believe it. Then she opened her mouth and whooped. That's the ugliest sound I've ever heard in my life. It was like the noise a bull alligator would make in a swamp. She just *whooped*. Rage. Complete, insane rage.’ (334)

This creation of the monster in *Carrie* is a short section of the novel, but one which shows Margaret as denying her daughter the opportunity to make the same mistakes she has made. While this sheltering of a child can be a noble quality for some parents who have experienced a troubled past, in the case of Margaret it is one which denies Carrie the most basic social interactions. In her extreme efforts to shelter her daughter Margaret turns the maternal into the malignant.

What is troubling about the domestic monster of Margaret White is that we can see her as being frightening but familiar. According to Marina Warner:

Bogeys make present what we dread, and these fantasies include what we know we are capable of perpetrating ourselves. Paedophiles are our late millennial ogres, and they bring the bogeyman very much closer to home than aliens or medieval

devils. This is more deeply unsettling, Adam Phillips argues, than fantasies of the sandman or the giant: the farther away fantasies situate the source of danger, the greater the sense of security at home, even though it is within the home and the family that the most damaging conflicts and hurts arise. (*No Go the Bogeyman*, 386-87)

King also admits that his domestic horrors and his reality-based characters and terrors are some of the most frightening monsters he has put down on paper. During an interview with *Penthouse Magazine* he explained why the reality of his monsters began to lower the number of readers visiting his stories:

And one of the reasons I think I've had some problems with *Cujo* is because people get a little bit worried when they read a book about this woman and kid trapped in a car by a Saint Bernard, and they say, "This could really happen." Then they write me a letter that says, "Gee, I liked your vampire novel [*Salem's Lot*] better, I liked *The Shining* better, because we know in our hearts that there are no vampires, and we are sure in our hearts that there are no hotels haunted by ghosts that come to life. But a Saint Bernard with a woman and a boy in the car, that's something else". (*Bare Bones*, 184)

In fact, it could be argued that those novels involving cars or dogs – *Christine* (1983), *From a Buick 8* (2003), and *Cujo* (1981) – have touched audiences less

profoundly than those involving people. Margaret White forms a solid foundation for other human and non-human creations that make their way into King's canon. Her extremes are both fascinating and frightening to witness and recur in male and female characters seen in his later works. These hidden terrors are often disguised within the inviting makeup of family members – such as Margaret White and Jack Torrance – or they are housed within the façade of a seemingly secure community such as Salem's Lot or Castle Rock and Bangor, Maine. It is when the social structure of these towns collapse and the monsters are unmasked that King unleashes the most terrifying and extreme emotions, in characters of good and bad disposition. Jack Torrance, wielding a croquet mallet while chasing his son Danny through the Overlook Hotel, resonates with a cringing truth that domestic violence exists and can happen without warning. Margaret White stabbing her daughter in the back, in a final and literal act of betrayal, rekindles a notion that King's characters are never entirely safe.

Carrie's final battle with her mother comes upon her return home from the prom where she has been doused with pig's blood and humiliated by those she believed to have accepted her. It is from her failure with the new beginning (friendships and possible normality) that she returns to her home (seeking security and safety) to find her frantic mother who wishes for nothing more than to end her life, convinced it will save her soul.

### **The Overlook Hotel and Undercurrents of Insanity: *The Shining***

This domestic horror which takes place in the home, or some other secured family setting such as a hotel, creates a shocking setting as it is the intrusion of

danger into an ostensibly safe place which causes the most dread, leaving no place to run as Gina Wisker points out in *Horror Fiction*:

The domestic space is a choice location for horror primarily because of the safety, security, and familiarity it promises. Disturbing these fundamentally undercuts the identity and ontological security. (*Horror Fiction*, 150)

At the Overlook Hotel, Jack Torrance finds himself falling into the old routine of craving a drink, only the hotel is in an off-season and the alcohol has all been taken away. The spirits of another sort occupying the hotel grow in power as Jack's craving for alcohol becomes more intense. The two act together as a constant reminder of the man falling to pieces. His continued wiping of his lips and the 'dry chewing of Excedrin tablets' are both traits he acquired through his years of alcohol abuse. These traits progress until we see Jack failing to take control of his alcohol dependency, even at a time when alcohol is absent. Jack's most extreme traits relate to his alcoholism and he admits that it has been at the root of his episodes of past rage. While he is conscious of this dependency and has to this point been successful in controlling his addiction he is unable to find sufficient resolve to continue his sobriety in the hotel. It is not uncommon for supernatural entities to take control, or possess, human subjects in King's fiction and this creates an interesting argument of plausibility within an otherwise implausible story. Is Jack seeing things or are things seizing him?

Of course, I speak of the scientific implausibility of a haunted house or creatures from outer space, yet unproven and so in some sense a laughable topic,

yet one that is used to considerable effect by King as his creatures assume human traits and attributes, if not assuming and consuming the human being altogether. King's attributing to the human of the monstrous is similar to the technique used in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*. Magistrale echoes this point as he discusses *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*, saying that both books "bring the terror back down to earth; indeed, their work is a reminder that the darkest evils are always those found in our neighbourhoods, in our children, and in ourselves rather than in some deserted place out amongst the stars" (*Landscape of Fear*, 15).

By taking a child, one seen to be normal and healthy and vibrant, and transforming her into a monster through possession we will associate the horrible acts to some external thing. What becomes frightening is that the human vessel, young Regan in the case of *The Exorcist*, may be harmed or possibly killed in order to dispel the evil inside. Killing for the greater good adds another dimension to the text when King employs such a technique within his fiction.

In *The Shining* we see the gradual decline of Jack Torrance, but before we see Jack assume the role of the hotel's evil mediator we see what good he is capable of offering. We see him as a man who has overcome a dysfunctional past. We have witnessed how Danny waits for him with great anticipation – not something we would expect from a child who fears his father, unless that anticipation is actually trepidation or dread. Our empathy increases with disclosure of Jack's failure to curb his anger in an incident with a student, leading to the loss of his job. This background gives readers of the novel a depth of character that is lost in the Kubrick film and is what makes for painful viewing during his eventual demise in the novel.

Several key moments in Jack's past, captured vividly in the novel, are absent from the film adaptation. These elements include the abuse at the hands of his father, and the confrontation with student George Hatfield as the boy was slashing the tyres of Jack's car. This is a critical scene as we witness the violent side of Jack Torrance. It is also crucially important to consider that the way the scene is written, Jack's actions appear to be justified as the spoiled and stuttering George has been using his corporate lawyer father, Brian Hatfield, to force Jack's hand to keep him on the debate team. So, as we see Jack slowly going crazy we consider there is a possibility that he will learn from his father's mistakes, that he will find the strength in his past mistake (striking Hatfield) and overcome the mounting anger and the monster will be destroyed internally.

While the novel makes this assumption easily the film does not give the audience the opportunity to see Jack as anything more than a psychotic killer. King suggested the casting of Jack Nicholson was a bad decision as the audience would immediately assume Jack Torrance to be crazy. Nicholson had already found fame in his role as mental patient Randle Patrick McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. So if we see Jack as crazy from the outset there is little hope that he will reform in the isolated hotel which has driven sane men mad. King said: "If the guy is nuts to begin with, then the entire tragedy of his downfall is wasted" (*Bare Bones*, 29). For those who have read the novel, the film is less a suspenseful demise and more an anticipation of when the character in crisis will finally crack.

This is not to say that the film fails to capture Jack's sickened mind, with his several perspectives (coming from various voices and spirit entities) and confused understanding of his role as new caretaker of the hotel. There are

several moments in the film which capture Jack's downfall and his inner turmoil most explicitly. Magistrale points out the significance of mirrors in the film as a means to reflect the depth of Jack's thoughts:

The various mirrored surfaces with which we watch Jack Torrance interact are markers or signifiers that visually identify and dramatize his loss of identity and eventually supernatural possession by the evil spirits at the Overlook. That this vampire-like possession may take place too quickly and with insufficient transition for the audience is a criticism that King himself has levelled on several different occasions. (*Hollywood's Stephen King*, 95)

By the time the hotel takes control of Jack we have not only come to know the man from his present actions, but we are also privy to events of his past which have shaped his current indiscretions. Before we see the creature we understand the man, yet when the creature arrives – devoted to killing his family for the sake of the hotel – we become faced with a similar moral dilemma to the one we face with Regan in *The Exorcist*. Do we want Jack killed to save the family?

What makes this a dilemma in the novel is that we know Jack Torrance and we have the empathy for what he has suffered. He is a man who has made mistakes, yet there is a genuine quality about Jack which makes him an everyman, someone we can recognise and feel compassion towards. "It is not the idea that Jack is a monster which is so discomforting; it is that Jack Torrance reflects so many people in the society, who would not like to think of themselves

as monsters, and who, indeed, to all appearances, are not monsters” (“Bakhtin’s Carnival Reversed”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 137).

The spirits occupying The Overlook are frightening figures as well, but it is the human element of terror that is at the core of even the most supernatural of King’s texts. In *The Shining* Jack is aware that the hotel wants Danny, but if it can’t have Danny it will take him instead. This use of Jack as a human conduit between the supernatural and the natural is an elaborate puppet-show. Although we can see the strings being pulled there is always hope that Jack will be able to pull his arms free. We retain the hope that he will be able to overcome the invisible urges brought by the spirits of the hotel as he was able to overcome the spirits of the bottle.

The connection between Jack’s susceptibility to addiction to both kinds of spirits is evident when he considers his fall from grace at Stovington school: “It had nothing to do with willpower, or the morality of drinking, or the weakening or strength of his own character. There was a broken switch somewhere inside, or a circuit breaker that didn’t work, and he had been propelled down the chute willy-nilly, slowly at first, then accelerating as Stovington applied its pressures on him” (81).

The pressures of the job, in this case the politics within the school and the students he was teaching, are similar to the pressures he feels in the Overlook. Isolation, together with weighty expectations and excessive demands from Stuart Ullman, the Overlook Manager, are parallel to the pressures he faced at the high school where a student with an influential father believes he should be granted preferential treatment. After Jack refuses to comply he is confronted by the boy and Jack’s violent personality drives him to assault, leading to him losing his

teaching position. But Jack's assault on student George Hatfield seems more than a spontaneous event in his life. Following an incident in room 217, where Jack sees George's naked body floating in the bathtub, we are asked to question the length of time the hotel has had a hold on Jack's life.

As a recovering alcoholic, and a failed writer, with an abusive and violent history, Jack is still haunted by this loss of temper that cost him a teaching position, and the stability his family needed. This vulnerability is recognised by the hotel as one which can be exploited in a similar manner as Jack's father has once exploited his subservient mother. As we recognise that the hotel reminds Jack of his faults and failures it becomes possible to see it use these weaknesses to mould the man into a monster. As Jack begins to turn monstrous we remember what happened to Delbert Grady, the caretaker who killed his family and then himself. We remember how Stuart Ullman, general manager of the Overlook, had assured Jack that Grady was not able to handle the isolation because a "less imaginative individual would be less susceptible to the rigors, the loneliness" (15). As Jack meets Delbert Grady for the first time we realise he is a very different and very capable man, with the capacity for 'imaginative thought'. Such an imaginative capacity as that which Jack possesses as a writer of fiction and plays, makes both men more susceptible to the rigorous loneliness of the snow-bound hotel.

During the exchange Grady denies being the caretaker and instead suggests Jack has "*always* been the caretaker. I should know, sir. I've always been here. The same manager hired us both, at the same time" (249). Jack is confused, still recalling Stuart Ullman's story about the high school dropout who murdered his wife and daughters. Grady's response opens a new realm of

possibility, suggesting that the “manager” of the Overlook is much more sinister and powerful than Ullman:

‘It’s true that I left organised education very early, sir. But the manager takes care of his help. He finds that it pays. Education always pays, don’t you agree, sir?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said dazedly.

‘For instance, you show a great interest in learning more about the Overlook Hotel. Very wise of you, sir. Very noble. A certain scrapbook was left in the basement for you to find -’

‘By whom?’ Jack asked eagerly.

‘By the manager, of course. Certain other materials could be put at your disposal, if you wished them...’

‘I do. Very much.’ He tried to control the eagerness in his voice and failed miserably.

‘You’re a true scholar,’ Grady said. ‘Pursue the topic to the end. Exhaust all sources.’ (250)

The subject of education and research is interesting here. Not only does it explain the power that the Overlook (school/institution) has over Jack (student), but it introduces the supernatural manager (teacher) who is influencing Jack with the scrapbook (textbook) he left behind. At this point in the novel Grady’s suggestion of ‘further education’ is instrumental in gaining Jack’s commitment. After all, Jack is a failed teacher, a failed writer, a failed husband and father. He has just fallen off the wagon and with a drink in his belly Grady is giving Jack the

opportunity to redeem himself by doing what Jack enjoys most – learning and respecting the hotel. It is a proposal Jack cannot decline, even if it means losing his family.

As a writer in King's canon, Jack Torrance carries great power. Thad Beaumont (*The Dark Half*), Mike Noonan (*Bag of Bones*), and Ben Mears (*Salem's Lot*) are other examples of individuals who have special abilities to communicate and commune with, struggle against and succumb to, the world of the supernatural. While Thad Beaumont and Ben Mears are more physical in their supernatural struggles, Mike Noonan's connections with the spirit world are not far removed from those of Jack Torrance. King is adamant that as adults we lose the ability to play with imagination – a concept he speaks about in *On Writing* – and by losing our powers of imagination we are losing one of our greatest assets. In his fiction, however, an active imagination makes characters more susceptible to the supernatural, in effect making them more powerful, yet less safe.

*Needful Things* (1991), for example, sees the town of Castle Rock brought to a crisis through a small civil war, one created through the greed of consumerism. The driving power behind Leland Gaunt's ability to influence the town's greed is the 'imagined possessions' his shop sells. A rookie baseball card, sunglasses worn by Elvis, which when worn allow you to be with Elvis, are but two examples of Leland Gaunt's magical wares. In reality, what the shop called Needful Things sells are, ironically, only valuable in the imaginations of those in possession of the goods. The same people who go on to wage wars amongst their neighbours to bring a final end to a small Maine town are in essence possessed by their possessions.

Another of King's writer protagonists, Mike Noonan, admits that his ability to accept what is unreal as real makes him a ready conduit to the spirit world seen in *Bag of Bones*. Jack Torrance is not so clear about why he has been contacted and used, and he is taken without realisation of the possession. It is a capability and a gift that serves writers in King's canon well. According to Tony Magistrale, "the writer in Stephen King's world is uniquely special: nothing less than a shaman. The creative writer works from a power source that both insulates him from the sterility of American cultural hegemony at the same time as it provides a conduit to the imagination and its magical link back to childhood" (*Hollywood's Stephen King*, 41).

In Jack Torrance we have several recollections of his father's abusive nature, including one in which his father beat his mother with his cane. Jack has a vivid recollection of his father's actions. He recalls the beating his mother suffered at the dinner table with his brothers and sister watching. He recalls the "seven whumps" (162) of the cane falling through the air and colliding with his mother. Jack also recalls the aftermath, the denial of his father who claimed to the doctor that his wife had fallen down the stairs. As troubling for Jack was the affirmation his mother gave to his father's claims. A deeply religious woman, his mother "had corroborated their father's story while holding the hand of a parish priest" (163). This is a fascinating section as it gives a sense of the ideals of Jack Torrance, knowing domestic violence is wrong and destructive, yet it comes as we witness Jack becoming a man. This moment of excessive violence will remain with us in the novel – as it will remain with Jack. No matter how horrible Jack becomes we will recall the boy he had been, fearing for his mother and realising the injustice of the beatings his father delivered to his family.

There are many abusive male characters in King's canon and this is not by accident, but rather by the writer's design. King is not shy when speaking his mind about politics and the shortcomings of social institutions, nor is he quiet when coming clean about his belief in man's capacity to commit acts of violence, as he showed during an interview published on a CNN website:

And when you see a guy who suddenly snaps, a guy who goes nuts, a Charles Whitman, who goes to the top of a Texas tower and shoots a whole bunch of people, when a guy goes postal – that's the current slang – that's a guy with fire in his wires, basically.

(<http://edition.cnn.com/books/news/9809/24/king.interview.salon/index2.html>)

In another interview King fed the media's interest in what kind of a man produces such ghastly monsters. Instead of maintaining that he was removed from the pack of the disturbed he placed himself in the centre of the asylum and declared it was his writing which keeps him from going insane: "Writing is necessary for my sanity. As a writer, I can externalize my fears and insecurities and night terrors on paper, which is what people pay shrinks a small fortune to do." He goes on to say: "I might very well have ended up there in the Texas tower with Charlie Whitman, working out my demons with a high-powered telescopic rifle instead of a word processor. I mean, I *know* that guy Whitman. My writing has kept me out of that tower" (*Bare Bones*, 44).

King's short stories are not lacking such human monsters, as we see in "Strawberry Spring", "The Man Who Loved Flowers" and most notably for this

section, the Charles Whitman inspired “Cain Rose Up”. While “Strawberry Spring” and “The Man Who Loved Flowers” both deal with the subject of serial killings, one with a character who is uncertain he has committed a crime and the other showing the act of violence as a shock ending, the last of the three stories is about a killing spree. In “Cain Rose Up” King visits a college campus and follows Curt Garrish after he completes his final exams and returns to his dormitory. While we are never enlightened as to the motives behind the killing we witness the terror and are part of the event. In following a seemingly benign college student to his dorm room we have resigned ourselves to the notion that Garrish is going home. It is when he brandishes his hunting rifle that the truth of his intentions becomes clear.

As King uses a third-person narrative to trace the footsteps of a man who takes a rifle to his college dorm room and opens fire on his fellow students it reveals to the reader nothing by way of his intentions. The unwrapping of his rifle is as frightening a scene as the emergence of Pennywise from Derry’s sewers in *It*, only Garrish is recognisable. He is a kid everyone may have known. He is the kid that everyone ignores, the kid that got lost in the system. He is now the young man we all will come to fear. Timeless as the story is, Curt Garrish is as real a prospect now as he ever was, possibly even more so since the events that took place in Columbine High school in Colorado on April 20, 1999, or more recently at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007.

While there is a connection this story has with true events, adding a dimension of plausibility, it is the act of senseless violence in itself that echoes King’s belief that man is a cruel creature and a creature subject to cruelty. Abusive males in King’s fiction have become a defining feature of his fictional

landscape, yet the idea that man is ‘born bad’ is not one that fits easily within all the stories of his canon. Jack learns abuse from his father as much as Teddy Duchamp learns of abuse and violence from his father in ‘The Body’. King’s admission in that CNN interview of his belief that man can have ‘a fire in his wires’ is an acknowledgment that the workings of a human mind are as frail and temperamental as any machine, with short-circuits always in danger of occurring.

While King’s interest in violent behaviour and insanity prevails in his fiction, it is not limited to the males of Castle Rock, Maine or Estes Park, Colorado. After Jack Torrance took his family to a hotel in the Rocky Mountains for an off-season of terror, a new and very real monster appeared – this one was different than the others. Annie Wilkes was female and was a number one fan.

### ***Misery and Misogyny***

In 1987, King introduced a central female antagonist who displayed the monstrous qualities of Margaret White, but whose victim was male, though his masculinity was less important to her than his construction of femininity in the form of a female character in a series of romance novels. *Misery* was inspired by a chance meeting King had with Mark Chapman, the man who assassinated John Lennon. When the two came face-to-face in the late 1970s Chapman claimed to be King’s ‘number one fan’. King obliged Chapman’s request to pose in a photograph and provided an autograph which read: ‘Best wishes to Mark Chapman, from Stephen King’. Chapman’s strange demeanour made an impression on King who remembered the brief encounter in 1980 when he saw Chapman on the television after he had murdered John Lennon. (*Penguin Readers Factsheet*, 4)

The experience of obsessive fans has affected other members of the King family. King's wife Tabitha found Erik Keene in the kitchen of the family home after he had travelled from Texas to "do something to gain publicity" (*America's Best Loved Boogeyman*, 146). Tabitha later explained in an interview that such attacks will continue to take place as it is part of American society where: "the mentally unbalanced have a de facto right to both lethal weapons and access to famous people" (148). She went on to speak about Mark Chapman who had admitted his target was not specifically John Lennon, but simply someone famous. Tabitha said, "it did not matter to him whether it was John Lennon, or Paul Simon, or Steve [King] – all of whom he made personal approaches. Murder is the ultimate fan possession of the idol" (149).

Not since Carrie's mother had King's readers witnessed the psychopathic tendencies displayed by a female character. Annie Wilkes, a former nurse and avid fan of romance novels rescues writer Paul Sheldon from his wrecked Ford Mustang in a snowbound Colorado. What takes place thereafter is neither lady-like nor romantic, but it is sheer misery for the male author. It is a story that follows a line of narrative much the antithesis of John Fowles' *The Collector* (1961). While Fowles introduces a woman held captive by a man – a scenario King would later flesh out in the creepiest fashion in *Gerald's Game* – King creates Annie Wilkes, a demanding woman who is equally obsessed and deranged. The connection between Fowles' novel and *Misery* is mentioned throughout the narrative. Bestselling novelist Paul Sheldon knows the novel well, recognises his situation as being eerily similar to what was suffered by the protagonist in *The Collector*, and

wonders if Annie Wilkes may have taken inspiration from the novel: “once Paul found himself wondering dourly if she had John Fowles’s first novel on her shelves and decided it might be better not to ask”. (*Misery*, 178)

The first scene with Annie Wilkes depicts a woman taking advantage of the helpless protagonist. Paul Sheldon describes his saviour as using rape-like force when she handles him as he lies crushed in his car. The description is not only of the force she uses, but of the beastly creature we come to see later in the novel: “When the lips were pulled back he smelled his warder for the first time, smelled her on the outrush of the breath she had forced into him the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman, a dreadful mixed stench of vanilla cookies and chocolate ice cream and chicken gravy and peanut-butter fudge” (4). This initial description is typical of King, again taking advantage of the cat in the cupboard movie moment. Here, we see the beast, only to find it acting as saviour rather than savage. The next time we meet Annie she is bringing nourishment to Paul’s bedside. We, like Paul, begin to relax in her presence and consider the possibility that the monster is a myth, dangerously making us more vulnerable to the hidden horrors to come.

Much of the criticism on *Misery* sees the relationship between Paul and Annie as a grotesque mother/child bond, with Annie controlling and punishing Paul in order to make him the man she wants him to be. According to Natalie Schroeder: “The sexual undertones are not limited to rape and prostitution; they also reverberate of incest. Annie becomes not only Paul’s wife/lover, but also his mother. When Paul first regains consciousness, he reverts to his childhood. He is Paulie with his mother and father at Revere Beach, watching the pilings appear between the waves.” (“Stephen King’s *Misery*”, 139)

Similarly, according to Douglas Keeseey the relationship between Paul Sheldon and Annie Wilkes begins as a rebirth of sorts for the now-crippled writer and the woman who claims to be his number one fan. Keeseey reads this rebirth (the pulling of a helpless human from the car and breathing life into his lungs) as the start of a frighteningly curious mother/child relationship:

Surely, Paul Sheldon's nightmarish experiences involve his fear of a mother-figure, Annie Wilkes, the crazed female fan who rescues him from a car crash and then holds him hostage, progressively infantilizing him and threatening to castrate him if he does not use his pen to keep writing about the Gothic romance character, Misery, with whom she has identified. ("Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera", 54)

While it is interesting to read Keeseey's take on Paul Sheldon's matrophobic fear of Annie Wilkes, I am not swayed by his reading enough to find myself reinterpreting the novel as wholly a disturbing mother/child relationship gone wrong. I read Annie Wilkes as a demented muse. As a writer of fiction I find terror and frustration in the writer-character's inability to produce a good story, or the possibility that a writer's block will eventually take hold of me. Or worse, there is another horrifying possibility, that a muse as devastating and relentless as Annie will possess me to write something I am not comfortable in producing.

King looked at Annie Wilkes in a similar way, less as a mother-figure and more as an addiction, something which possesses the power to lead the unwilling and unwitting astray. King had become just such an easy target for the likes of

Annie when he found himself heavily addicted to alcohol and drugs. In a candid admission he relates the pull of the drugs (an external force – which internalises when used) to Annie Wilkes (a character he created and externalised through publication of his fiction):

I did think, though – as well as I could in my addled state – and what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie’s pet writer. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to work anymore if I quit drinking and drugging, but I decided (again, so far as I was able to decide anything in my distraught and depressed state of mind) that I would trade writing for staying married and watching the kids grow up. It came to that. (*On Writing*, 72)

Keesey goes on to speak about the novel being viewed as a “masochistic wish-fulfilment fantasy in which a man flirts with the idea of total dependency and vulnerability only to master his fear of weakness and prove his manhood in an act of sadistic triumph over a female body” (“Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera”, 56-57). This feminist reading of King continues in Keesey’s writing on *Carrie* where the predominance of his perceived motivation of character comes from the extreme compensation of Margaret White to protect her daughter, as her absent father should. While I give some credence to this theory my reading of Annie Wilkes differs. *Misery*, like other King novels, is about genre as much as gender or sexuality. Most of King’s writer characters lead double lives, writing

genre fiction but dreaming of going straight. They are often horror or romance writers who aspire to being taken seriously as authors of literary fiction, only to find that they are haunted by the world they wish to leave behind.

*Misery* is a novel built within a confined narrative to give the reader the same isolated feeling Paul Sheldon is experiencing. As Natalie Schroeder observes: “Locked in a room in Annie’s isolated farmhouse overlooking a mountainous terrain, Paul becomes an ironic version of *Misery*, the persecuted heroine of his own Gothic romance series” (“Stephen King’s *Misery*”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 138). It is through his thoughts – as he leaves the room through his imagination – that we get round to view Annie’s house. If not for Paul’s imagination (his mobility of mind) we would be stuck with him on the bed in a back room of a secluded Colorado home, imprisoned and reliant on Annie to return. For this reason we appreciate even more his imagination and his ability as a writer to recall his life in detail. (A similar dependence arises in *Gerald’s Game*). In *Misery*’s relayed effect, we as readers are reliant on Paul to feed us information as he is reliant on Annie feeding him painkillers. The remedy to our anxiety about what will happen next is only eased by the continuation of the story from Paul. Conversely, he can only continue the story when he is feeling well, when he is fed medicines by Annie. In an odd way we are as reliant on the captor as the man she has imprisoned.

As if displaying to the reader that the horror that comes from Annie is on the inside, a kind of wolf in sheep’s clothing (possibly more apt for King’s fiction is the notion of the unchanged werewolf), Paul again is caught by the rancidity of Annie’s breath: “He smelled something on her breath, something from the dark and sour chambers inside her, something that smelled like dead

fish.” Annie then blows her breath “down his throat like a dirty wind from hell.” “His [Paul] stomach clenched, but he smiled at her” (174). This raises the question of whether misogyny or at least male anxiety about potency and productivity is at the heart of *Misery*.

As Paul continues on a steady digression he makes connections between Annie and his mother, drawing on a frightening sub-text that sees Paul helplessly in the hands of a woman who has entire control over him. In a typical domestic dynamic, one that sees a boy simultaneously cared for and punished by his mother, such a relationship (barring the severing of feet and thumb) would be brutal, yet plausible. However King’s extremes see the relationship dynamic between Paul and Annie progress to the most barbarous of affairs.

Paul’s addiction, created and nurtured by Annie, makes him vulnerable, as do the injuries that originally required such medication. This need for pain relief compounds his need for Annie, his supplier of medication, and so builds on the child/mother dynamic. When Annie confronts Paul about the manuscript for his latest novel *Fast Cars* she asks him to burn it. His refusal to destroy what he considers to be his greatest work to date inspires a fresh wave of rage from Annie who declares Paul to be “a very stubborn little boy” (49). Again, the infantilizing mother figure, first witnessed in *Carrie*, threatens to emasculate the author. Of course, in the earlier novel, the victim was female. Here, the relationship is not mother-daughter but reader-author.

The controlling of Paul Sheldon is a means to an end for Annie Wilkes. While Annie is in control she expects her wish for a new Misery Chastain novel to be produced without delay. Of course with the injuries Paul Sheldon has suffered, coupled with his addiction to painkillers, his creative process has been

somewhat impeded. Still, Annie is not a woman to accept anything less than the dutiful fulfilment of her desires. If Paul fails to give her what she wants he will not be granted the objects of his desire, which have at this stage been reduced to water, food, and drugs. While King looks at Annie as being a metaphor for drugs and alcohol it is also important to take into consideration King's addiction to writing. Writing, he has said on many occasions, is his therapy. Therapy, as we have seen in *Misery*, can lead to addiction and so it stands as an argument that his addiction to writing is as much an underlying inspiration behind this novel.

If we read *Misery* as a novel dealing with the extreme anxieties of producing a work of fiction then Annie Wilkes becomes an exceptionally demanding muse, an evil agent as much as an agent of evil. As a novelist I am aware of the anticipation and the drawing urge to begin a new piece of fiction. Likewise, I am aware of the factors that get thrown into the mix once such a work has been completed. These, like the basis of trauma in many of King's works, are often domestic in nature. A grocery run needing to be made, the sorting and settling of the monthly bills, a child waking from a nightmare, are all elements that occur in the lives of writers that slow the creative process. King's extremes demand that the writing process be tossed into the most hauntingly familiar setting, with the familiarity extending to the object of terror. A family-less family home in a remote location with a mother figure who happens to be a psychotic nurse is not out of the ordinary, for King and his readers have come to expect nothing less. Now, all our captive author has to do is to get over the pain within his broken body and write through the fear and addictions his saviour and tormenter has imposed.

There are occasions in the novel that make it clear that Paul Sheldon looks on Annie Wilkes as his muse. We meet Paul Sheldon after he has already killed off his fictional character of Misery Chastain in a novel that is due to reach bookstores. In his possession he has a copy of another manuscript which he believes to be the literary work which few critics have considered him capable of writing. His intention is not to return to the *Misery* novels, but to leave his heroine dead and move on to what King terms 'mainstream fiction'. Enter Annie Wilkes, breathing putrid-smelling life into Sheldon's lungs and demanding, once she has read the final Misery Chastain novel, that he return to the story and bring the fictional Misery back to life. As this is against Paul's intentions she forces him in a series of painful and degrading episodes to begin work. Paul is then writing as a matter of life and death – or more immediately as a matter of comfort or pain.

In *Fear Itself* Tony Magistrale speaks of how King's fiction contains levels of normality in the most abnormal of circumstances and in doing so creates a greater depth to horrors as they are now found in the daily round of ritual and routine: "Horror springs in King's stories from contemporary social *reality*, and I'd say it is this quality more than any other that has made King a bestseller. King doesn't take vampires seriously, but you would have to be a fool or a saint not to recognize and react to the pervasive horror in everyday life" (*Fear Itself*, 92).

This pervasive horror is not limited to the mainstream fiction King has produced in the *Different Seasons* collection. His supernatural epics, such as *IT* and *The Stand* define vivid otherworldly horrors through such 'contemporary social reality'. As I have already demonstrated it is through the use of humans

that many of King's supernatural creatures are able to cause the most destruction, both in a physical and psychological sense. King's inclusion of socio-political commentary adds further dimensions to his rich texts.

In most of the inanimate, malevolent centers in King's fiction – from Christine, to the MicMac burial ground, to the Overlook Hotel, to the Tommyknockers' spaceship – a connection and / or identification with the human world is absolutely necessary to animate their malefic energies. King may well be suggesting that evil exists only as a theoretical construct without human beings – and that it only becomes real when we humans, with our greeds, liabilities, and unchecked urges, served as its hosts. (*Second Decade*, 102-103)

An example of this is depicted most vividly in *Needful Things* where a new shop is to open in the small town of Castle Rock, Maine. While at this time Castle Rock has seen a fair share of devastation it is still a small town with the lethargic pace it has always possessed. This is evident in the opening line: "In a small town, the opening of a store is big news".

In *Needful Things* King creates a commentary on American consumerism, highlighting the mentality of the "want over need" culture. The economy of Castle Rock need not be bustling for the townspeople to shop in *Needful Things*. Money will not purchase any of the items Leland Gaunt has for sale. What he wants in return for his wares is commitment to destroying a small part of the

community. A pledge to run a seemingly harmless errand, or commit a small act of vandalism in exchange for a most desired possession may not seem like a deal to pass by. For the people of Castle Rock the goods far outweigh the bad they have done – all except for a child.

As I discuss in other chapters, King's fiction is filled with children of extraordinary qualities. Whether we are speaking about telekinetic powers like Carrie White, Danny Torrance or Charlie McGee (*Firestarter*), or the morally galvanised characters such as Gordie Lachance, Jack Sawyer, and in *Needful Things*, Brian Rusk, King's child-characters have survival abilities that give them the opportunities to negotiate the pitfalls of the adult world.

Brian Rusk may tell himself that he does not have the same interest in the new store in town, not as much interest as many of the adults in the town anyway, but there is the curiosity that still pulls him through the door of the shop. A curiosity that is often at play within King's fiction – the same urge that took Danny Torrance into room 217 at the Overlook Hotel and the same curiosity that kept Trisha McFarland walking away from her bickering mother and brother in *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*.

What becomes frightening is the uncertainty about the decision-making of King's young characters. We witness Gage Creed's death in *Pet Sematary* when he walks into the road, in front of a speeding truck. We follow Carrie White as she returns home to her mother when her chance to be normal had failed. And we watch Brian Rusk agonise over his act of vandalism until he uses his father's shotgun to commit suicide. None of these children were saved by their parents. While Louis Creed made an attempt to save his son before he stepped in front of the truck, the other children were failed by either violent or

absent parents. Brian Rusk's mother, for example, was too busy being with Elvis when her son needed to confess his dirty little secret.

These are just a few examples of the failed children that frequent King's stories, but what is important to consider are the circumstances that cause the parents to fail them. These are often eternal or external sources and forces, something of a greater power, that guide their actions in a deviant direction. Even when motivation begins as noble and harmless, even helpful – as with Louis Creed and his interest in science with the intention of using it to save the dying – extremes will soon set in and with the extremes come the delivery of evil or the monster itself.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Retrospection of Abuse: Recollection of Mistreatment and Neglect**

## **Retrospection of Abuse: Recollection of Mistreatment and Neglect**

My focus in this chapter is on the recollection of violent episodes, often featured in detailed flashbacks, which in some way impinge upon the present predicament of characters. Bearing in mind that King's work has a preoccupation with psychological traumas – most notably traumas that were ingrained within the character's psyche during episodes of childhood abuse – I chose to deal primarily with the novella 'The Body' which places physical and psychological abuse at the forefront of the narrative. I also chose this novella because it is outside of the horror genre, and although the violent pasts of characters are portrayed in these texts as well, King's storytelling is at its strongest when dealing with human beings rather than devils and demons.

I also chose the novella, as it was adapted to film in what King believed to be "the finest thing that's ever been made from my work" (*Creepshows*, 47). It is not simply the fact that the book has been successfully adapted that makes the novella a more appealing source. It is more to do with the difficulties King and director Rob Reiner encountered when trying to make the film. When the production company changed hands, King's original deal with Embassy Communications fell through two days before filming was due to start. This setback was followed by more frustrating times. Filming eventually took place in Oregon and California, yet upon completion a distributor could not be found. Rob Reiner explained: "We actually played down King's name because we didn't want people to have the idea that this was a bloody, gory horror movie" (*Creepshows*, 49). The stigma attached to Stephen King had been predicted by his editor, Bill Thompson, when King submitted the manuscript of *Salem's Lot*

(1975) as his second novel. Thompson had said: “It’s just that if you do a book about vampires as the follow-up to a book about a girl who can move things by mind-power, you’re going to get typed” (“Afterword”, *Different Seasons*, 553).

Before examining “The Body” with regard to narrative devices I think a moment of consideration needs to be given to the collection of stories in which ‘The Body’ was first published. *Different Seasons* is a compilation of four mainstream novellas written following the completion of a full-length novel. In King’s own words, “it’s as if I’ve always finished the big job with just enough gas left in the tank to blow off one good-sized novella” (“Afterword”, *Different Seasons*, 555). *Salem’s Lot* (1975), *The Shining* (1977), *The Dead Zone* (1979), and *Firestarter* (1980) were all works King had completed before pouring the remainder of creative resources into novellas, a tough to market hybrid of short and long fiction. The idea that King wrote four novellas, in what he calls the style of ‘mainstream fiction’, after writing horror novels shows his allegiance to the genre fiction that granted him global popularity, while not entirely allowing himself to be contained in any one category. However, King faces a population of fans and critics alike that think of his writing as horror, even when the stories, like those in *Different Seasons* (1982), bear little resemblance to the writings within the genre novels they succeeded. For his readers this labelling of King as a horror writer comes from an appreciation of the fiction he has produced in the past. For some critics and ‘literary writers’ King’s fiction lacks elegance while relying too heavily on unrealistic scenarios.

Although his writing sells remarkably well, King, like most genre writers, has few fans among the writers of the ‘literary world’. James Kelman says the one characteristic of all genre fiction is its lack of reality (Kelman 1988, 25).

Kelman goes on to say that this disregard for reality in genre fiction is, “structural – in other words, if reality had a part to play in genre fiction then it would stop being genre fiction” (25). If we were to take these words to heart and read through the novellas in the *Different Seasons* collection we would affirm that what has occurred with these writings is a genre shift, where the plot eases back and allows characterization to emerge in the forefront of the narrative. In his genre writing King uses the story to propel the reader through the text, performing the same song and dance routine that makes him a great storyteller, while placing an emphasis on the evil creatures his mind conjures into being.

Since the publication of *Misery* (1984) King’s fiction has taken a progressive shift in the subject matter he has chosen to write about. *Dolores Claiborne* (1992) and *Rose Madder* (1995) were both novels looking at female figures that have been the subject of domestic abuse. While *Rose Madder* continues King’s genre tradition with the presence of a painted monster it does act as a marker of sorts as to the changes that were to come. Like *Dolores Claiborne*, *Rose Madder* is a novel concerned more with the plight of the abused woman than it is with the monster within the story, and so it is the abusive husband that takes centre stage in the plot, becoming the true (realistic) monster.

Prior to the publication of either of these novels, King had explored the consequences of male abuse of power in *Gerald’s Game* (1992), in which the main protagonist, Jessie Birlingame, recollects the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father during a solar eclipse. Carole Senf, in “Gerald’s Game and Dolores Claiborne: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic Female Narrative Voice”, connects Jesse Birlingame’s history of abuse with her present predicament: “She had spent her entire life repressing the fact that her father

sexually abused her when she was a child, and she had married a man who continued to dominate her life. Now middle-aged, she is a literal prisoner of her husband's sexual desire" (*Imagining the Worst*, 94). It is evident that this childhood event structured her subsequent relationships, which ultimately led her to marry an exploitative man – the Gerald of the title whose bondage game she plays against her will – and to the tight spot in which she finds herself for so much of the novel, handcuffed to a bed recalling her life.

Once again, this novel still contains distinct elements of grotesque horror through the mutilation of Jessie's dead husband/abuser by a dog named Prince. But the supernatural, horror fiction elements of the novel are overshadowed by the haunting presence of abusive male figures, both past and present. The abuse Jessie suffers at the hands of her father prompts the creation of a voice that advises her at moments when she is being compromised, or perceives she may be compromised, by men similar to her father:

In later years that voice, which she eventually came to think of as that of the Goodwife, frequently filled her with exasperation; it was sometimes the voice of caution, often the voice of blame, and almost always the voice of denial. Unpleasant things, demeaning things, painful things... (*Gerald's Game*, 191)

Such histories of abuse affecting individuals have been prevalent in King's fiction from early in his writing career. However, they have assumed a more profound role in recent years, often taking the character of the abuser and shaping them to embody the once mythical monsters that haunted the closets of

his narratives. This may be the maturing of the writer, one who once thought himself incapable of writing a story that encapsulates the trepidation of modern life and instead used outside entities, often unrealistic, to enforce the brutality within the text. While Carrie White was victimized by her mother's abuse her story is heavily based on the supernatural occurrences that emerge with the appearance of the woman from the pubescent girl. The shift in King's canon, from supernatural-based fiction to more mainstream works, came in 1984 with the publication of *Misery* which I discuss further in a later chapter.

King's young characters have often been involved in long journeys, rites of passage, where they face adult challenges and are forced to look into themselves to question what strengths they possess. Tony Magistrale notes: "King's children cling to their youthful idealism and romantic innocence, both of which come under fierce attack in his novels from the oppressive forces of societal institutions and the supernatural creatures that frequently emerge as a direct consequence of adult moral lapses. If these young people are to survive – morally as well as physically – they must somehow find a way to resist the prevailing values of a society that transforms its adults into monsters" ("Stephen King", *American Writers*, 142).

Since early interviews King has declared his interest in young characters and made it clear that he always wished they would survive, to complete their rites of passage and end their journeys unscathed. But a writer cannot always choose the direction of a story: "There's a boy in *Salem's Lot* who gets away. His name is Mark Petrie and he and the writer, Ben Mears, get away. There's a little boy in *The Shining*, Danny Torrance, who also gets away. I think most of the times the kids get away. But we also know as adults, as thinking rational people,

that sometimes they don't. There are crib deaths, there are kids who are abused and get killed that way" (*Bare Bones*, 18).

This makes it clear that from the very beginning King has been preoccupied with the monstrous human as well as the inhuman monster. We see this in *The Bachman Books*, with the character of Charlie Decker in *Rage* taking matters into his own violent hands, holding his class hostage in order to get heard. We see this in King's short stories which act as snapshots, focusing in on the dark and shady reaches of human nature, with the majority still containing elements of the creatures that appear on movie screens as wet plastic imitations of bad dreams. However, King did make attempts at 'mainstream fiction' earlier in his career with short stories that are published in his collection *Night Shift* (1978). Both 'The Last Rung on the Ladder' and 'The Woman in the Room' are about the loss felt with the death and suffering of family members. Neither of these stories delves into horror and terror, but rather they look deeply and emotionally at the reality and gravity of human loss. Both of these stories also take a look at the incidents of the past and the ways in which the memories of these events affect the people who experienced them. This theme King exploits well with the use of sometimes-lengthy flashbacks that shape both the character and the situations surrounding the narrative. 'The Body' is one of the finest examples of King's use of flashback, with the entire text being told in retrospect by a man who has survived and lived a successful life. The text gives glimpses into the present and the years bridging the two times and allows a clear view of how the events changed the lives of those characters involved. What is different about 'The Body' is that the narrator has overcome the tragedies he witnessed in

the past and makes it clear that he is a survivor. What this leaves is the telling of the stories of the other three boys, and their life-changing encounter with death.

In 'The Body' we are introduced to four twelve year-old boys who are on their summer break from school when one of them brings the news that his brother has discovered the body of a missing boy named Ray Brower who had disappeared from a neighbouring town. The closeness of age sparks the interest of the four boys who listen intently to the story of the young boy on radio broadcasts. The group attributes to Ray Brower an almost legendary status and, given the opportunity to see him, or at least his remains, in person, they immediately decide to spend the weekend in search of the body. The morbid idea of children wanting to see a dead human being is made plausible by explanations made by the narrator, who at twelve years old was one of the four youths on the quest to find the dead boy. The story is a record of the events that take place as the boys set off on an adventure that follows the railroad tracks that are thought to have ultimately killed Ray Brower. Although the premise of the story is simple it is the development of character and voice within the narrative, as in all of King's writing, that makes his stories both absorbing and insightful:

Even when the supernatural is not introduced, as in *Rage*, the adolescent is given a privileged place from which to speak, and to speak unchallenged. The enemy of such adolescents, of course, is that symbol of American modernism, the middle-class family. It is the family that makes of adolescence such a gruesome age.

('Postmodern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Studies*, 154)

Although this story deals with child abuse, showing adults who seem to neither care for their children nor face punishment for their actions, the voice that tells the story does not ask for sympathy from the reader. King uses a similar matter-of-fact voice in many of his narratives. According to David Punter, “King’s narrators emerge as story-tellers supreme, hovering on the enticing, languorous infantile borderline between the voice which lulls us to sleep and the voice which whispers terror in the dark” (‘Problems of Recollection and Constructions’, *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, 125). The voice used in the telling of ‘The Body’ floats between good and evil, but more importantly for the purpose of my argument it is a voice that treads a fine line between that of an adult and that of a child, both the age of the abused and the abuser.

The narrative within the text of ‘The Body’ is what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan refers to as a homodiegetic narrative, where the narrator takes part in the story “in some manifestation of his ‘self’” (*Narrative Fiction*, 95). It may be worth noting that Rimmon-Kenan chooses *Great Expectations* as an example for the use of this kind of narrative, showing it is the narrator Pip who tells the story of a ‘younger version of himself’ (96). The use of the homodiegetic narrator in ‘The Body’ gives the reader an instant key-hole glimpse into the future by showing that Gordon Lachance escapes any life-threatening events that may have taken place during that fateful summer and has since become a millionaire writer. Just as importantly the use of the homodiegetic narrator adds validity to the telling of the tale, giving the reader an eyewitness account of all the events that touched these boys in the summer of 1960, of such a foreboding magnitude that Gordon Lachance felt it necessary to speak of what happened years later.

King seems to have found a formula for storytelling with the ingredients of narrative voice and retrospective divergences finding their way into his texts. Another ingredient of King's storytelling, and possibly most important of all, is King's opening paragraphs. He has the ability to seize the reader with a snapshot of the troubles to come, stringing them along by attacking the dark curiosities that live in all of us. In 'The Body' King begins with a fragment of what is to come, allowing the reader a moment to think of the conflict before it is presented in a distant sequence of events. It is as if he is setting the reader up for a ride and showing them the crash that will inevitably take place before the passengers have even had a chance to buckle themselves in:

*I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago ... although sometimes it doesn't seem that long to me. Especially on the nights I wake up from those dreams where the hail fell into his open eyes. (Different Seasons, 321)*

As readers we want to know how a boy of twelve came to be in the presence of a dead body and it is clear that King intends to take us to the place where the body lay and show us all of the tortures and decays it has gone through. Having woken the reader's curiosity with this short introduction the narrator focuses the attention of the reader on the tree house where the group spent the majority of its time, issuing visions of a 'good place' where children will be safe, and for the most part these illusions proved to be actualities. But what becomes clear is that the tree house is used as a place of refuge from their homes, each of which are

locations of abuse. It is interesting to note that the first characterizations come while in the tree house, the safe place where Gordon and his friends felt they could speak freely, without consequence.

The elaborate construction of the four central characters in 'The Body' is created through the situations of abuse at the hands of family members and subsequent ill-mannered interactions the four boys have with other adults. Before the weekend hike begins we are introduced to all four of the boys beginning with Teddy Duchamp, a simple-minded youth with a hot temper and a juvenile bravado that drives him to jump in front of moving trucks and trains in an effort to test his mettle. But before learning of Teddy's penchant for self-destructive behaviour we learn of the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father, an abuse that left Teddy slightly deformed and hard of hearing:

Teddy's dad took Teddy over to the big woodstove at the back of the kitchen and shoved the side of Teddy's head down against one of the cast-iron burner plates. He held it down there for about ten seconds. Then he yanked Teddy up by the hair and did the other side. Then he called the Central Maine General Emergency Unit and told them to come get his boy. (324)

Along with demonstrating to the reader the excesses of abuse Teddy had endured at the hands of his father we are presented with a snapshot of the father after this episode when he shows no remorse for what he has done. It is interesting in looking at this section of text to take into account the sense of loyalty Teddy demonstrates toward his father throughout the remainder of the story. He is

continually defending the actions of his father to anyone who will listen by habitually recounting the fact that Mr Duchamp had ‘stormed the beaches of Normandy’, which Teddy clearly accepted as a tangible justification for his father’s actions. Teddy’s attempts at dodging vehicles is simply his way of duplicating his father’s courage, acting on primal energies as if he were a soldier running in the sandy prints his father had left behind.

Alarmingly, this type of behaviour according to research into the consequences of abuse is not uncommon. Teddy’s aggressive and destructive tendencies are traits which frequently emerge in those who suffer regular episodes of violence physical abuse:

Many physically abused children suffer considerable emotional and psychological problems in their early childhood, leading them to have problems in trusting other people and to suffer from a sense of personal worthlessness. Socially and intellectually they do not perform well because of this. (*Child Abuse*, 170)

By coming of age through traumatic rites of passage, as do the four boys in “The Body”, King’s adolescent characters run the risk of assuming the violent tendencies of their family members. The influence King’s adults have on his adolescent characters can be seen as contributing to the drastic actions some of them take – such as the rampage of Carrie White, or Charlie Decker’s hostage taking in *Rage*. According to Tony Magistrale, “The adults in King’s fiction act frequently like the worst of his children; they explore places where they have no

business going, their behaviour is often immature and without consequence” (*Landscape of Fear*, 77). He goes on to touch on a key theme in King’s fiction – institutions and the lack of support they give those they are set up to protect and serve: “their institutions – the church, the state’s massive bureaucratic system of control, the nuclear family itself – barely mask an undercurrent of violence that is capable of manifesting itself at any given moment” (77). This is summed up nicely in *Lisey’s Story* (2006), where the husband and wife team agree that ‘Families suck’ (149).

King borrows from a Gothic convention by representing a domestic danger, one that cannot be escaped as it lives in the home, the place of sanctuary and rest. By establishing monsters in the homes of his victims, King is not merely using the reality of the familiar (and familial) monster to make the abuse more real, but he is confining the choices of his characters by reducing the chance for flight. The resulting need to fight for survival creates a claustrophobic feel to his settings – one that is common in the stories which established the genre:

Gothic writing had displayed a marked tendency to represent the family as a source of danger, even as a model of false consciousness: works like Walpole’s *The Castle Otranto* (1764) or Shelley’s melodrama *The Cenci* (1819), as well as later novels like *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and many other characteristic Gothic fictions, represented the family, not merely as failing its individual members, but as a source of dangerously concealed secrets, even of literal

skeletons in the cupboard. ('The Ghost Story', *A Companion to the Gothic*, 127)

I would like to turn now to the narrator of 'The Body', who was spared the physical abuse from his parents, but has instead been subjected to a distanced relationship after the death of his older brother. Although Gordon tells us that his parents were older than most of the people who were raising children that were his age it is the text within the text that gets to the heart of their relationship. Gordon speaks about reading *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison for a class project and he explains the feelings he had toward the character in the book and in doing so gives a vivid account of the relationship he has with his parents: "Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers. He's like a black ghost. Once I got into it, I ate that book up like it was John D Macdonald, because that cat Ralph Ellison was writing about me" (*Different Seasons*, 340). Even if the reader of 'The Body' had not previously read *Invisible Man* the simplifying of Ellison's text within the narrative illustrates the impact it had and still has on Gordon Lachance. Such uses of other writers' texts are not uncommon in King's fiction and the use of Ellison here is appropriate insofar as the last line in *Invisible Man* reads: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (*Invisible Man*, 469). Ironically, the African American phrase that King uses to identify with Ellison's invisible man – "that cat" – is out of sync with Ellison's own largely unaccented English in his novel.

Coincidentally, Richard Wright, speaking of his novel, *Native Son* (1940), remarks: "We have only a money-grubbing industrial civilization. But we

do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him” (*Native Son*, 540). Perhaps the horror genre, far from being irrelevant, gets closer to the heart of the American nightmare than other literary forms.

This technique of borrowing from other texts, including those from his own writing, is a common method of building character and atmosphere within King’s stories. David Punter, in recognizing this trait, wrote that what we commonly find in King’s writing is “a manic proliferation of texts, texts about texts spun from side-hints and ideas, texts designed to fill an endless vacuum” (‘Problems of Recollection and Construction’, *Modern Gothic, A Reader*, 122). This adds considerably to King’s storytelling, building a world that appears deeply rooted in the real by simply allowing the reader to see something that is both familiar and tangible.

It is not only the texts of other writers that King embeds in his fiction, but texts that he has written himself, either as the author Stephen King, or as the narrator within his stories. There are several examples of this embedding technique within ‘The Body’, from a simple mention to an elaborate story within the story. This acts as a quick way of ensuring the reader’s trust by flashing before them something familiar that suggests a sense of reality within a fictional world. One such use of this text within the text comes almost without notice when the narrator speaks of Cujo, a dog that struck fear into the town of Castle Rock after becoming rabid. This use of intertextuality would go unnoticed if the

reader was not familiar with King's other writings and would not recognize the name of one of King's novels, adapted, like much of his work, for the screen.

Another, more prolific instance of intertextuality is the skeleton of a story that the young Gordon Lachance has made up and intends to write. The story is told as the four boys are taking a break from the journey down the railroad tracks. This is a section of the novella that not only shows the interaction between the boys but also demonstrates the leadership qualities Gordon possesses, and his ability to keep the group's attention. This segment of text connects the past and present in an economical way by beginning the telling of the tale by the young Gordon Lachance and stopping it abruptly only to continue the story as the older Gordon's published piece in the following chapter. It gives a sense of what the boy we have grown to know has become, offering a break from the adventure of the summer of 1960 to let the reader know all is well at the present time. This is a technique used again later in the novella in a story titled 'Stud City', and like the story young Gordon began telling it shows the voice and evolution of the adult writer Gordon. This telling of the story is cut short once more as the ensuing chapter returns to the account young Gordon gives at the side of the rail tracks. The effect of the shift from past to present in the telling of the tale gives a clear sense of 'then' and 'now', adding an element of nostalgia while again letting the reader know not all of the things resulting from this summer end badly.

In building even further on the relationship the narrator has with his family King uses another device, one that seems more personal than hearing of the events that happened in the past directly from the mouth of Gordon Lachance. Instead, we read the words from his own hand. By printing a story

written by the narrator, one that comes complete with publishing information, the reader is exposed to both his interpretation of situations and obvious embellishments within the story, but is also exposed to what can be seen as the effects of the past. This portion of the novella acts as a quick way out for the narrator, allowing him to tell of his not-so-perfect family without having to retell his story. As a reader we are given an intimate moment with the writer Gordon Lachance, not the narrator of the same name. King does this by sectioning off a chapter and devoting it to a story Gordon Lachance had published in 1970. The story, 'Stud City', printed in place of Chapter 7, is written in the first person and is clearly autobiographical, with Chico taking the place of Gordon and Johnny taking the role of Dennis, Gordon's dead brother.

It is interesting when looking at the narration of 'Stud City' to notice that abuse seems to be a topic that Gordon is keen to talk about, but only when it is in the context of other people. It can be argued that Gordon's story is true to life, with the events that take place in 'Stud City' having taken place after the summer of 1960. As if the presentation of these events of his life was not intimate enough Gordon allows the reader further insight in the following chapter when the present day Gordon Lachance gives his thoughts on the story: "But it was the first time I had ever really used the places I knew and the things I felt in a piece of fiction, and there was a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had bothered me for years come out in a new form, *a form over which I had imposed control*" (358).

Italics as indication of internal thought is a device King uses in many of his stories. A simple slanting of letters and the reader is aware that something is taking place, a voice of conscience, a voice of reason or one of irrational thought,

a significant memory, whatever the content of the italics the significance of this text within the text has immediate impact and is unavoidable. While the majority of instances where King employs the technique work well there are moments when his use of italics as emphasis (as we see in the above excerpt) or when indicating internal thoughts seems clunky and forced. Moments when it works well include the point when King uses it to emphasize the inner struggle of characters without requiring them to speak their distress. As readers hearing the most private thoughts we have intimate access to the character and are able to see both the actions and intentions, which in King's fiction are not always harmonized.

An example of this is in "Apt Pupil", another novella from the *Different Seasons* collection. 'All American' school boy Todd Bowden has a fascination with Nazi Germany and in 1975 he secretly discovers a Nazi war criminal living in his quiet neighbourhood. With his desire to learn comes a frightening determination to take from the old man a history of his experiences. He controls elderly Kurt Dussander, making him commit to ever more demeaning tasks in a bid to keep his secret safe. As we see Todd becoming more controlling and more of a monster externally there remain moments when we see the inner workings of the boy who has lost his way.

He stared at the grades, unbelieving. He had known it was going to be bad, but this was a disaster.

*Maybe that's best*, an inner voice spoke up suddenly.

*Maybe you even did it on purpose, because a part of you*

*wants it to end. Needs for it to end. Before something bad happens.* ('Apt Pupil', *Different Seasons*, 155)

This internalized conflict works as the emotions displayed by Todd Bowden's character are so extreme that the violent exterior is balanced by the inner rational mind. His calm conscience is a character within itself and is one which we hope to see again as readers, almost urging as we turn the page to see the slanting letters of Todd's italic thoughts.

For now we will leave Gordon and 'Stud City' and look at Chris Chambers, the leader of the rag-tag group, who was equally unable to escape the harm of an angry father. What is most disturbing about Chris Chambers' story is that we know his abuse was public knowledge, having seen a truant officer visiting the Chambers' house to find out why Chris had not made it to school that day. This scene also shows the disrespect the boys have for adult authority figures as they have named the truant officer Bertie in an effort to demonstrate their disinclination: 'if Bertie found out that Chris was home because his father had beaten the shit out of him, Bertie just went away and didn't say boo to a cuckoo-bird' ('The Body', 336). This is the first we learn that a public awareness of the abuse these boys suffered existed in the town of Castle Rock. Yet this revelation comes at a time in the novella when the characters are still being presented to the reader, before their interactions with other adults have been witnessed and the reactions to the abuse at the hands of their family can be seen first-hand. At this time the boys seem innocent and the scenes of abuse are devastating and brutal, however they are not shown to have changed the

personalities of the boys thus far in the text, making them all seem more victimized in their innocence than later becomes apparent.

We finally come to the character of Vern Tessio who, like Teddy, is simpleminded, yet less aggressive and quick-tempered. Vern is slightly different from the other kids in the group as his abuse comes at the hands of his older brother, Billy. Although we do not see the beatings Vern suffered we know they are just as real when they are spoken of in jest, like all of the episodes the other boys experienced. The way these boys speak about abuse makes the episodes appear to be occurrences that happened to everyone in those days, something that was accepted. This acceptance allows the boys to set aside the bad times and get on with other things. Such a philosophy could account for King's assigning Vern Tessio a humorous role within the story and presenting him as comic relief. By introducing Vern when he is under the porch of his mother's house digging, King secures our interest. Just as he has done at the beginning of the novella, he has captured the reader's attention before offering further explanation. When he reveals to readers that Vern is digging for pennies that he buried four years previous we think it is humorous, and knowing the poor child has been searching for a long time and still has not found what he is looking for makes us pity him.

It is clear that the boys know there are consequences that come with the abuse that all have suffered at the hands of their family members. Individually, they can see this in each other, and this is expressed at points throughout the novella. It is also important to note that distinctions are made as to what changes have come as a result of the beatings, with contrasts being drawn as to the way each of the boys have been transformed.

These proposed changes or fears of the effects the abusive family members are having on the boys come up in conversations. While the topic of physical abuse is largely hidden from the dialogue the topic of what causes the violence to happen is often breached. The boys speak freely about the troubles of family and make attempts to understand the root of the problems. These conversations are often conducted with a shocking calm, a cold callous dialogue that emerges with each new revelation, making it appear as if the boys expect that they will have been changed as a result of the physical pain they have endured, most often fearing they will become more like their abusers.

Gordon Lachance recalls a conversation with Chris Chambers when the subject of alcoholism came up. As a result of the abuse he suffers Chris has made a conscious decision to abstain from the activities of his father and brother:

He said his father never got his nose all the way out of the bottle anymore, that his older brother had been drunk out of his tits when he raped that girl, and that Eyeball was always guzzling purple Jesuses with Ace Merrill and Charlie Hogan and Billy Tessio. What, he asked me, did I think his chances of letting go of the bottle would be once he picked it up? (361).

Along with the boys foreseeing the consequences of the abuse, they grasp the reasons why abuse is taking place, not justifying the actions, but identifying the origins of this violence. A conversation between Chris and Gordon sees Chris testifying to the fact that abuse in his own family acts as a means of keeping him

in order while preserving the memory of his brother. This comes as a powerful statement from a boy of twelve who already understands the reasons for his abusive environment, looking at it as a way of bettering himself and possibly preparing him for the future.

Not only does Chris Chambers see the reasons for the abuse in his own household, he sees the abuse in other families and tells Gordon that his mother and father are doing something very similar to him: ““I know about you and your folks. They don’t give a shit about you. Your big brother was the one they cared about. Like my dad, when Frank got thrown into the stockade in Portsmouth. That was when he started always bein’ mad at us other kids and hitting us all the time”” (418).

In *Child Abuse: Towards a Knowledge Base*, Brian Corby suggests that mental health issues such as depression (from which the parents of each of the boys seem to suffer) have historically been underestimated in research of families where abuse occurs (116). Such an underestimation of mental health issues in families where domestic abuse takes place is not surprising and can account, at least partially, for a culture in which a closed door can hide many sins.

Gordon Lachance allows the reader access to intimate details about the most basic and disturbing of his family dynamics by sharing the dialogue he had with his friends. We also glean from these exchanges a sense of the raw emotion, which is in the most literal way unadulterated and shows the reader that these boys are all self-sufficient and observant of the world and their place in it. The certainty these youngsters exude gives them an almost adult quality and possibly

offers an explanation as to the resonance this story had with a broad readership and why it has adapted well to film.

The concern these boys feel for one another is tainted, yet we can see that the hardships they have endured have contributed and so we as readers can accept their hardened exteriors. When Chris Chambers vocalizes his concerns for Teddy's mental composure following another truck-dodging incident we are interested to see how he interprets the dangerous act – one which we would almost expect to be met with an encouragement of more bravado: “‘Oh, yeah,’ Chris said matter-of-factly. ‘He won’t live to be twice the age he is now, I bet. His dad burnin’ his ear like that. That’s what did it. He’s crazy to dodge trucks the way he does. He can’t see worth a shit, glasses or no glasses’” (370).

This dispassionate comment does not seem to be that of a friend who is worried that what he has said may come true. In Chris's mind it is common knowledge that Teddy is destined for an early demise and this thought is enhanced even further by Gordon who describes the look Teddy gets when train-dodging: “That queer light was creeping back into Teddy's eyes and I thought he wasn't seeing the GS&WM train trestle at all but a long sandy beach, a thousand LSTs aground in the foaming wave, ten thousand GIs charging up the sand, combat boots digging. They were leaping rolls of barbed wire! Tossing grenades at pillboxes! Overrunning machine-gun nests!” (390). This lets the reader know quite clearly that Teddy is already following the lead of his father and feels it necessary to demonstrate his guts and glory. Too young for the military, and possibly aware that the deformity his father gave him will keep him from ever gaining acceptance in the armed forces, he finds neighbourhood dangers to be fitting conquests.

It is also important to remember that it is through the use of dialogue and third person narrative that we learn of Gordon Lachance, the man behind the voice giving us the details of each and every other character in the novella. It is possible in considering reasons for his distancing of himself in the narrative that Gordon (the famous and accomplished writer) feared he ran the risk of becoming an unreliable narrator if he went on to describe his own troubled family life. With these four characters being raised in brutal surroundings it is almost fitting that they are in search of the body of a dead boy, someone their own age who is much worse off than themselves. As they are walking along the railway line they take some time to consider what they are about to witness when they finally come to see the body. Moments of uncertainty are expressed, but it is in the common interest of the group to overcome fear because in their minds toughness is a virtue, and this journey represents the greatest test they have had to face to date. It is a test that comes not only as a means of facing a dead boy, but one that is more physical in nature as they walk the railway line and are forced to cross a bridge where a near miss with an unexpected train leaves Gordon and Vern almost tasting the same fate as Ray Brower.

The climax of the story comes with the locating of the body of the dead boy, with suspense mounting through the initial feelings the boys express when seeing the body – no longer a boy – for the first time. Throughout the novella we learned not only of the four boys who are looking for Ray as they walked along the railway line, we also learned of Ray Brower, if only from the small amount that the boys had heard on the radio and more importantly from Gordon as he prepared to see Ray for the first time. Gordon shows pity for Ray Brower because he visualized him alone in the woods, helpless and scared, and seems to

give no thought to the notion that he and his friends are in the same situation, with the only obvious difference being that Ray is dead. Although the walk to see Ray Brower is one that sends a chill through the spines of each of the boys taking part, it is Ray whom Gordon feels for, demonstrating a youthful ideal of death where all is not at an end. Although the climax includes the confrontation with the older brothers who arrive with the intention of taking Ray Brower's body, the most disturbing and crucial element of the scene is the observation Gordon makes when seeing Ray Brower's face:

There was a dried froth of blood above his mouth and on his chin  
– from a bloody nose, I thought – and the right side of his face  
was lacerated and darkly bruised. Still, I thought, he didn't really  
look bad. I had once walked into a door my brother Dennis was  
shoving open, came off with bruises even worse than this kid's,  
*plus* the bloody nose, and still had two helpings of everything for  
supper after it happened. (450)

This piece of narrative demonstrates the extent to which the abuse each of the boys has suffered has altered their perceptions of what the human body can endure. As each of the boys is a survivor of abuse they have expectation as to what the body of Ray Brower will look like, nothing short of a mangled mess. When they see that Ray's injuries are not as markedly external as many of their own injuries have been, the prospect of a young mortality becomes very real.

While making the final section of the journey the language of the narrative becomes more brutal with the clouds in the sky turning dangerous and

transforming to “thunderheads in great pillars as purple as bruises” (444). The atmosphere suggests that more trouble is on the way, that the journey will not end with the locating of Ray Brower’s body. And when the boys do come to find the dead boy they come together to look down upon him, evaluating his wounds.

Throughout the text the reader is subjected to the extremes of physical abuse suffered by a group of young boys, culminating in the corpse of another young boy, whose death being covered up as a train accident is terrifyingly feasible. What is even more disturbing is the cold sense of dislocation that these four boys express throughout the text in regards to family and society in general. They are only able to express concern when confronted by the body of Ray Brower. However odd it appears for children to act in this way it is through the building of character and the story itself that the actions and emotions of these adolescents are deemed plausible, even if it is morally difficult to accept.

After finding the body of Ray Brower the confrontation that ensues with the older boys from town displays the connection that Gordon and his friends feel toward Ray Brower. The initial intention of finding the dead boy was to collect on a reward for information leading to his return, but somehow the journey has made them all feel a closer bond with Ray. As they stand over the body, taking in the surroundings for the first time, a gang of older boys, including the brothers of Chris and Vern, arrive. They come in cars and Gordon feels a sense of contempt at the fact that the older boys show up, prepared to load the body and return it to the city, without having to make a journey as difficult as their own. The confrontation that ensues brings forward a question of ownership as to who has the right to the body of Ray Brower. Each group calls for ‘dibs’ on the body and neither is willing to give into the other. It is not until Chris

Chambers fires his father's pistol into the air that the shift of power is evident. This final act of empowerment enables Gordon and his friends to take control of the situation. Although the promise of revenge comes with the departure of the older boys, it is a small conquest that has been won. It is at this point that the reality of the situation – the body of a dead boy, the inevitable retaliation from the older gang, and the consequences of taking it all back to the city of Castle Rock – presents a genuine dilemma. In the end the dead boy is left behind, alone in the woods, as he had been when they arrived.

King's ability to command the reader's attention so early in the story can give the reader a sense of what these young boys were going through, following the lead of those they trusted in a world that is not as safe as small town America is thought to be. In gaining the reader's trust, if only by engaging their curiosity, King has begun to use the reader as a tool in telling the story, making them become part of the group in a sense and having the reader experience life in the setting of 1960 Maine. Even more importantly, King is guiding the reader along in an adventure to find a dead boy, much like Gordon Lachance does with his three friends. King makes the experience of reading about the happenings of the summer of 1960 as vivid as walking along the streets and railroad tracks as a young and vulnerable youth. He creates a sense of reality that reminds the reader of the past they will experience in the text and the past they have already experienced in reality. The reader is left feeling as exposed as Ray Brower, abandoned on a track that promises to lead home but never does, the hail falling into their open eyes.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Remorse and Resurrection: Interpreting Loss and Suffering Through Faith and Science**

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Grief is like a drunken houseguest, always coming back for one more  
goodbye hug. (*Bag of Bones*, 67)

Mike Noonan's remark captures the sense of prolonged bereavement found in King's fiction. Characters who suffer loss or loss of innocence are subject to extended periods of mourning. There is a sense in which grief is a source of the grotesque. A recurring theme in King's fiction is the fear and realisation of loss. Whether the loss is physical or psychological in nature it is often used as a device to weaken individuals, making them more vulnerable to the horrors and supernatural creatures haunting the stories. The weakening of characters through loss commonly results in the altered mindset of the affected characters. This 'softening of the target', as I shall call it here, acts as a device to add suspense to the narrative while soliciting empathy from the reader.

The loss and suffering in King's fiction affects both mind and body, taking advantage of the two, leaving characters traumatised, commonly ending in an irrational and extreme state of mind. From "Survivor Type" in *Skeleton Crew*, where a surgeon stranded on a deserted island amputates parts of himself to use as a food source (simultaneously losing himself physically and mentally in an effort to survive), to *Salem's Lot*, where a town is coming to terms with the mysterious deaths of its citizens while trying to survive the monsters within, King's fiction is a complicated mix of storylines based on loss. In his fiction there is more fight than flight, with characters required to kill to survive and save the mourning until after the monsters are all defeated or destroyed.

Steven Bruhm notes that the Gothic form has always been heavily weighted on the traumas affecting characters: “First, the Gothic itself is a narrative of trauma. Its protagonists usually experience some horrifying event that profoundly affects them, destroying (at least temporarily) the norms that structure their lives and identities” (‘Contemporary Gothic’, *Gothic Fiction*, 268). Bruhm goes on to connect the similarity between characters witnessing “images of hauntings, destruction and death, obsessive return to the shattering moment, forgetfulness or unwanted epiphany” to recent research and writings produced by Cathy Caruth in defining “trauma and its corollary, post-traumatic stress disorder” (‘Trauma and Experience’, *Trauma*, 10).

Loss and suffering are woven throughout King’s fiction, but I have selected a series of texts which best embody the theme, and the emotions and reactions directly related to it. This chapter is split into two sections in which I look at alternating means by which loss and suffering are used as a narrative device. First, I look at *Pet Sematary*, where the suffering of characters is a key component in the narrative drive and structure and a recurring motif throughout the novel. King admits that he had shied away from writing about the process of suffering after death because “for me, it was like looking through a window into something that could be” (*Art of darkness*, 154). In *Pet Sematary* King faces the subject of grief head-on and creates in the process an interesting study of how extreme faiths determine the depth of mourning. The members of the Creed family have contrasting means by which they deal with loss – through science and medicine, or through religious belief.

### **Domesticating Death: Raising Cats and Kids in *Pet Sematary***

I decided to focus on *Pet Sematary* – written phonetically to depict the sense of innocence of the children who created and continue to maintain the burial site – as it is a novel in which loss is used to create a history, a present and a possible future for the small town setting of Ludlow, Maine. While there is a strong presence of physical loss in the novel, notably through the deaths of Gage Creed and Norma Crandall, the novel also introduces the themes of loss of youth, loss of trust, loss of place and most importantly in this chapter loss of faith.

It is important at this time to take into consideration the significance of names King has given his characters. Names seem to be a game for King, sometimes ironic, often thought provoking, and always offering an initial sense of character. The family name of Creed holds multi-dimensional meaning with Rachel choosing faith in religion and Louis selecting his faith in medicine. The name is important as it is used regularly in the narrative to remind the reader of the faith Louis possesses – one that drives him to obsessive acts in an attempt to keep him from facing the consequences of failure. For Louis Creed, a man of medicine, failure means death and this catastrophic cost has required him to re-evaluate the loss of his religious faith. Douglas Winter speaks about this central focus of loss of faith within *Pet Sematary* and the importance the names have in the novel: “King named Ellie’s cat with a purpose; in the death of Church, he signals that the issue at the heart of *Pet Sematary* is that of the rational being’s struggle with modern death – death without God, death without hope of salvation” (*Art of Darkness*, 157).

As quickly as we get to know the Creed family we also get to know their setting. The Creeds have just moved to Ludlow, Maine, where they intend to start a new life, away from the hustle of the city. The history of Ludlow, we

come to learn, is etched in the headstones marking the graves of family pets that have been buried over the years in the Pet Sematary. “HANNAH THE BEST DOG THAT EVER LIVED 1929-1939” (35), “TRIXIE, KILT ON THE HIGHWAY SEPT 15, 1968” (34). These markings, with the misspellings and the simplistic syntax are the work of children, many of whom are now adults, if not dead themselves. The pet cemetery is a place that holds the tradition of the town just as much as it holds the bodies of dead pets. Jud Crandall emphasises the importance of the cemetery and the tradition that has been continued by generations of Ludlow youths when he says ““the town kids come up here a lot, I already told you that. They keep it nice. Nobody tells them to; they just do it”” (31).

This early indication that the local children have inherited burial practices and a strong sense of the responsibility which accompanies these practices is simultaneously engaging and disquieting. By establishing so early in the story that death is ceremoniously marked in Ludlow, King challenges the reader to equally believe in the practice of these burials, or at least accept that they have taken place for years and will continue to take place as long as local animals continue to die on the busy road.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “gage” as “Something of value deposited to ensure the performance of some action, and liable to forfeiture in case of non-performance; a pawn, pledge, security”. True to his name, Gage Creed is indeed a pawn to the powers that occupy the Micmac burial ground. His death (Louis’s failure to save him) results in the death of security and the demise of the Creed family.

Like the Creeds, we as readers have only just entered the town of Ludlow and must accept the traditions - creeds - or face being rejected. As the property of their house borders the tree-line which leads to the entrance of the pet cemetery, the Creeds face the prospect of witnessing the burial processions of many of Ludlow's house pets. This close proximity to the pet cemetery is something that Rachel Creed finds disconcerting, but she also finds solace in the peace and comfort of the setting. Seclusion comes at a cost. Once we have seen the pet cemetery for the first time we are again reminded of how idyllic the town of Ludlow is, in effect taking away the jitters of the creepy place that is hidden in the woodlands. The depth of the town and the history of the place are intensified in a very typical King fashion by a story-within-a-story told by Jud Crandall: "That year my dog Spot died –1910, I mean, the first time he died – Stanny was already an old man, and more than a little crazy" (152).

Thus begins the history of Ludlow, as created through the narratives introducing the Pet Sematary, building a strong sense of nostalgia. King's use of nostalgia is not merely a tool that assigns times to a place, but rather it deepens the complexity of the place by creating a series of layers, of happenings which add to the charm and darkness of this town. These histories, the characters and their contexts, add vividness and urgency, as the reader is aware and familiar with how each was created.

The predicaments that King's characters face are often escalations of the events of the past. These 'lost moments' of time are still present as they are, in true naturalistic form, the cause of the story being told. For instance *Gerald's Game* may focus on the story of Jessie Burlingame, a woman handcuffed naked to a bed in an isolated cabin, with her husband dead at her side, but the depth of

the story and the scale of her misfortune is revealed as we learn of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father. This abuse, we come to understand, is the reason Jessie has continually become involved with abusive and domineering men.

Jud Crandall's story about his dog Spot is similar as it assigns the town of Ludlow a sense of history as well as making us aware of the powers that the land behind the pet cemetery possesses. We learn that Jud buried Spot for the first time in the Micmac burial ground and the animal returned from the dead. By relaying this story to Louis Creed, a man of medicine who feels he is in competition with death, Jud Crandall is reintroducing the horrors of the past. Jud knows the trouble that will follow and yet he still suggests to Louis that burial in the sacred Indian land is an option; an option which has a horrifying outcome, made simply to spare Louis's daughter Ellie from having to face mourning her dead cat.

My interest here is in the ways in which the main characters deal with the suffering brought on by the experience of loss. Each of the characters in *Pet Sematary* deals with loss in a different way, each is heavily influenced by events of their past as well as the influence of religion and science. With Louis Creed we have a lapsed Methodist, who has since placed his faith in science and medicine. Instead of praying for the dying, Louis prides himself on an ability to resuscitate victims and accepts his moments of success as great triumphs. His wife Rachel, on the other hand, is more spiritual, although she admits the lapse in her once devout following of Judaism. Their daughter Ellie is finding her own faith in God from school and from investigating her own feelings about the loss

of loved ones. Jud Crandall, the Creeds' elderly neighbour has faith in the town of Ludlow, a community that has grown round him over the years.

Louis as a medical man brings a scientific perspective to the spirituality of suffering. We are reminded throughout the novel that Louis Creed has been successful in saving lives, and so has become proficient at his role of doctor - both at home and in the workplace. We are also reminded that while he is a good doctor he cannot save all of his patients. His memories of those he has lost - in his mind, failed - seems to have driven him to further accept the power of medicine rather than maintain his former faith in religion. One particular passage makes this evident: "He had pronounced two dozen people dead in his career and had never felt the passage of a soul" (26).

This shift from spiritual to scientific faith is the same change that caused an uproar during the age of enlightenment. Louis Creed displays, late in the novel, the same blind drive to cheat death through the use of science as seen in Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. The act of bringing a human being back to life fills both of these men with a sense of power but also proves, through experimentation with forbidden science, that death is not final - a theory that Louis Creed holds true until Church, the family cat, is killed.

I will discuss King's influences in greater detail in the second half of this essay, but it is important here to consider one of his key influences. Freud's theories have impacted King's writing, from the elaborate use of flashback to childhood to his vivid dream sequences. Freud's writings on gothic literature and the psyche have helped mould some of King's characters. Louis Creed is no exception and his drive to prove that death is not inevitable, even when it undermines his belief that death is a natural process, is suggested by Freud to be

a typical driving force and trait in scientists. Freud suggested that two things account for this conservatism. The first being the strength of the “emotional reaction to death” and the second is the “insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it”. According to Freud the fact that Biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is “a regular” or “avoidable” event of life will continue to drive further scientific study on the subject (*Art and Literature*, 364).

It seems that the main difference between Victor Frankenstein and Louis Creed is the initiation that brought each man to experiment with the dead. While Frankenstein’s monster was created in a laboratory with the direct intention of restoring life to an un-living thing, Louis Creed is motivated by the failure of domestic happiness, something Victor Frankenstein was neglecting in favour of his science. Both men do, however, come to a similar fate through their experiments when loved ones are killed by the monsters they have resurrected.

While Frankenstein collected parts of corpses whom he did not know in an effort to piece his monster together, the creature he creates looks upon him as a father-figure. Conversely, Louis Creed returns his son from the dead and upon his return looks into Gage’s eyes and can no longer see the boy as his son. In fact it is not until he injects the resurrected Gage with a hypodermic needle to kill him that Louis sees his son again, just as the boy dies for the second time: “Now Gage looked up at him and for a moment Louis saw his son – his real son – his face unhappy and filled with pain” (414).

Both men display a need to fulfil themselves as men of science, men of scientific faith, and their dedication to proving themselves takes them on disastrous journeys into unknown territory. Our first glimpse of Louis Creed saving a life comes after we have witnessed him fail in his attempt to save Victor

Pascal, a university student hit by a car while jogging with his fiancée. Louis's inability to save the young man causes him distress, however what Louis experiences is not suffering in the sense of mourning the departed, but rather concern with his failure to bring him back through use of his skills in medicine. His science, we later come to find, is the closest Louis Creed comes to religion. His profession requires him to consider the loss of the patient as a common occurrence, one he will have to accept as an occupational hazard.

Still, his decision to accept a position as head of the medical staff at the university is one that keeps him from having to face a regular influx of such extreme traumas – or so he had believed. In Louis's mind the University position gave him the opportunity to practice medicine without the constant treatment of the critically ill. Instead what he deals with are common ailments in a usually healthy population. By his own admission in the winter months leading to Christmas Louis and his staff were inundated with students suffering from 'bronchitis and several cases of mononucleosis and walking pneumonia' (182). All of these ailments in young and otherwise fit patients are easily treated, thereby allowing doctors to provide a simple and easy cure.

After a trauma occurs when a toboggan sled, driven by drunken fraternity boys, hits a Civil War cannon, Louis's reaction when relaying the story to Rachel shows how he thrives on dealing with the aftermath of accidents which are not life threatening:

He had laughed almost until he cried. Rachel had looked at him strangely, not understanding what was so funny, and Louis couldn't tell her: it had been a stupid accident, and

people had been hurt, but they would all walk away from it.

His laughter was partly relief, but it was partly triumph, too –  
won one today, Louis. (182)

Further evidence of Louis Creed's "saviour syndrome" is presented while he is contemplating Gage returning from the grave. Louis has a vision in which he sees himself and Gage heading to Florida, where Louis takes a job in Disneyland as a medic and finds himself continuing the mundane, yet enviable task of saving the lives of tourists:

He saw himself, dressed in white, resuscitating a pregnant woman who had foolishly gone on the Magic Mountain ride and had fainted. *Stand back, stand back, give her some air*, he heard himself saying, and the woman opened her eyes and smiled gratefully at him. (314)

It is ironic that the first patient Louis sees in his new role on the University medical staff is Victor Pascal, whom he fails to save (67). This failure to resuscitate plays heavily on Louis's conscience and is a force that builds throughout the novel as he seeks opportunities to redeem himself. One such opportunity appears as Louis chaperones Ellie on her Halloween trick-or-treating, while in the Crandall home, Norma Crandall suffers a severe heart attack. The episode is a key scene in the novel as it shows Louis's ability to save a life. Crucially, it encapsulates his view of the human body as an ever-decaying object. This loss of youth becomes paramount as the novel progresses, showing

that the loss of youth (and most importantly loss of the abilities and freedoms of youth, as displayed through the young and naïve Ellie in her Halloween outfit looking on) reminds characters of the ever-present nature of death. Death, Louis Creed believes, is “just as natural as childbirth” (59).

While Norma’s heart is failing, Louis reflects on what she may have been like in her younger years. His attention to her condition is secondary to the notion of the lost young girl, the one hiding inside the skin of an aged and dying woman:

She opened her mouth. Stale denture breath wafted out, and Louis felt a moment of aching sorrow for her, lying here on her kitchen floor in a litter of apples and Halloween candy. It occurred to him that once she had been seventeen, her breasts eyed with great interest by the young men of the neighbourhood, all her teeth her own, and the heart under her shirtwaist a tough little pony-engine. (104)

This is the reflection of Louis’s own fear and trepidation at the realisation that he and Rachel are on their way to the same end: the slow and inevitable progression of time and its effects on the human body. Louis’s thought – “*We’re really going to get old*” (25) – is a reflection of his concern early in the novel – the whispers of mortality he hears – and it is a concern that follows him throughout the tale.

Louis does not appear to feel a sense of suffering at the idea of himself and Rachel growing old, yet there is a sense of melancholy when attending to the fact that Ellie and Gage will not always be children. While speaking with Ellie

about Norma's death and the possibilities of an afterlife Louis confesses to being a lapsed Methodist. He encounters guilt at having missed an opportunity to pass those taught religious beliefs on to his daughter: "She's only five, *but* it's late for that. Jesus Christ, it gets late so fast" (197). This reflects Louis's belief that the innocence of youth makes them vulnerable, and accepting of new notions, as adults develop stringent barriers to block less tangible ideas.

On another occasion, the day of "Gage's first haircut came and passed, and when Louis saw his son's hair growing in darker, he joked about it and did his own mourning – but only in his heart" (218). As I will discuss later in this chapter Louis suffers inwardly throughout the novel. When Gage is killed Louis turns again to this inward, self-obsessed mourning, which becomes such a confining and consuming state that he develops an outward appearance of cold-heartedness. It turns him 'stoney' and renders him unable to help Rachel and Ellie come to terms with the loss of the young son and brother.

However distressing the realisation of physical degeneration may be, Louis Creed continues to press on. His interest in medicine and his faith in the healing powers of modern science give him an understanding of death and its natural processes. His interest in the subject of death, as inevitable as it must be in his profession, often turns to the facts he has come to understand during his years of study. When introduced to the Micmac burial ground by Jud, Louis's initial reaction is to question the ritual of burying the cat beyond the Pet Sematary, but this urge is overcome by a memory – stopping him from questioning Jud's suggestions. Facts help Louis Creed cope with the notion of death, of the finality of death, and of the beliefs and rituals spawned from it:

This made Louis think of the Egyptians, who had gone that one better: they had slaughtered the pets of royalty, so that the souls of the pets might go along to whatever afterlife there might be with the soul of the master. He remembered reading about the slaughter of more than ten thousand pets and domestic animals following the decease of one pharaoh's daughter – included in the tally had been six hundred pigs, and two thousand peacocks. The pigs had been scented with attar of roses, the dead lady's favourite perfume, before their throats were cut. (131)

This passage clarifies Louis's translation of facts to faith where he thinks there may be an afterlife, but is uncertain as to what may be waiting in the afterlife. His nature is to heal and believe in the hard facts, not to think about the element of the unknown. When considering death Louis counters the uncertainty of what the afterlife may be like with the facts and data from scientific studies and his personal notion of death as being as natural as life itself. Suffering and grief are psychological states that have a cure through medical treatment, as does everything else, including, he will later discover, death.

Louis's theories are based on his experience, first that of the Methodist Church which cannot stop people from dying and later his participation in another institution, that of organised medicine. His affiliation with medicine has seen the saving of lives rather than prayers for the dead. His mother's words continue to come back to him throughout the novel: 'What's dead is dead'. Still, his conviction and the medical training that has brought him to head up the

campus medical staff of the University of Maine in Orono creates a barrier that can postpone this inevitability. It is clear that Louis finds cheating death the most rewarding aspect of his profession.

This triumph Louis feels when saving lives is his new religion, one that holds all his faith, as he is not required to be passive in the presence of death. The line 'won one today, Louis' is a reflection of the game he plays with death on a daily basis. His philosophical take on the position of medical practitioner is not one of providing medicine and comfort to those dying, but rather one which pits doctor against the 'death' opponent. These encounters with death come as a challenge in which the victor retains the patient as prize. For Louis it is not the physical object, or patient, which lasts as prize, but the sense that he has succeeded in scoring for the side of the living. This may be a rather callous way of looking at the doctor/patient relationship, but it is one that explains why Louis chose to stay away from hospitals and private practice where chances of such encounters may be more frequent with an increased number of patients to see.

Louis's faith in the medical institution grows exponentially throughout the novel. Each resurrection drives him further to the extremes of his belief in the ability to heal. While he questions the notion of an afterlife in a conversation with his daughter Ellie, he sees the powers of the Micmac burial ground, having returned Church from his roadside death. His Methodist upbringing may have taught him to pray for the animal, for its soul and its journey to an afterlife, but his medical profession organises the possibilities of reincarnation into discernable and discrete blocks of information.

This is the first of Louis Creed's excursions to the Indian burial ground and one that is initiated by Jud Crandall. Having saved his wife, Jud feels compelled to help Louis from suffering the effects of loss within his family.

"Does she love the cat?"

"Yes, but -"

Jud's voice, soft and somehow logical: "And do you love her?"

"Of course I love her, she's my dau-"

"Then come on."

Louis went. (121)

This excerpt homes in on a key theme within *Pet Sematary*, the drive of its characters to save others from having to deal with that which will cause emotional pain. The fact that Jud leads Louis to the burial ground, after witnessing the ill-fated resurrection of his own pet, is important to consider. Tony Magistrale sees Jud Crandall's suggestion to Louis to bury Churchill in the pet cemetery as kindly meant, but unknowingly working toward the design of evil which exists in the Micmac burial ground.

Jud is well-intentioned; he introduces Louis to the vampiric mystery of the Micmac cemetery because he sincerely wants to help him deal with the problem of his dead cat. But in once again transgressing the "barrier that was not meant to be crossed," Jud is also serving evil's design. He becomes, albeit unwittingly, as much manipulated by the power located at the

Micmac gravesite as the spectres (Jack) Torrance must confront in residence at the Overlook. (*Hollywood's Stephen King*, 101)

Louis buries Church in an effort to save Ellie from the grief that would follow for the same reason that he refrains from engaging Rachel in conversations about death. Rachel holds tightly to a secret history, a history deeply rooted in the loss of her sister when she was a young and innocent child. Once again, King's characters are often devastated by memories of their past. While Rachel is very much spiritual over physical, she has suffered the loss of her sister, Zelda, who succumbed to spinal meningitis. She has since sidestepped the notion of loss that comes into her life by staying away from funerals of loved ones:

“Lou, I couldn't,” she said simply. She sounded very sleepy now. “Since then I've been... I guess a little phobic on the subject.”

*Just a little phobic*, Louis thought. *Yeah, right.*

“I can't... seem to help it. In my mind I know you're right, that death is perfectly natural, good, even – but what my mind knows and what happens... inside me...” (209)

But when Gage is killed by a speeding truck there is no-one left to save them from suffering. This is the crucial moment in the novel where Louis, who has been able to save Norma Crandall from her heart attack, Gage from choking, and six college kids from a toboggan accident, is absorbed by the loss of his son. It is

a loss that brings suffering which accentuates the individuality of the characters. We witness Rachel suffering as a mother, but also as a woman who only recently came to terms with the loss of her sister. We also see Ellie, who has come to terms with the inevitability of death, while not accepting the ‘right of God’ to take the life, understand that it is part of the process of living.

It is important to consider this section of the text where Gage is killed more closely as it was here that King found himself having trouble with the subject matter. While he had killed child characters in his earlier novels (Tad Trenton in *Cujo*) the death of Gage Creed was the first “death on a rational level” that King had written.

I have always been aware of the things that I didn’t want to write about. The death of a child is one – and the death of Tad Trenton at the end of *Cujo* was bad enough, but there I didn’t have to deal with the aftermath. And I have always shied away from the entire funeral process – the aftermath of death. The funeral parlors, the burial, the grief, and, particularly where you are dealing with the death of a healthy child, the guilt – the feeling that you are somehow at fault. And for me, it was like looking through a window into something that could be.

(*The Art of Darkness*, 154)

After Louis’s conversation with Ellie that delves into ideas of faith and death she seems to understand, from having experienced the loss of Norma Crandall that life goes on. However, even when explaining the possibility of the existence and

non-existence of an afterlife to Ellie, Louis remains very stoic on the subject, showing that with his daughter he pulls no punches on the subject of death and remains more logical and analytical than religious:

What we *know* is this: when we die, one of two things happens. Either our souls and thoughts somehow survive the experience of dying, or they don't. If they do, that opens up every possibility you could think of. If we don't, it's just blotto. The end. (198)

Ellie, showing a measure of resolve typical of many of King's child characters, tells Louis: "If he [Church] died now, I could take it," she said, and then seemed to consider the thought she had just spoken aloud, as if mildly startled. Then she said, as if agreeing with herself: "Sure I could." And went to find Rachel" (200).

Even though Ellie believes she can handle the death of Church she mourns the loss of Norma for what she may no longer share with her. "No more cookies," Ellie sobbed. "She made the best oatmeal cookies I ever ate. But she won't make them any more because she's *dead*. Daddy, why do people have to be dead?" (214). This affirms that Ellie has not yet grasped the similarities between the finality of human death and animal death. Both are final, and both cause equal suffering in those left behind. As one of King's children Ellie has the responsibility to continue to ask the questions and make the demands that are the most direct and affecting. In her simplicity and purity Ellie convinces Louis Creed that he cannot give up on Gage following his death. Ironically it is Ellie's

faith in God which gives Louis the faith within himself to attempt the impossible and bring his son back to life.

“I’m going to wish really hard,” Ellie said calmly, “and pray to God for Gage to come back.”

“Ellie – “

“God can take it back if wants to,” Ellie said. “He can do anything He wants to.”

“Ellie, God doesn’t do things like that,” Louis said uneasily, and in his mind’s eye he saw Church squatting on the closed lid of the toilet, staring at him with those muddy eyes as Louis lay in the tub.

“He does so,” she said. “In Sunday School the teacher told us about this guy Lazarus. He was dead and Jesus brought him back to life. He said, ‘Lazarus, come forth,’ and the teacher said if he’d just said ‘Come forth,’ probably everybody in that graveyard would have come out, and Jesus only wanted Lazarus” (251).

Likewise, it is Louis’s “mind’s eye” memory of what happened to Church upon his return from the Micmac burial grounds which slow his attempts at a second resurrection.

Freud speaks about the actions of Leonardo de Vinci following the death of his mother, where the artist shows his recognition of his mother by paying for an expensive funeral. Freud suggests it is difficult to understand why he went to

such great expense and maintains it is understood best when put into the context of Leonardo's "obsessional neurosis": "What we have before us in the account of the costs of the funeral is the expression – distorted out of all recognition – of his mourning for his mother. We wonder how such distortion could come about, and indeed we cannot understand it if we treat it as a normal mental process. But similar processes are well known to us in abnormal conditions of neurosis and especially of what is known as 'obsessional neurosis'" (*Art and Literature*, 197).

Like Louis Creed, Leonardo had according to Freud "succeeded in subjecting his feelings to the yoke of research and in inhibiting their free utterance; but even for him there were occasions when what had been suppressed obtained expression forcibly. The death of the mother he had once loved so dearly was one of these" (197). Jud Crandall, who has already endured Norma's death from a second heart attack, witnesses Gage's death and is present throughout the Creeds' grieving. As he has progressed through the grieving process once before, his presence during their grieving is that of experience and guidance as much as that of a friend.

It was Jud who offered Louis the opportunity to bring Church back to life and it was Jud who reminded Louis why they were doing it. In speaking to Louis about Ellie's understanding that Church will be different when he returns from the burial ground he offers his take on death and the suffering it brings:

Maybe she'll learn something about what death really is,  
which is where the pain stops and the good memories begin.  
Not the end of life, but the end of pain. You don't tell her  
those things; she will figure them out on her own. (164)

Louis takes his daughter's dead cat to the Micmac burial ground in an act that will not only save him from having to face his daughter's mourning, but also explore the possibility of unexplained forces, and with this exploration (and experimentation) he hopes to find a way to beat the death which his science cannot cheat. What Louis does not take into consideration, possibly as he is a man who has lost his connection with the importance of spiritual faith and no longer has consideration as to what it means to 'others', is the moral impropriety of using the land which has been taken from (lost by) the Micmac Indians:

The Micmac burial ground that lies beyond the pet cemetery exerts a malignant and ancient spiritual influence over the environs of Ludlow, Maine; the Wendigo who presides over this burial ground is the amoral nature god who returns to reclaim what Christianity has taken from the natives.  
(‘Contemporary Gothic’, *Gothic Fiction*, 271)

What the Indian people lost was more than their sacred lands. History shows that the Micmac was a tribe of people that lived as one with nature. The French colonialists were so taken by the hospitality and lifestyle of the Micmac people that they left them to remain on their land and instead built their villages on land nearby. It was not until the English arrived and took the land from the French that trouble for the Micmac people began:

The English trait of colonialization was rapidly put into effect, the Micmac being confined to reservations and the old free hunting and fishing economy gone forever. The subsequent exploitation – further loss of lands, loss of water resources and the offer of only seasonal jobs at subsistence wages – is a shameful chapter in the settling of Acadia, but it did demonstrate the great resilience of the people. (*The Native Americans*, 453)

One of the principles which helped the Micmac people survive the reservation lifestyle was their philosophy that they were part of nature and one with the earth. The Micmac philosophy said: “Man was part of nature – not outside it – he was but part of the webs of the natural world, and the earth and woodlands could be neither owned nor exploited.” (455) According to one notable scholar, C. E. Cleland, who studied the Micmac people in depth, this close connection with nature made life and death a seamless entity. “Thus a man is born and for a time becomes a cannibal, eating and taking energy from his fellow creatures; when his soul and shadow leaves his body, Earth Mother takes it back to nourish the plants which in turn feed both animals and men. His debt is repayed, his spirit freed, and the cycle of life complete” (*The Native Americans*, 455).

This closeness with nature and the spirituality shown by the Micmac Indians would not be easily understood by Louis Creed. Having already witnessed the power of the Micmac land he is no longer concerned about the logical, that death is a natural process of life, nor is he concerned with the moral implications of using land which has been taken from (lost by) the Micmac

people. There is nothing that will stop his plans to bring his son back to life because for Louis Creed rationality is gone and what is left is the all-consuming guilt of a man who witnessed what the burial ground has to offer. As a medical man Louis is not concerned with the medicine man. He has made an assessment of the power of the Micmac burial ground. He is conscious of its power and feels the presence, although he cannot explain it he is certain it is there. He also has an understanding of what it has taken from him and what it expects to get in return for his use of the sacred grounds:

*It has fed on your grief ... no, more than that. It's doubled it, cubed it, raised it to the nth power. And it isn't just grief it feeds on. Sanity. It's eaten your sanity. The flaw is only the inability to accept, not uncommon. It's cost you your wife and it's almost surely cost you your best friend as well as your son. This is it. What comes when you're too slow wishing away the thing that knocks on your door in the middle of the night is simple enough. Total darkness. (406)*

While in this delicate mental state Louis looks for a source of solace and inevitably delves deeply into his faith in science in an attempt to find an end to the suffering. This is a crucial turning point in the novel and in the character of Louis Creed as this far into the narrative Louis has seen death as something 'as natural as birth' and often a good thing. His reference to death has been as a means to end the suffering, yet the death of Gage brings a sense of loss that Louis has yet to experience. His cheating death, and his continued competition to

save lives, has kept him from having to participate in the act of grieving. More accurately, rather than returning to his 'lost' faith following the loss of his son Louis chooses to explore his new possibility as an extension of his faith in science, that of the magic held within the Micmac burial grounds.

The novel takes a horrifying turn when we witness the extremes of Louis Creed's personality. Unlike Jack Torrance, Louis Creed is a calm and thoughtful man, yet one who is irrational in caring for his family, a very ironic flaw in his character as he is seemingly so caring in his medical career. His irrationality leads to decision making which causes the demise of his family and leads to the most horrific of premises in the horror novel, that of returning the dead to the living.

Slavoj Zizek suggests that the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture is that "of a person who does not want to stay dead but returns again and again to pose a threat to the living" (*Looking Awry*, 22). This point is considered "partially correct" by Jesse W. Nash who suggests Zizek has failed to take into consideration two key elements, that "the fantasy, as it is rooted in the popular imagination and the archaic religious mind, is based on a fear of the dead, and that fantasy is not that someone will "want" to come back from the dead but that someone or something will bring that person back" ('Postmodern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 153). Nash goes on to discuss a second point which she believes is important as it "flies in the face of what we know from our experience and from what we know medically and scientifically." She says: "A second and perhaps even more significant aspect of this common fantasy is that it expresses a pre-scientific or superstitious fear that death is not final, that death

can somehow be overturned, that one can be both dead and alive at the same time” (153).

In terms of Louis Creed this irrational belief that someone can be both alive and dead at the same time goes against his faith in science. He is in effect losing his faith by considering and performing the exhumation and reburial of Gage in the Micmac burial ground. His scientific knowledge would tell him what his mother had been telling him for years – dead is dead. However, he has seen the possibility. While unexplained, the Micmac burial ground had returned Church and spared his daughter from suffering through his death, and so it too could return Gage and spare him and his family from suffering the loss of his son.

Saving lives is clearly Louis Creed’s passion and so his faith in medicine is tangible and his failings cause him to question his faith or at least the practice of his faith. In terms of Gage his failure to save a life is heightened by his wish to quell the suffering he and his family will experience. Here, it is important to see how closely related Louis’s feelings (and the situation of the speeding truck and his naïve son) are to King the man as well as the writer.

An inspiration for the scene in which Gage is killed by a speeding semi is stranger than fiction. King explained during an interview with *London’s Evening Standard* newspaper that: “In *Pet Sematary* there is a little boy who runs into a road and a truck runs him over. At that time my little boy had run into a road and a truck was coming. I caught him by one leg and yanked him down and saved his life – which is what God made parents for, to save their kids’ lives. When I wrote about that, I did have the feeling of being on a psychiatrist’s couch articulating some traumatic possibility” (*Creepshows*, 58).

This explains the power held within the narrative, but as dramatic a revelation as it is we can also determine that it accounts for the manner in which Louis, lost in his own thoughts, makes reference to the psychological, and textbook, stages of the grieving process. His attempts to understand the stages, and the stage his wife Rachel is currently experiencing, allows him the space to assess the amount of loss his wife feels. Similarly, King in researching his novel would have carried out his own research in an attempt to learn what he would have suffered if not for his narrow escape. He was able to “bring the boy down” whereas Louis’ hand brushed the hood of Gage’s jacket. He was a fraction too far away and that small amount of space and time changed him. His obsession becomes apparent and we see this through sections of the novel that tend to read as very clinical and precise. Here, Louis Creed is a medical man dealing with his wife’s suffering through textbook knowledge:

All the textbooks he’d read on the subject of death told him that the bereaved’s first strong impulse in the aftermath of death-shock is to get away from the place where it happened... and that to follow such an impulse may turn out to be the most harmful course of action, because it allows the bereaved the dubious luxury of refusing to come to terms with the new reality. (294)

This is a very rational and logical means by which Louis is seemingly taking control of his overwhelming grief. Still, it becomes frightening when placed in the context of the irrational man we see earlier in the novel. After witnessing speeding trucks on the road in front of his house, and following the death of

Church, Louis neglects his children's safety. Nash says: "He [Louis] does not build a fence at this point, heeding a real warning; no, he considers resurrecting Church. So central is the cat to the health of his family – and thus the significance of the cat's name – that Creed takes the car to the old Indian burial ground and resurrects him." (156)

Despite everything, Louis puts Rachel and Ellie on a plane to Chicago so he can bury Gage with the hope that he will return with fewer changes than those he witnessed with Church. He again places his own need to restore his loss ahead of his family's need to work through their loss. Louis himself intends to work through Gage's death by bringing him back to life (his medical/physical method of dealing with loss) while allowing Rachel the false luxury of separation from troubling memories of Gage.

Louis's own sense of loss is expressed more as a distress that he was not able to stop the tragedy from taking place. He was unable to grab Gage's jacket before he made it to the road, stepping in front of the speeding truck. His fingers had touched the fabric, but never gained enough purchase to pull his son back. But in his dreams Louis is able to bring the boy back. In the dreams that come after he has been drinking, after his conversations with Jud Crandall who warns against using the Micmac burial ground to bury Gage, Louis dreams about the day and saves Gage:

Louis put on a final burst of speed and leaped, throwing himself out straight and parallel to the ground like a football player about to make a tackle...(277)

This series of events is the same as the day on which Gage died, brought on by the sound of the trucks thundering down the road as he fell asleep. But in the dream his fingers do not slip down the back of Gage's jacket, and the boy does not stumble out in front of the truck. In the dream, "just as Gage's forward motion carried him into the road, Louis's fingers brushed the back of his jacket ... and then snagged it" (278).

The guilt Louis feels when considering the margin by which he missed saving his son's life is a guilt that weighs as heavily as Rachel's remorse at being unable to protect him. However, Rachel has never been able to protect the children from physical harm. When Gage is stricken with flu early in the novel he begins to choke and in a hysterical moment Rachel summons Louis to administer care to the boy. She is paralysed by the prospect of losing her children in the same way she lost her sister Zelda. Even after Louis has cleared the vomit choking his son's airways Rachel remains edgy: "He almost died, didn't he, Louis? He almost ch-ch-ch- oh my *God*" (180). Louis replies by saying: "The chances are fifty-to-one he would have cleared it himself, Rachel. I just gave him a hand".

He then responds to Rachel's fear that Gage was close to dying by simply stating that "we're all close. All the time" (180). With Louis the philosophy that death is always close at hand does not cause undue distress. He has accepted his responsibility to his family and friends and his patients that he is the one on call to postpone the inevitability of death. This is expressed after Norma suffers a brain embolism, which takes her life as Louis was not on hand to save her (193).

Having Rachel and Ellie leave Ludlow to spend time with Rachel's family in Chicago gives Louis the time alone to deal with his grief, and plot

Gage's homecoming. Rachel's difficulty in coping with the loss of her son is not eased by her emotionally distant husband, yet she cannot feel angry at his lack of reaction to Gage's death:

There had been times in the dark watches of the night when she had longed to hate Louis for the grief he had fathered inside her, and for not giving her the comfort she needed (or allowing her to give the comfort she needed to give), but she could not. She loved him too much still, and his face had been so pale ... so watchful ... (368)

Rachel considers Louis as the saviour – and sentinel – of the family, and he is in terms of healing physical wounds, and standing guard over the grave, but Rachel is the saviour in terms of emotional wounds. After Norma's death she comforts Ellie by helping her bake oatmeal cookies, the same cookies Norma had made. After Louis loses his patient Victor Pascal in the University Medical Center Rachel comforts him with physical contact and emotional support. Yet Rachel lacks the ability to heal physical wounds, just as Louis is incapable, outside of taught psychology, to deal with emotional distress. For this reason Louis insists that Rachel take Ellie to Chicago, with the supposed purpose of beginning the healing process, while in actuality it is designed to allow Louis to begin his own recovery process: raising the dead.

While the act of bringing Gage back to life is one that would not sit well with those who grieve over the death, Louis cannot help but consider

the option as a means of rectifying his failure to save his son's life. This revolving and evolving secret remorse Louis holds for failing his son is one that applies to him an outward appearance of an unsympathetic mourner, one who believes their suffering is greater than that of others. This outward appearance causes difficulty for Louis, as Steve and Jud believe him to be neglecting his responsibility, as a husband and father, to support his wife and daughter through the difficulties of losing a loved one. While this may be true in terms of emotional support, Louis believes that his attempts to return Gage to his family through use of the Micmac burial ground will salve all the suffering and restore the loss. Steve and Jud, who offer him no support, while giving Rachel all they can offer, only see a man selfish in his own suffering:

After a moment – in terms of clock-time probably quite short, but both then and in retrospect it seemed long – Steve put an arm around her and hugged her gently. His eyes on Louis's were reproachful and angry. Louis turned from them toward Jud, but Jud was looking down, as if in shame. There was no help there. (244)

The men around Louis feel he should take control and help his wife and daughter through this time of suffering. Louis can't help himself as he contemplates the slim margin by which he almost avoided the tragedy from taking place. But he was too tired to shake it. "Perhaps, after twelve or sixteen hours of sleep, he would be able to comfort Rachel a little" (245). This seems

cold and disconnected, yet it is important to remember that Louis is a doctor who thinks of timescales for healing, even in short terms with the medicinal agent being nothing more than sleep.

Jud later uses a softer approach and tells Louis a story about bodies of dead soldiers being brought back to Ludlow on a train. The soldiers were killed in Italy during the Second World War:

A second child might have reminded old Bill that there's others that feel the pain and have to be helped through. I guess in that way, you're luckier – having another child and all, I mean. A child and a wife who are both alive and well. (265)

This does nothing for Louis, who at Gage's funeral turns away from Jud's damning stare: "Louis looked away. There was nothing he could do for her, not yet. She would have to swim in her grief as best she could. His thoughts were too full of his son" (284). More accurately, his thoughts were with the plans he was turning over and over in his mind, plans of patiently enduring the funeral and the burial. Plans that will see his wife follow her parents to their home with Ellie grieving at her side. His thoughts were with the plans to resurrect his son and return his family to the way it had been, skipping the grieving process entirely and leaving it for another day. Louis Creed, the great cheater of death.

The connection I made earlier in this chapter with Louis Creed paralleling the interests of Victor Frankenstein begins to surface frequently as Louis prepares, both logistically and psychologically, for the reburial of his dead son. While logistically there are concerns around removing the body from the

grave and transporting it to the Micmac burial ground without being detected, there is also concern at the outcome of the operation. While Louis makes clear his concerns about the resurrection in medical terms he does not speak about the spiritual and moral dilemma of returning his dead son to life.

Robert Hertz's research into death and burial practices has been influential in the study of mourning and funeral practices around the world. His simple suggestion that "death has not always been represented and felt as it is in our society" (*Death and the Right Hand*, 28) was enough to prompt further exploration into the interpretations of death and burial practices. While I will not go into great detail here, there are some connections with Louis Creed's motives that changed my interpretation of his actions:

The detailed attention to the sequence of mortuary rites is intended to show how these rituals organise and orchestrate private emotions, a point which is illustrated with the example of weeping which, Hertz argues, is both institutionally governed and the manifestation of an emotion which appears falsely internal. (*Death & the Regeneration of Life*, 3)

In Hertz' theory he argues that the process of burial and mourning takes place in two phases: "'Society' had to meet this threat by recuperating from the deceased what it had given of itself and regrafting it to another host. There are thus two phases to the mortuary rituals: a phase of disaggregation (represented by the temporary disposal of the corpse) followed by a phase of reinstallation (represented by the secondary burial) from which the collectivity emerges

triumphant over death. This dual process is mirrored in belief about the fate of the soul and the ritual condition of the mourners” (*Death and the Right Hand*, 81).

In terms of King’s novel, Louis Creed had already witnessed Gage’s funeral. Hertz’s suggestion that the burial process takes place in two phases is reinterpreted in Louis’s actions where the ‘disaggregation’ is the temporary disposal of his son’s body in a plot at Pleasantview Cemetery. While this was meant to begin the ‘regrafting’ process onto another ‘host’ it was only the beginning of the intended ‘reinstallation’ which Louis was to carry out in the Micmac burial ground. This makes an eerie sense as Gage is then regrafted to the host of the Wendigo which protects the lands surrounding the sacred site, returning to Louis a very different Gage.

This should have been no surprise for Louis who had already witnessed Church come back as a different cat from the one killed by a speeding truck. True, he questions how the boy will return having suffered the same fate. As a man of science Louis sees death as the failing of the body rather than the releasing of the soul. After Gage’s death, Louis becomes introspective in his grief. The suffering Louis Creed endures is remorse at having been unable to save Gage and contemplation as to how to bring him back. His grief exists more in connection with his wife, as she suffers for a tragedy he has not been able to avoid; just as he felt for Rachel when Norma Crandall died: “Louis’s brow furrowed, and in spite of this terrible news he found it was Rachel his mind was going out to, seeking, trying to find” (192).

According to Freud, while mourning seems natural and “self-evident” to layman, it has remained a “great riddle” to psychologists who see it as “one of

those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back” (*Art and Literature*, 289). This scientific look at mourning as a great riddle may explain why Louis has the ability to overcome grief, especially when it is connected with deaths that he has had no chance to prevent. Norma died while he was at the University Medical Center executing his responsibility as caretaker of the dying. Earlier he admits during a television interview that Victor Pascow was “mortally wounded upon being struck” (71), which again clears him of responsibility for the young man’s death. While these two losses are out of Louis’s control, Gage’s death not only occurred before him, but he had touched the fabric of the boy’s jacket before making it to the road. For this reason Louis is consumed by the life he was unable to save, that of his child whom he had saved earlier that year, and whom he, as a parent, (according to King) was supposed to save again and again.

It must be taken into account that up to this point Louis’s feelings have been hidden. There are glimpses of Louis’s pain when recollecting the near-miss when grasping for Gage, but as to the full extent of his feelings about the prospect of living without Gage, for example, there have been very few suggestions that he has considered living without him at all. This may suggest that Louis has always considered the possibility of bringing his son back to life, which would reverse the effects of the death and return his family to the way it had been before the accident.

As Louis gets closer to bringing Gage back he returns to his experience as a medical practitioner, demonstrating that he is not interested in rekindling his old religious beliefs. The lapsed Methodist has a stronger faith in science than in his lost religion. That is not to say Louis completely lacks a spiritual side, as this

is demonstrated in his conversations with Ellie regarding faith. These exchanges with his daughter demonstrate that he now considers the possibilities of an afterlife with a scientific rationale.

At times this rationale offers insights into how Louis feels about the loss of his son. For instance when Louis considers Gage's death and Rachel's suffering it is stated: "When it started not to hurt, it started not to matter. She understood, perhaps, Louis thought, how easy it would be to let Gage become dead" (252). This reflects the beliefs of Jud who tells Ellie to continue thinking of Gage and he will always be around. Still, Louis disconnects himself from the process of suffering by absorbing himself into his son's re-interment.

According to Louis it is science alone that can bring his son back to life, and it is his son's resurrection that will return Rachel to the woman she has been, curing her suffering. Louis's faith in science and his need to redeem himself as a healing man are demonstrated in the following passage:

*I will make a diagnosis, not only of his body but of his spirit. I will make allowances for the trauma of the accident itself, which he may or may not remember. Keeping the example of Church before me, I will expect retardation, perhaps mild, perhaps profound. I will judge our ability to reintegrate Gage into our family on the basis of what I see over a period of from twenty-four to seventy-two hours. And if the loss is too great – or if he comes back as Timmy Baterman apparently came back, as a thing of evil – I will kill him. (313)*

The vocabulary Louis uses is in itself medical, not one of a suffering father, but one of a physician about to perform an operation. This operation is one which will right the wrongs for Louis even if it fails to work and Gage remains dead. However, Gage's return to life would allow Louis to verify that he is able to cheat death and by doing so he will be satisfied to "give Gage back" if he is not able to serve another purpose, to return to Rachel as a loving son.

This persona reflects heavily on that of Victor Frankenstein, a man who loves his fiancée, who goes to her to marry having brought the monster to life, and who suffers her death because he was willing to abandon his responsibility to the monster. This responsibility of bringing life back from the dead is weighted in a statement made by Victor Pascoe: "The soil of a man's heart is stonier, Louis," the dying man whispered. "A man grows what he can ... and tends it" (67). It is a statement that is echoed by Jud Crandall who delivers Louis to the Micmac burial ground to bury Church. It is a warning that a man must accept the choices he makes, living by the consequences of his actions, good or bad.

Louis continues to consider his experiment in medical terms: "The reinterment completed, he would fly to Chicago and join his family. Neither Rachel nor Ellie need ever know about his failed experiment" (313). Again, this demonstrates that Gage is no longer his dead son, but rather an object of his failure, or of his God-like ability if the boy were to return without complications. Further indication of this monstrous conjunction comes when Louis considers the possible outcome of the experiment:

*Besides, he gibbered to himself, it may still come out all right,  
there is no gain without risk, perhaps no risk without love.  
There's still my bag, not the one downstairs but the one in our  
bathroom on the high shelf, the one I sent Ellie for the night  
Norma had her heart attack. There are syringes, and if  
something happens ... something bad ... no one has to know  
but me. (375)*

Gage's reburial according to Louis has been well planned and he has a contingency in case the boy returns in a similar manner to Church. Yet the funeral rites which Louis enacts on his own, laying the boy to rest in the sacred Indian ground, should be considered. After placing the boy in the ground Louis returns to his home and falls asleep. He feels tired and in performing the task he can finally rest: "To lie here on his back, at rest, was exquisite. His thoughts turned to Disney World again. He saw himself in a plain white uniform, driving a white van with the mouse ears logo on it – nothing to indicate it was a rescue unit on the outside, of course, nothing to scare the paying customers" (383).

This sense of relief is short-lived as Gage returns with the spirit of the Wendigo inside of him and begins to enact the spirit's terrible will upon first Jud Crandall and then Rachel Creed: "I brought you something, mommy!" (399). Louis wakes from his sound slumber to find the atrocities his son has committed and in a final connection with Victor Frankenstein, or more to the monster, he feels the solitude and the disaster of his own actions: "That click was in his head. It was the sound of some relay fusing and burning out for ever, the sound of lightening stroking down in a direct hit, the sound of a door opening" (413).

It does not take long for Louis to realise his mistake in bringing Gage back to life and it is my belief that this reflects his extreme drive to cheat death rather than reflecting on his affections toward his son. By succeeding in raising Gage he erases the narrow miss in keeping Gage from reaching the road. While his hand missed his son's hood he has hit the mark with re-creating his son. Louis realises that Gage comes back different from the boy he had been, returning a monstrous form of his self. This zombie-like state is described by Marina Warner in *Phantasmagoria*:

A zombie is someone whose soul has been stolen, whose body has not exactly died but passed into the power of a magician or owner who uses it for his (rarely her) own purposes (357).

While the wendigo spirit at the Micmac burial ground may be controlling the actions of the zombie-like Gage, it is apt to consider that Louis Creed is equally to be credited as a magician of sorts as it was his placing Gage in the ground which began the transformation. Louis, as the 'owner' of Gage, is using his dead son to experiment in his obsession with cheating death. As puppeteer Louis is even less capable than he is at controlling fate and his scientific logic soon sets in as he concludes his only option to limit the ill effects of his mistake is to "mercy kill" his son.

Louis finds his son and administers the lethal dose using the hypodermic needle. He watches the creature stumble as it begins to die and when it calls to him he goes to it after seeing it returning to his "real son":

Louis stood there for a moment, then went to Gage, moving carefully, expecting some trick. But there was no trick, no sudden leap with clawed hands. He slid his fingers expertly down Gage's throat, found the pulse, and held it. He was then a doctor for the last time in his life, monitoring the pulse, monitoring until there was nothing, nothing inside, nothing outside. (414)

For the first time in the novel we see Louis accepting death, welcoming it. His fight against death, however, is not over as his sense of responsibility in the murder of his wife brings him to question if the other attempts to resurrect his family were simply quirks of fate. Following her death at the hands of Gage, Louis – seeing what role his hands have played in creating the monster – decides one last trip to the burial ground is in order. True to his irrational self his immediate reaction is to journey to the Micmac land to return his wife to the living rather than considering Ellie, the surviving member of his family who remains with Rachel's parents in Chicago. For Louis Creed it is no longer the living that concerns him. As in King's latest offering, *Lisey's Story*, the pulling power of the past, and in particular the "plots" that hold the secrets of the dead, is both a coping mechanism against the pressures of the present and a desperate way of warding off fearful futures.



## **Chapter Four**

### **The Selfish Apparition: Memory and Fear Projecting Entity**

## **The Selfish Apparition: Memory and Fear Projecting Entity**

In *Bag of Bones*, bestselling author Mike Noonan finds himself contacted by his dead wife. Noonan, as one of King's writers, has the capacity to channel the supernatural, but he also has the capacity through his imagination to create a perceived supernatural, often as a result of the after-effects of trauma. In the case of *Bag of Bones* it is Mike's suffering from the loss of his wife that brings on the experiences of, and encounters with, an other-world horror. While Stephen King is renowned for being a writer of supernatural fiction, it is most often his hinting toward the possibility of the supernatural that is most disturbing. Just as Freud suggested that the uncanny results when the familiar becomes unfamiliar, so King's horrors most often emerge after his reader is engrossed in domestic normality. It is there, at home, or in a home-from-home, in a place perceived to be safe, that the horrors take place. When the uncanny occurs in these recognisable social settings it creates the believability the story requires. King's readers are left the arduous task of distinguishing reality from imaginative terror, or natural from supernatural.

Freud wrote that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full function of the thing it symbolizes" ('The Uncanny', 367). In *Bag of Bones*, Noonan finds himself continually contacted by what he believes to be the spirit of his dead wife. As a writer, Noonan freely and openly admits to having voices living in his head, voices that give him trouble

differentiating between real and fantasy, and as King makes this admission early in the novel that the narrator does not always know what is fact and what is fiction the reader is offered a more active role than just passive audience member. King is leaving it up to the reader to decide when Noonan is reliable and when he is employing the excessive imagination that has made him a successful writer. According to Freud we must allow this process to take place:

It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation. (*Art & Literature*, 351)

This question of reliability creates another layer of complexity to a tale that sees a writer suffering from severe writer's block beginning to search for answers surrounding the mystery of his wife's untimely death. The investigation takes Noonan to Sara Laughs, a holiday home he and his wife regularly visited on Dark Score Lake in a New England region known as the TR. What occurs at Sara Laughs is arguably Mike's subconscious directing him to solve the mystery surrounding Jo's death while also solving the murder of Sara Tidwell, a blues singer who once lived in the house which now goes by her nickname 'Sara Laughs'.

This section of the chapter examines the notion of "memory creating apparition". This term refers to the peculiar position King places his readers in – a position which blurs the lines of the natural (memories of past occurrences) and the supernatural (ghostly occurrences). It is my contention that Mike Noonan's

psychological anguish from the loss of his wife inspires memories of her which contribute to the appearance of the hauntings he experiences. He is in essence creating a perceived reality through memories of his wife, bringing her back to life in the form of apparitions which live only in his mind. This process affects Mike from the moment he first enters Sara Laughs after a four-year absence. It is Mike's need to solve the mystery of his wife's death (and the secrets she was hiding from him) that leads him to the cabin. It is his memory of her that follows him, and in turn meets him at the home she had always cherished. The memories, and not the apparitions, begin to haunt him from the moment he arrives; memories deeply rooted in the ornaments the house holds, as much as in the house itself. This powerful emotional attachment connects Mike to the house and, drawing him in as much as it drove him away, allows the building to take on a persona and become an entity in itself in a traditional Gothic twist. Grief is an extreme state that features prominently in King's fiction, changing the way his characters perceive the world. Michael Gamer suggests that such extreme states of consciousness have long been common in Gothic and romantic literature:

Mary Shelley and Byron, meanwhile, increasingly find in the Gothic a language for philosophical and psychological inquiry, taking their cues from writers like Radcliffe and Maturin while redirecting the focus of the texts away from romance narratives and toward the representation of extreme states of consciousness. (*Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 100)

This extreme state of consciousness in *Bag of Bones* is commonly found in King's canon. There is no doubt that King has taken something from Freud's work on the Gothic and the human psyche. They share the same fascination with what it is that scares people and what it is that keeps readers turning the page. It is fitting that King pays homage to Freud in so many of his works which have the bones, if not the blood, of Freud's theories running through their pages.

King's references to Freud in his fiction are not always complimentary and at times refer to the Austrian father of psychoanalysis in terms that suggests King's association with Freud is sceptical detachment. However, the simple fact that King refers to Freud in his work signifies his interest in his theories and shows, as unashamedly as his homage to the masters of horror, that he finds validity in Freud's writings. Writers who have inspired his work are listed throughout King's canon and *Bag of Bones* is no exception with the likes of Harper Lee (28), John D. MacDonald (60), Somerset Maugham (19) and Ray Bradbury (351) all gaining a mention.

In *Bag of Bones*, we are dealing with a character who is suffering psychological trauma and who believes in the ghosts, I have also researched the process of grieving and have included excerpts which shed light on Mike's neurotic state, which in turn make the notion of his imagining the entities he encounters more real. My reading of *Bag of Bones* deals more with the study of psychology of character than the literary theory behind the characterisation. I feel it is important to examine the novel in this way as in Mike Noonan we are faced with someone who is absorbed by his grief and is seeking solace, in an irrational way, by following the direction of his dreams.

King's characters dream and, whether these dreams come in the waking hours or in the darkest of nights, there is always apprehension as to what they will find in these hypnotic-type states. King's characters dream in Technicolor and each episode gives vital clues to the characters that are dreaming and the characters they are dreaming about.

Adding a sense of validity to the novel, and in keeping with the traditions of the Gothic ghost story, *Bag of Bones* is told through a first-person narrator. As Robert Phillips indicates in his introduction to *Nightshades: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghost Stories* the use of the first-person narrator is "part of the tradition dating back to Edgar Allan Poe, whose tales nearly always were told by a narrator so as to garner credibility" (xiii). The technique works well in *Bag of Bones*. We are intrigued by Mike Noonan as from the outset he appears to be one of the more autobiographical of King's characters. He is also one of the more unstable characters in King's corpus, failing in his job, unable to concentrate and suffering from relentless nightmares.

In one of the first dream sequences, before Mike drives to Sara Laughs, he sees himself walking up the path toward the lake house. In his dream, or precognition of events to come, Mike questions the repercussions of staying away from the lake house for so long. This section is important as it clearly establishes King's intention of drawing the reader into Mike Noonan's thoughts and his habitual questioning of his actions and perceptions. While it is the first person narrative that allows an instant intimacy with the reader, it is Mike's admission of his feelings towards the house that makes it clear to the reader what he believes he will find upon arrival.

It's dark, and it will be frightening to go into that dark place alone  
(suppose Sara resents having been left so long alone? suppose she's  
angry?), but I must. (38)

This excerpt shows that Mike has come to believe that Sara Laughs has summoned him, drawing him to return to the TR (as Mike refers to the lakeside town surrounding Dark Score Lake) after Jo's death. As this part of the chapter looks at the text as a story of a very natural internal struggle, one dealing with fear of betrayal and uncertainty following the loss of a loved one, Mike's conviction that Sara Laughs draws him back is possible and plausible as the appeal of the place is most heightened by his lasting memory of his dead wife. There are several similarities between Mike Noonan and another disturbed writer in King's canon. A haunted hotel that guided him to attempt to murder his wife and son summoned Jack Torrance, in *The Shining*. While Torrance travelled to the Overlook Hotel to find a job in the hope that it would keep his domestic life intact, Noonan returns to Sara Laughs and the TR to find answers as to where his domestic life went wrong. Both men are trying to find themselves as men and writers and both are suffering from serious cases of writer's block, as well as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mike suggests throughout the novel that Jo found the TR, and Sara Laughs in particular, a place where she felt at ease. It was quiet and she could work on her crafts in the shed behind the house while Mike tapped at his word processor in a secluded room upstairs. Such strong associations connecting his wife with the house suggests that it is Mike's memory of Jo, and his fond memories of how happy she was while at Sara Laughs, that make it possible for

her to remain in the place for his own psychological well being. After all, Mike has yet to set foot in Sara Laughs since his wife's death, and yet he has not made any attempt to sell it on. The house is the last remaining tangible reminder of his wife, standing as much as a monument to Jo Noonan's memory, as it stands in memory of Sara Tidwell.

Before visiting Sara Laughs Mike begins to contemplate its connection with his wife:

I lay on my side, the shivers slowly subsiding, thinking of her coffin lying there in the driveway, thinking that it made a kind of mad sense – Jo had loved Sara, and if she were to haunt anyplace, it would be there (53).

This excerpt offers reasons why Mike returns to Sara Laughs, and why the house seems to have such a supernatural draw – because it is connected so deeply to his wife's memory. While this admission demonstrating Mike's strong belief that Jo's connection with Sara Laughs extends further than the grave, it also urges the reader to question Mike's state of mind as he is in bed shivering as he thinks of his dead wife. A man who is still deeply mourning his beloved, but also one who is searching for something that will connect them, albeit in a non-physical sense, once more, cannot be in control of his faculties.

Anthony Storr reminds us that dreams, according to Freud, are wish fulfilments: "Freud affirmed that, with very few exceptions, dreams were disguised, hallucinatory fulfilments of repressed wishes. He also asserted that dreams not only represented current wishes, but were also invariably expressions

of wish-fulfilments dating from early childhood” (*Freud & Jung*, 32). While Mike’s dreams of his wife do not recollect moments from his childhood they are reflections and recordings of the moments in his life, or at least the place the moments were recorded in his mind, which represent his wife. His wish-fulfilment is clearly to be rejoined with Jo and his admission that she would most likely ‘haunt’ Sara Laughs is confirmed within his dream of the summerhouse.

We can interpret this section as a moment of digression, reading it as Mike’s first step towards convincing himself that Sara Laughs is the connection he needs. Shortly after this moment Mike admits that his dreams of Sara Laughs are becoming more and more real, so real that he discovers wounds suffered during the series of his dreams suddenly appear as he regains consciousness:

It was the cut on the back of my hand. That cut had been in all the dreams, I would swear it had ... and then it had actually appeared. You didn’t get that sort of shit in the works of Dr Freud; stuff like that was strictly for the Psychic Friends hotline.  
(63-64)

Mike’s instant connection between the dreams and the scientific study of their subconscious meanings demonstrates that he is concerned with his mental state. Likewise it affirms that he (like King) is aware of Freud’s work. What is more interesting is that Freud’s connection with studies of psychology and Gothic fiction are considered intellectual and defining whereas the Psychic Friends Hotline is the scientific equivalent, to use

King's phrase, of a Big Mac, large fries, and a Diet Coke. King seems to be playing with the reliability of his narrator here as much as in many of his tales featuring writer protagonists. Mike Noonan holds a strong allegiance to popular culture. What King says here is as much an admission about the popularity of tarot readings as it is about popular writing, or anything else that is embraced by the masses.

When King refers to the Psychic Friends Network he is calling attention to the thousands of people using it to find a sort of faith, a belief in the popular notion of the afterlife and spiritual, and this taking of faith from an accessible and marketable form of the 'supernatural' is similar to the faith King's loyal readers have in his works. Both Mike Noonan and King perceive their writings as similar to the Psychic Friends Network as they have found commercial success and popularity, which makes their books easily dismissible by some sceptics and critics. This passage is also important as Mike admits that the story he is about to tell is incredible, if not impossible. As importantly, Mike demonstrates that he is coming to terms with his 'need to believe' as well as his unease with the unexplained. This is a lot to consider for a man who is in a poor mental state – one that has crippled his writing career. Freud is often invoked in a playful fashion by King, as a kind of bogeyman whose theories both support and undermine the horror genre's reliance on popular psychology. Of course, Freud drew heavily on imaginative writing for his own theories, so the links between his work and King's writing are not so tenuous.

King has mentioned in several interviews that he does not believe in monsters but that the thought of monsters frightens him just the same. But his

reasoning behind the statement and his interest in topics that touch upon the subject of the supernatural is summarised in an interview he gave to *Playboy Magazine* in 1983: “There’s a big and vital difference between the unexplained and the inexplicable, and we should keep that in mind when discussing so-called psychic phenomena. Actually, I prefer the term “wild talents,” which was coined by the science fiction writer Jack Vance” (*Bare Bones*, 26).

But, what kind of person believes in ghosts? A person as devastated as Mike Noonan, equipped with his imaginative capacity, is a magnet for the supernatural. Consider Freud’s theories about what kind of people suffer from “serious depression”: “The person who is likely to develop serious depression in response to loss, rather than simply passing through a period of mourning, can be thought of as someone who has no abiding sense of his own worth, and who therefore has no inner resources to fall back upon when loss or deprivation assails him. Such a person remains entirely dependent upon external supplies to keep up his self-esteem; upon other people to love or admire him, or upon achievement to boost his ego” (Freud & Jung, 57).

With this in mind, we go back to Mike Noonan, who has not produced a work of fiction in the years following his wife’s death and who has exhausted his resources of completed manuscripts. After pilfering all of his completed work from a safe-deposit box and mailing them to his publisher he is truly alone and feeling without worth. So now he is searching for a last connection (some kind of a contact) that will help him pass through his ‘period of mourning’ and help him get on with his life again.

Take into account King's admiration for Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House* and the character of Eleanor Vance, a psychic who is drawn in by the house where she is caught in trances, saved (until her car crashes into a tree as she tries to escape the house) by her fellow psychics from the research team. What is key here is the similarities between Mike Noonan (and Jack Torrance from *The Shining*) and Eleanor Vance. These characters are in a very disturbed state of mind and are individuals who are very susceptible to the powers of the house:

There is, of course, a strong suggestion that the house has taken possession of Eleanor and has forced her to relive its terrible past – and this, indeed, is one of the donnees of the haunted house genre. However, the possibility also looms that Eleanor is mentally unstable. Even before the issue of the supernatural becomes a live one, she has an overwhelming desire to “belong” and to be loved. (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 147)

Mike's admission that he now needs dreams more than ever suggests that he is no longer capable of exhausting his subconscious through writing his imagination. This is important when considering his declining mental state. Mike's former occupation, heavily, if not entirely reliant on creative thought, has left him completely since the death of his wife. Mike's requirement to fill the void – both in terms of his writing and his domestic situation – sets in train a desperate search to locate an outlet, or in this case an inlet for his imagination.

His admission that dreams have begun, since his wife's death, to play a major part in his psychological maintenance is made early in the novel:

There was an exotic strangeness to the dream that was missing from my waking life, now that the road leading out of my imagination was so effectively blocked. (39)

It is not only dreams that seem to have taken control of the energy that was once used to fuel Mike's literary output. His subconscious at times tends to draw on the same energy, producing voices and at times hysteria which Mike does not have the ability to control. Mike's connection to the house, and the entities present inside, is expressed as he has his first experience with an apparition in Sara Laughs. The entity, or its voice in this excerpt, is that of a child crying when he enters the house and turns on the foyer light. There is a moment when Mike believes it is a spirit, yet he is quick to dismiss the laugh as a voice that has been conjured by fear brought on by the recollection of his dreams. He rationalises the voice as being part of him, one of the many vivid voices that live in his writer's mind:

I hear voices in my head, and have for as long as I can remember. I don't know if that's part of the necessary equipment for being a writer or not; I've never asked another one. I never felt the need to, because I know all the voices I hear are versions of me. (87)

Mike's rationale is that the house holds memories like a container for spirits, and so the house keeps spirits within the structure making it possible to hear, and at times see, those who have been living within it in the past. It stands to reason that Mike, holding memories as strongly as he does, keeps Jo alive in his mind. The house seems to be, for Mike, an extension of Jo just as much as his memories of her are an extension of himself.

In another excerpt, where Mike is walking towards Sara Laughs, recalling the dreams that have prompted his return to the house, he finds himself unable to differentiate between what is reality and what had been the dream.

Even before the shrouded thing had come bursting out of the house, I had felt something was all wrong, all twisted up; I had felt that somehow the house itself had gone insane. (80)

As Mike's need to be reunited with Jo in an effort to exorcize his demons draws him to Sara Laughs it is his psychological distress that in actuality guides him. If the house has, as Mike puts it, 'gone insane' so too has Mike as he believes irrationally that the house has memories.

Mike visits Sara Laughs with a preconceived notion that houses and buildings hold souls like some kind of cosmic container, a belief King often exploits. This belief connects directly with the hallucination Mike has as he dreams of Sara Tidwell, singing to a crowd in the TR of the past. This time-stream Mike speaks of, and experiences in the dream, holds not only the spirits of former tenants, but their memories as well.

I think houses live their own lives along a time-stream that's different from the ones upon which their owners float, one that's slower. In a house, especially an old one, the past is closer. In my life Johanna had been dead nearly four years, but to Sara, she was much nearer than that. (88)

This ability for houses to store the energy of those who have lived in them is a common theory in parapsychology; it is also a theory which has captured the imagination of writers and readers of Gothic literature for years in such novels as *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Fall of the House of Usher* and more recently *Ghost Story*. King commented during an interview about such use of spirits of past tenants to bring a new context to a story about psychological horror: "In *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the new tenant of the house sees this greasy mark on the wallpaper where another woman's gone mad, walking around on her hands and knees for weeks on end with her head tipped against the wallpaper, so it's left that greasy mark. But it's left something far more sinister than that. It's left the spirit of madness" (*Bare Bones*, 60).

King is speaking about the marks left behind as being the ghosts of someone else, or the undesirable part of the personality – the failed element of the troubled individual. What is important to consider, as King has displayed here, is that what is most troubling is the real horror of insanity which has been left behind. As significant as the marks on the wall is how we as readers interpret them. How do we see the greasy stain upon the wall? How do we visualise the madness of the woman? Most strikingly, in relation to Mike Noonan in his fragile state, what do our interpretations of the evidence say about us?

Mike's belief that such memories of past tenants exist within Sara Laughs is evident later in the novel when Mike is caught in Sara Laughs in a dream state, which is plagued by both spatial and chronological anomalies. During the dream state Mike finds himself walking through the timeline of Sara Laughs – picking up spirits/memories of the house. Not only does he meet Sara Tidwell, young and vibrant and alive – as he admitted he had desired to do for so long – but as he returns from his dream/spiritual time-travelling he finds himself in a corridor that in itself acts as a timeline:

As I stood before the second pair of doorways, I heard a voice somewhere in the dark say quite clearly: 'No, the President's wife wasn't hit. That's his blood on her stockings.' (364)

Prior to Mike entering this dream state, before he finds himself in the corridor listening to commentary on the assassination of President Kennedy, Mike recalls an episode in his life when he entered another such state. Mike at the time was eight years old and we can assume it was the year Kennedy was shot. This makes the current experience significant as it is connected to a past illness which allowed Mike to worm into this new consciousness. Mike is as unwell now as he was back then and the inclusion of commentary on Kennedy's assassination is used to bridge the time-gap between the then and now. In the story Mike tells how he contracted measles and became extremely ill with a high fever. The fever made him delirious and he entered what he remembered to be a similar state to the one he experiences when travelling through Sara's time lapse: "It was as if I had found a secret passage hidden just beyond the wall of the world and went crawling along it" (207).

While Mike does not make the connection between the fever he suffered from as a child and his ability to communicate with the spirit world it does beg the question as to why he would associate the two so strongly if there had not been a reason. Mike seems to be admitting that a similar delirium to the one he experienced at eight years of age, could have been the cause and explanation for what he experienced in present-day Sara Laughs; once again admitting that while an explanation could be reached through Freud's psychoanalysis, there is still an element of the supernatural at hand.

In another dream sequence Mike hears music playing. He recognises the lyrics as those of Sara Tidwell and knows that it is she and her band the Red-Tops playing. Here, Mike doesn't say Sara Tidwell was rocking, he says Sara Laughs (as in the house) is rocking. This section is significant as all of the present-day construction and additions which have been built over the years exist in the dream-state. In Mike's previous dreams Sara Laughs had been no more than the original shack in which Sara Tidwell had lived. Mike has found himself in the time-space, and the house has become Sara's world:

It was laughing and urgent and ominous all at the same time, and I knew at once that I was hearing Sara Tidwell, who had never cut a record in her life. I was hearing Sara Laughs, and man, she was *rocking*. (207)

Given Mike's visions and his propensity for hearing voices that no one else can hear we should consider here that Mike is creating the sense of place he wishes existed around him. He is sitting in Jo's study, looking at old pictures of Sara

Tidwell, considering times of old and wondering what Sara's voice would have sounded like. Just as his need for confirmation that Jo was present in the house was recognised and arguably fulfilled with the recording of her voice, so Mike's interest in Sara Tidwell is validated with the chance to witness her perform in a dream state. This suggested presence of the supernatural is prevalent throughout the novel with Mike taking account of the voices and the messages he receives from what he believes to be spirits held within Sara Laughs. These messages are not always letters arranged on the refrigerator, but are most often no more than voices inside the head of a troubled writer, such as Mike's explanation of the writing process when he observes:

The muses are ghosts, and sometimes they come  
uninvited.

*My house is haunted.*

*Sara Laughs has always been haunted... you've stirred em  
up.*

*stirred*, I wrote on the refrigerator. (302)

Another example of such an experience finds Mike hearing what he believes to be the voice of his dead wife. In this section Mike has just come in contact with Max DeVore for the first time. The conversation with DeVore is unexpected as Mike is sitting on the porch watching the Fourth of July fireworks, a moment he has been dreading since returning to Sara Laughs. As the fireworks display was an event Mike shared each year with his wife his thoughts are entirely with her when DeVore interrupts with the aggressive phone call:

*You're scared of this guy, aren't you? Jo asked. Okay, maybe you're right to be scared. A man who feels he can be angry whenever he wants to at whoever he wants to ... that's a man who can be dangerous.*

Then Mattie's voice: *Mr Noonan, I'm not a bad mother.*

*Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. (114)*

With this section of internal dialogue King asks his readers to consider the possibility that the voices in Mike's head are simply his way of sounding out his ideas. It is possible to believe that his internal voices, while sounding like those of people he has experienced, both dead and alive, are nothing more than his conscience. After all, it is impossible not to take into consideration that Mattie's voice is simply repeating something she said to him when they first met a few days before this phone call. His recollection of Mattie's voice repeating her words precisely is no more than memory, making it entirely possible that Jo's voice is much the same.

While King has his readers question throughout the novel whether or not the supernatural is in Mike's head or in the physical world he adds a further twist by allowing Mike unusual communication skills. He and Kyra Devore communicate through dreams and more significantly through a kind of telepathic phone call that King in his other novels calls 'the shine'.

The relevance of the ability to 'shine' in *Bag of Bones* is not far removed from that of *The Shining* where Danny Torrance and Dick Hallorann have the ability to communicate without speaking. This telepathy is a survival mechanism

in King's fiction as it allows thoughts to remain secret from those who intend to cause harm. The ability to 'shine' is distinct from but related to the telekinetic and pyrotechnic powers of the protagonists in *Carrie* and *Firestarter*.

The study of telepathic phenomenon gained a fresh interest around the time King began producing his early supernatural works. While it had been 'practiced' and demonstrated within the spiritualist and parapsychic communities for many years before, it was through fiction and film that the subject began to garner greater public attention. Telepathy comes from the Greek *tele*, 'distance' and *pathos*, 'sensation of feeling.' The word was coined in 1882 by Fredrick W. H. Myers, who defined it as "transmission of thought independently of the recognised channels of sense" (*The Spirit Book*, 406).

A possible inspiration for *Bag of Bones* is a theory that telekinesis is conducted through a kind of ghostly grapevine: "Professor James Henry Hyslop thought it possible that spirits might be the cause of telepathy between the living. He claimed that Myers also saw this possibility at the start of his investigation into telepathy. In his experiments with Miss Miles and Miss Ramsden, Miles claimed that she could always tell when her telepathy had been successful because she heard rappings" (*The Spirit Book*, 406).

I discuss the significance of these "rappings" later in this chapter when Mike encounters what he believes to be Jo's spirit in the cellar of Sara Laughs, but for now we will stay with the process of shining. Mike's relationship with Kyra DeVore is one that is similar in strength and intensity to Danny and Jack Torrance in the early chapters of *The Shining* and even arguably Ben Mears and Mark Petrie in *Salem's Lot*. Joseph Reino suggests that it is easy to read these relationships as paedophilic in nature. He quotes from sections of *Salem's Lot*

where the dialogue between Mark Petrie and Ben Mears seems to be more of an exchange between lovers than a conversation between a man and a boy. Reino does, however counter this perception by saying, “Ben’s initial reaction to Mark and his subsequent relationships fall somewhat short of raw sexual attraction, yet are clearly beyond friendship, paternal affection or mere remembrance of things past” (*Stephen King: The First Decade*, 29).

Such relationships between adults and children in King’s fiction are never as intense as when the two share the ability to ‘shine’. It seems King is making a literal association with the phrase ‘taking a shine to something’ by establishing such a passionate bond between individuals that the resulting “connections” the two share are almost inexplicable to those outside of the bond. Reino argues: “Simplistic explanations of what is going on beneath the psychological surface are of little value and suggest, perhaps, an insensitivity to the kind of haunted nuance at which King is most skillful” (*Stephen King: The First Decade*, 26).

Even within the text of *Hearts in Atlantis*, the relationship between Bobby Garfield and Ted Brautigan comes under suspicion from Liz Garfield. Bobby’s mother’s perception of the relationship as unacceptable is directly related to the mistreatment she suffers at the hands of her boss (164). Her suspicions of Ted Brautigan are confirmed in her mind when she returns home to find a young Carole Gerber shirtless and crying. While the reader is aware that Bobby had brought Carole to the house to get Ted’s help in mending her arm following an attack by three neighbourhood boys, Liz sees the ‘bad man’ as Ted Brautigan because of her distrust in men. Even after Carole pleads on behalf of Ted’s innocence Liz Garfield remains certain of his lecherous ways: “Quite the

Good Samaritan, aren't you? How many feels did you cop while you were fixing her up? She hasn't got much, but I bet you checked what you could, didn't you?" (189)

Liz Garfield's concerns may seem to be justified had we witnessed the scene from her perspective, however with insight into the nature of his contact with Carole Gerber we see Ted as being as much a victim as the young girl. We also see Liz Garfield as a victim having background to the abuse she has suffered, and equally understand her concern for the girl and her suspicions in the older man. The dilemma King presents to the reader is more in terms of challenging the existing social taboo of such adult/child relationships. It is important to note that it is the physical contact Liz Garfield is concerned that Ted Brautigan is having with Carole Gerber that concerns her most, yet the intellectual and telekinetic connection Ted shares with her son Bobby is much more intimate. It appears that such a relationship – as it is unseen and comes without physical harm – appears, at least to Liz Garfield, to be more acceptable.

The ability to shine which Mike shares with Kyra in *Bag of Bones* is one of the few sections of the novel which cannot be explained away as simple memory. However, taking into consideration the parapsychological research surrounding the topic of telepathic communication, specifically concerning the influence which spirits are believed to have on the process, it stands to reason that Mike's connection with Kyra Devore is influenced (conducted) by Jo as she was unable to deliver him the child which she was carrying.

The connection between the "refrigerator people" (Noonan's name for the unseen forces he believes to be sending him messages by arranging letters on kitchen appliances) and the supernatural telekinetics that Mike and Kyra have in

common appear in this novel to be more of a medium to show the connectedness that the two share, an emotional pairing that would defeat the apparition occupying Sara Laughs and heal the emotional trauma Mike feels from losing his wife. Still, there are questions as to whether the messages left on Mike's appliances and those on Kyra's fridge are in fact communications from 'the other side' or if they are simply the result of Mike and Kyra moving them without thought.

In one section Mike says: "I returned to the fridge and once more forgot to open it. My hands went to the magnets instead and again began moving them around, watching as words formed, broke apart, evolved. It was a peculiar kind of writing ... but it *was* writing. I could tell by the way I was starting to trance out" (301). If he is trancing out there is nothing to stop us believing that he is subconsciously (or unconsciously) returning to the fridge to leave himself messages. It is not surprising then when Mattie tells Mike: "I haven't talked to anyone about Ki's frigafater [Kyra's pronunciation] people. Neither has she, until now. Not that there are any real people, but the letters seem to move around by themselves. It's like a Ouija board'" (328).

Ouija boards require the hands of people to work as mediums, to touch the marker from which the message is spelled out. As it is through the medium (in this case Mike and Kyra) that the response is made it is arguable that it is not the spirits that are making the messages, but the mediums themselves. This argument is further established when Mattie declares her suspicions. "'You know,' she said, 'it's crossed my mind that Kyra's moving the letters around herself. Mentally'" (329).

The process of writing, while requiring a slight amount of physical activity is very much a ‘mental’ process. The only suggestion in the novel that there is real supernatural power taking place is the telepathy between Mike and Kyra when they shine; and again there is the suggestion that the two are connected by the spirit of Johanna Noonan. It stands to reason then that if Mike’s ability to shine is influenced or enabled by the spirit world he would then be able to use it to communicate with ghosts. During one night Mike gets out of bed and hears the sobbing of a child. While this could have begun communication with the other side, which Mike seems so intent to find connection with, he instead dismisses the sound as nothing, “Just another Manderley dream”:

I knew better, but I also knew I was going back to sleep, and right then that seemed like the important thing. As I drifted off, I thought in a voice that was purely my own: *She is alive. Sara is alive.* (117)

While it is Mike’s belief that Sara Tidwell’s spirit and Sara Laughs, the house itself, drew him back to the TR to enact Sara’s revenge, he is also aware that until this trip to Dark Score Lake he had not so much as thought of Sara Laughs. That part of his life had, as Mike puts it, “been Jo’s job”. The power of Jo’s spirit is in question throughout the novel with the voice coming in whispers and her presence felt in warm winds and in the ringing of Bunter the moose’s bell. It is evident in Mike’s mind, after considering the possibility that it was Sara who summoned him to the TR, that something had kept him away during the past four years. In considering what may have been the reason for his distance, and lack of

intention, in visiting Sara Laughs, Mike comes to the realization that it may have been nothing more than his intense relationship with writing.

Had somehow forgotten all about Sara Laughs, it seemed, even when summer came around. Was it possible to be that absorbed in a writing project? It didn't seem likely ... but what other explanation was there? (121)

Mike's questioning of how he had forgotten about Sara Laughs and why, when she was living, it was Jo's responsibility to decide when to visit the TR, enlightens the reader as to Mike's negligent personality. Up to this point in the novel we have seen a man desperately searching for answers, yet now we find a man who may be to blame for part of the pain and guilt he has been experiencing. It is because of Mike's writing career that he has neglected his wife and now that she is dead he feels the need to reconnect with her. Remember that Mike's writing career has come to a standstill since Jo's death: "Sometimes I tried to write, and every time I did, I locked up. Once, when I tried to force a sentence or two (any sentence or two, just as long as they came fresh-baked out of my own head), I had to grab a wastebasket and vomit into it" (31). He can no longer neglect her in favour of his writing and with neither of his passions accessible he has become a suffering and lonely man.

Throughout the novel Mike is involved in the process of mourning his wife, a process that he approaches with the same investigative attention that he would have used in approaching a new writing project. What he has undertaken at Sara Laughs is much more difficult, as he has to decide if the apparitions are truly

spirits haunting Sara Laughs or if the spirits and apparitions he has experienced are merely in his head. This is a process that, as a writer, he has never before questioned as it was one which has made him more proficient at his craft:

It wasn't the first time I'd spooked myself like that. I see things that's all. Write enough stories and every shadow on the floor looks like a footprint, every line in the dirt like a secret message. Which did not, of course, ease the task of deciding what was really peculiar at Sara Laughs and what was peculiar only because my *mind* was peculiar. (123)

On a Dictaphone that Mike was given by his agent after the publication of his first novel he captures the voice of his dead wife, giving him what would at first appeared to be a piece of physical evidence that Johanna Noonan's spirit is present in Sara Laughs. It is interesting that Mike continually questions his experience with the ghosts as being possibly invoked by his writer's mind. The fact that the voice of his dead wife is captured on the Memo-Scriber Dictaphone, given to him by his agent, suggests again that his writing and the spirit activity are connected. It is also worth pointing out here that this contacting of a ghost through 'new media' is way of giving an otherwise traditional ghost story a contemporary feel.

In 1944, Edmund Wilson suggested in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* that there would be no reason to read ghost stories in an age of electronic light, radio and telephone (128). Over sixty years on and the ghost story is still a popular form, admittedly less than what it was

during the height of the so-called mediumistic craze of the Victorian period, when science and spiritualism appeared to be engaged in an awkward dance, yet there seems to be increasing means of communication with the other side through the advancement of technology. Not just the radio and telephone, but also the use of computers and, in *Bag of Bones*, the handy Dictaphone. New technologies advance ghosts rather than setting them back.

Still, it is interesting to consider what Wilson had to say were the reasons behind the public's interest in ghost stories. He believed two main drivers kept people returning to these tales of the unnatural. The first is that we search for evidence of another world the moment we feel that "our world has failed us." The second, Wilson suggests is "the instinct to inoculate ourselves against panic at the real horrors loose on the earth" (*Classis and Commercials*, 173). King discussed the subject of writing about the supernatural, admitting there are responsibilities a writer must face when broaching the subject that has yet to be proven: "I did not accept the ideas in this article as gospel truth – it seems to me that the writer who deals with psychic phenomena in his or her fiction has a responsibility to deal with such phenomena respectfully but not in a state of utter, worshipful belief – but I did find the idea interesting, both for the idea itself and because it suggested a vague but intriguing referent in my own experience: that the past *is* a ghost which haunts our present lives constantly" (*Danse Macabre*, 265).

While we as readers are absorbing ourselves, and hiding away from the horrors we should be facing in our real world, Mike Noonan is hiding away in his summer house, creating his version of a ghost story. It stands to reason that as successful a writer as Mike Noonan had been – "We weren't rich enough to

own a jet (Grisham) or a pro football team (Clancy), but by the standards of Derry, Maine, we were quite rolling in it” (20) – he would need an outlet for his imagination. If his illness came when he was consciously attempting to put words down on the page the question remains as to whether he would be ill when creating the story without enacting the literary effort.

His communications with the spirits continue and are heightened further by his scribblings with pencil and paper. This is a physical confirmation that his activities as a writer make him a perfect medium to investigate the house and assist or dispel the spirits and memories that haunt it. Still, his fruitful mind makes him question if what he is experiencing is real, if “the presence I felt might be, let’s face it, only in my own head” (269).

From the recording of Jo’s voice on the Dictaphone Mike finds himself frightened and bewildered, yet he continues to search for Jo’s spirit. There is still a question as to what it is that Mike has captured on the memo-scriber Dictaphone. ““*Oh Mike,*” a voice whispered – mourned, almost – on the tape, and I found myself having to press the heel of one hand to my mouth to hold back a scream. It was what I had heard in Jo’s office when the draft rushed past the side of my face ...” (131). If we are to take Mike at his word then we are to believe that what he recorded sounds like a breeze, little more than a soft wind, and so it is Mike’s interpretation of what is on the tape that identifies the sound as being his wife’s voice. And again when the voice is recorded (322), much the same way as before, it is Mike who needs to hear his wife’s voice. He is the only one to listen to these recordings and so he has no one to confirm it is Jo’s voice (or any voice at all) that is on the tape. Mike, in his fragile state, does not offer

anyone the chance to hear the tape, making certain no one can question what it is that he has captured.

As it is Jo that he wants it is not surprising that it is Jo that Mike gets. Mike's first response to the recording of his wife's voice is one of horror, yet it quickly changes to one of satisfaction, and even gratification, that he has found what he's been searching for:

'Thanks,' I said, and my voice wasn't quite my own for a moment or two. It seemed that in the TR my wife was hardly dead at all.

(134)

We should take into consideration the fact that while Mike is speaking with his dead wife, he is communicating by using a voice that he does not completely recognize as being his own. Here, King hints at a new horror emerging and taking shape within the novel, one which sees a man steadily on the decline to a mental breakdown. Still, we cannot pass judgement just yet as Mike Noonan is one of King's writers, and constant readers will be aware of the writer's ability, within his canon, to conduct supernatural events even when they seem so obviously troubled.

Whether Mike's personality is changing in the novel may be an issue, but another related topic for argument is one raised by Thomas Edison, who speculated thus: "If our personality survives, then it is strictly logical or scientific to assume that it retains memory, intellect, other faculties and knowledge that we acquire on this Earth. Therefore... if we can evolve an instrument so delicate as to be affected by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an

instrument, when made available, ought to record something” (*The Spirit Book*, 128-129). This is an interesting concept, yet it is difficult to see a common Dictaphone as being the sensitive piece of equipment Edison spoke about, one capable of capturing messages from the other side. According to a 1974 publication entitled *You Can Communicate With the Unseen World*, such a notion is not preposterous. Harold Sherman wrote: “By use of an ordinary tape recorder and/or a radio set attuned to unused frequencies, spirit voices of purported entities are being received” (128).

This communication with the ‘unseen world’ became known as Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP). This was a new and exciting development in the spiritualist movement around the time King’s supernatural writing career was taking off, and at a time when his writing changed to focus less on the natural human characters such as Charlie Decker in *Rage* and more on the likes of Carrie White, such a development would have held a fascination for King. This would have made it into his ‘toolbox’ as he calls it in *On Writing*, only to be used in a novel some thirty years later.

While the recording of Jo’s voice acts for Mike as confirmation that she exists within the house, the continual contact they share through thoughts is something that Mike can more easily explain away as his overactive writer’s mind. Yet it is through these exchanges that it becomes apparent that Jo in life may have been Mike’s voice of reason.

*Settle down, Michael, Jo’s voice advised. The red rag is gone now, no one’s waving anything in front of you, so just settle –.*

(159)

If in fact Jo was Mike's voice of reason while she was still alive it is arguable that she would continue to be a voice of reason within his head after she has passed on. Mike admits that he has voices floating in his head, voices he recognises, as well as voices that just come out of nowhere. With this in mind it is not too far fetched to believe that the voice of the most influential person in his life would remain with him after she had died. Freud wrote: "We possess, as it seems, a certain amount of capacity for love – what we call libido – which in the earliest stages of development is directed towards our own ego. Later, though still at a very early time, this libido is diverted from the ego onto objects, which are thus in a sense taken into our ego. If the objects are destroyed or if they are lost to us, our capacity for love (our libido) is once more liberated; and it can then either take other objects instead or can temporarily return to the ego" (*Art and Literature*, 289). More simply, Mike's memories of Jo and the emotions they shared will be part of Mike, and with his lack of connection and his need for an "ego boost" he is a likely conduit for the memories/apparitions which are floating around Sara Laughs.

Physical contact with a spirit comes late in the novel when Mike is attacked by Devore and Whitmore, who are terrorising him, driving him into Dark Score Lake where he attempts to swim to safety. Growing tired, Mike fears he will not be able to reach the raft in the middle of the lake: "I sank, swallowed more water, and spat it out. I began pummelling the lake again and forced myself to stop. From the shore, I could hear Rogette Whitmore's tinkling laughter. *You bitch*, I thought. *You scrawny bi-*" (292). Jo's voice again enters Mike's head - as he is in the water it would be difficult to hear the voice of the spirit otherwise.

Mike admits: “Her voice was in my head, but it wasn’t the one I make when I’m imagining her side of the mental dialogue or when I just miss her and need to whistle her up for a while” (292). There is the physical experience of something splashing beside Mike to lend credence to his contact with Jo:

Then I felt a hand seize me by the nape of the neck. The pain of having my hair yanked brought me back to reality in a flash – it was better than an epinephrine injection. I felt another hand clamp around my left leg; there was a brief but terrible sense of heat. The cramp let go and I broke the surface swimming – *really* swimming this time, not just dogpaddling, and in what seemed like seconds I was clinging to the ladder on the side of the float.  
(293)

“After-death communication” is a term coined by American researchers of the paranormal Bill and Judy Guggenheim, and is a subject that has been gaining increasing popularity with more people coming forward with stories of contact with the dead. Emma Heathcote-Jones said of the Guggenheim’s theory: “Their assertion is that some sort of after-death communication is one of the most common spiritual experiences that we have. Indeed, a number of studies published in medical journals and other scholarly sources have established that a high percentage of bereaved people have visions of the deceased, with research showing as many as 75 per cent of grieving spouses or parents claiming to have had some sort of visitation” (*After-death Communication*, 18).

Visitations are not likely to occur, according to parapsychologists, as the physical manifestations of loved ones happens much less frequently than audible indications of spirit presence. These audible episodes and occasionally (yet rarely) the sense of being touched, are the most typical indications that a haunting is taking place according to Hans Eysenck and Carl Sargent: “Rappings, noises, the sensation of being touched by some invisible agent, apparition, and longevity (reports by different people over a long period of years) appear to typify hauntings. By contrast, poltergeists involve more dramatic movements of objects, are of short duration, include fewer rappings, and less apparent communication by any alleged spirit” (*Explaining the Unexplained*, 127).

However, it seems that rapping is often accompanied by other ghostly activity associated with poltergeists. “The phenomenon of raps on walls, windows, roofs, and furniture are usually accompanied by other poltergeist occurrences, though not in every instance. Such rappings are sometimes sharp but just as often heard as dull thumps or as loud bangs” (*The Spirit Book*, 341). This is an important piece of information. According to parapsychology the differentiation between a haunting and a poltergeist suggests that what Mike Noonan is experiencing in Sara Laughs is a combination of two separate paranormal occurrences. Communication with Jo’s spirit is in line with what is deemed here to be a haunting, as Jo’s ghost is speaking and even touching Mike. The other activities taking place in Sara Laughs, such as the moving of letters on the refrigerator, the message in the flour, and the ringing of Bunter’s bell, are associated more often with poltergeist activities.

It has been suggested that poltergeist activities can be brought on by heightened sexual tension. While Mike is missing his wife in an emotional sense,

what is alluded to less in his narrative, yet easily deduced, is that he is missing her in a physical sense as well: “Frequently-voiced theory about poltergeists, namely that they are in some way linked to puberty, and therefore to sexual tensions and conflicts, a notion assiduously exploited in movies such as *The Exorcist* and *Carrie*” (*Explaining the Unexplained*, 127). While the author of this text does not take into consideration that neither of these movies (or the novels on which they were based) are depicting stories of poltergeists, but rather stories of human possession by demons, I find it interesting that the suggestion is made that the paranormal can be triggered by sexual tension.

In *Bag of Bones* Mike Noonan is missing his wife in an emotional and physical sense, and as importantly he is concerned that she may have been having an affair. His uncertainty and his failing masculinity are exploited by Sara Laughs who visits Noonan in a dream. Such a theory is confirmed by Raymond Buckland in *The Spirit Book* where he says: “Poltergeist activity often takes place around an adolescent going through puberty, or someone in a highly emotional state. The person is usually unaware of the pent-up energy being randomly released in his or her vicinity until the poltergeist activity explodes.” (*The Spirit Book*, 313)

Mike’s life revolved round his writing, so much so that he admits to being sent into a trance-like state each time he takes to the craft. Jo gave him the time and space he needed to produce his fiction, but in death Jo seems to use Mike as an instrument to write through the mysteries behind Sara Laughs. As this is in one sense the converse to her living persona it is arguable that Mike is subconsciously using Jo’s spirit/memory as a means to find his writing mind again. This would explain why Mike uses Jo’s typewriter to break his writer’s

block (230). Although she had her own interests while she was alive, and agreed to leave the writing to Mike, it is through the use of her typewriter that he is able to regain some of his former abilities to tell a story and at the same time makes himself more susceptible to his spirit/memories by re-establishing his imagination: “I had come back to Sara Laughs; I was in the zone; I had returned to my dream and this time it had possessed me” (438).

While researching Jo’s final movements Mike is of two minds: the writer who wants “to know just enough so I can lie colorfully” (229) and the man who is desperate with guilt and ideas of betrayal. This latter version of his personality prevails and the obsessive man sees no stone left unturned. It is, however through his persistence that Mike locates the owls which deliver him a final affirmation that his efforts were worthwhile.

Mike locates the owl in Jo’s shed and from “two pegs with hollow space between them” (457) he removes JO’S NOTIONS. These pages of thoughts and ideas which Jo had collected over the years gave Mike the opportunity to continue/finish what his wife had started. With the information contained in JO’S NOTIONS Mike is able to solve the mystery surrounding Sara Tidwell’s death and her haunting of Sara Laughs. Aside from the significance to plot the delivery of JO’S NOTIONS plays a significant part in Mike’s grieving process as Jo had died with their first child still inside of her. By locating the owl statues in Jo’s shed and removing in a symbolic manner the material it contained Mike is delivering (and laying to rest) his unborn child.

While the notes help Mike piece together the mystery of Sara Laughs, he suggests: “I didn’t need Jo to show me the spot; the Green Lady had been pointing to it all along. Even had she not been, and even if Sara Tidwell did not

stink to the heavens, I think I would have known. I think I would have been led there by my own haunted heart” (468).

Mike burns the pages of JO’S NOTIONS, and in the process speaks with Ki about what the pages represent. She believes that they are a story and Mike tells her they are more like a crossword or a letter. He tells Ki that keeping the pages around is not a good idea: “‘Because they ...’ *Can come back to haunt you* was what rose to mind, but I wouldn’t say it. ‘Because they can embarrass you in later life’” (501).

It is through Mike’s writing that he comes to realise what is happening in the TR, the drownings and the owls both ‘appearing’ to him through writing. Still, he is not comfortable to think that he has written what he knows – hiding the information in what he refers to as ‘second-rate thrillers’ – but he cannot come to terms with the fact that his wife is gone. Her spirit/memory helps him understand all that has happened in the past, the history of Sara Laughs and the entire TR, and how it has affected and still affects those descendents of the victims and tormentors.

As Mike reads through the novel he has produced during his stay at Sara Laughs he finds the cryptic messages from the ‘refrigerator people’ running through his head. He discovers the answers to what he is looking for, and begins to understand the history of the house: “I remembered how deliriously happy I had been to discover that the block had been dissolved and I could write again. It had been dissolved all right, but not because I’d finally beaten it or found a way around it. *Jo* had dissolved it” (449).

After solving the mystery of Sara Laughs and coming to terms with the loss of his wife, Mike finds the peace of mind that he has been seeking. By

travelling to the summer house he uncovers the memories that guided his investigation, and by confronting his fears (nightmares) he is able to 'dissolve' his writer's block. His ghosts, seen and heard, come to Mike in his home, in a place where he should feel safe, yet Mike Noonan was scared from the start - and for good reason: "A ghost is frequently a domestic figure, haunting familiar places, threatening where you feel most safe or warning when you feel secure. Restless, the spectre unsettles the settled" (*Horror Fiction*, 162). A ghost will unsettle the settled and so the effects the apparitions/memories have on Mike, in his state of mourning, are heightened and made extreme. We witness the search of a man who is looking for answers and expecting to uncover ghosts along the way. We meet Mike Noonan shivering in his bed, unable to leave his home, and we witness his emergence. Through facing his fears and continually questioning his perceptions – challenging his visions – he finds solace in memories of what had been.

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## **Part Two: Creative Engagement**

### ***Without Warning***

**A Novel**

**By Will Napier**

## Prologue

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Can't remember the guy's name. The one who took me to see my mother's grave for the first time. He had arms like cannons. Big and black and looked about as heavy as the trees on the hills surrounding the field of headstones. He pulled the van up the long road that ran through the middle of the cemetery. Kept checking the piece of white paper beside him. Drove on and slowed down now and again whenever he needed to check the paper. Tried to get a look at him to see what was going on in his head. Couldn't see his eyes behind the shades. He kept moving his chin like he was angling his head to look back at me in the rear-view mirror. Expression on his face never changed.

'You alright, Joe?' he asked.

'What are you looking at up there?'

'A fax. Got it sent to the home so you'll know where to find the site. The plot, I mean.'

He raised the paper in his right hand and kept driving. I looked at it for a second. Not reaching for it, but leaning forward to see what it was all about. Saw the lines that were the highway we'd come off. The small wave that was the roads we were driving on. One that cut through the centre of the field. Smaller waves went off from there, but they were just paths to walk. Black spots next to the main wave were places to park. There was an x on the side of the main wave. A few badly drawn circles that were probably meant to be trees so I looked up to see if I could figure out what part of the wave we were riding. Figured the x was where my mother was buried.

‘You holding up okay?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Just kind of strange is all. It’s been a while, you know?’

‘Long’s that?’

‘Since she was taken away.’ Turned from him so he couldn’t look at my eyes in the mirror. ‘Since my old man hauled her off.’

He shook his head and lowered the fax-map.

‘She’s been dead a while. More than a year.’

‘Why’d you decide to come out here now, Joe?’ He angled his chin up to the mirror again. ‘Why not sooner?’

Shrugged my shoulders and kept looking out the window. Watched the sky over the trees. Blue and clear. Not many clouds. Only clouds I could see were way off in the distance. Shaped like knives cutting low across the sky. Shaving the tops of the trees where the hills rose up. They were cutting slow. Beyond the clouds the sky was a blue that made my eyes go dry. I couldn’t keep from looking at it.

‘Probably just cause I don’t have anything else to do. Cause there’s the chance to come out.’

‘Hear you,’ he said.

Drove the rest of the way without saying anything else. I watched the scene pass by outside my window. We were passing all the same things now. Headstones down the hill to the left and headstones up the hill to the right. We were going down and at the bottom of the hill there was a small circle of gravel to turn around on. Nothing else beyond that spot but long grass and the start of a forest. Way he was slowing the van down the closer we got to the bottom I guessed we were lost. Didn’t say anything cause it didn’t feel like it mattered.

Could have turned the van round - driven the three hours back to St Martin's Home for Boys - and I wouldn't have cared a damn. My mother wasn't going anywhere. Kind of figured if I didn't see her grave right then I'd get another six-hour round trip some other day.

'What are you smiling at?' the big guy asked.

'Guess I'm smiling cause we're lost.'

'Got that wrong,' he said. He pulled the van round the circle and stopped it in the shade. Branches of a tree were hanging down and touching the windscreen. He put an arm across the bench seat and turned his head so I could see myself in his sunglasses. Didn't like what I saw. Some runt of a guy looking all stupid sitting pretty on a big bench seat. Hunkered up next to the door like that. Looked like a kid. Looked like some lost punk.

'You're mom's grave is up the hill,' he told me. 'Should be about fifty feet up this road and then right. Walk till you pass...' Turned his head and was looking down at something in the front seat. He raised the fax-map. 'Pass maybe twenty plots and you should be there.'

He rolled up the sheet of paper and fed it through the cage that was separating us. I took it from him and picked the plastic wrapped flowers from the seat next to me.

'You want to let me out?' I asked.

'Yeah, man.' He opened his door and stood outside the van stretching his back. Stayed like that for a few seconds. I watched him, almost annoyed that he was taking his time before letting me out. Couldn't get too annoyed cause he wasn't a guy to get involved with. Big as he was I wouldn't have a chance. He came up to my door and pulled the handle. Swung the door open. 'Sorry about

that, Joe. Forget about the handles on these doors sometimes. I'm usually driving the other van.' Pointed at the door. 'Other van the doors can still open from the inside.'

'You're not usually driving guys like me,' I said.

He smiled at that too. His white teeth looked wet and wide behind his dark lips. He was nodding his head. Caught my reflection in his glasses. Out of reflex I put my hand to my face. Ran a finger over the scar over my left eye. Like I needed to make sure it was still there. Got out of the van and felt his hand fall on my shoulder.

'I'll be watching you from here,' he said. 'You need me to drive up and get you, just raise your hand.' He waited for me to nod then said, 'See you at the top.'

His hand left my shoulder so he could aim his thick finger up the hill. Followed where he was pointing. Looked up to the top of the road we'd just come from. Same one that led back to the highway. Kept nodding my head without looking at him and tossed the bouquet of flowers from one hand to the next. Tossed it back again.

'Take your time. I'm in no rush.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Neither am I.'

Started walking up the hill. Out of the shade and into the heat. Sun was coming down hard with nothing to break it up before it hit my shoulders. Wasn't any shade in the field I was walking toward either. No big headstones even that I could lean my back against. Felt like an ass for what I was wearing. I'd dressed in a white t-shirt with some khaki shorts first thing. Then thought about it a while. Figured I needed to suffer somehow if I was going to get the full effect.

Figured I owed that much to my mother. It was hot out. Had felt it in my dorm room when I woke that morning. Went back to my closet and changed. Black button up shirt. Black jeans. My black military boots that were already gleaming bright. Sat on my bed for a few minutes looking out the window. Staring while I tied my boots up - watching through the bars and into the blue sky.

Had a good feeling about getting away too. I'd left my dorm room and stopped to look through the windows leading onto the back green at St Martin's. Saw a pair of red flags sticking up out of the ground. Markers for the beginning of the forest part of the cross country run. Start of two miles of uneven trails. It was a good run, but that day I wasn't interested. Just didn't have the energy for it. Went down the hall and into the reception foyer. Stood at the front door and touched the buzzer. Waited.

'Stand to the left,' said the intercom voice. Sidestepped and looked down the corridor and caught sight of the guard with the phone to his ear. He was looking at me. 'What's the name?'

'Joseph Pullman.'

'Wait.'

He'd looked down at his desk and flipped through a clipboard full of papers. Used a finger to run down the list. Flipped another page and kept running his finger down. Finally stopped and nodded his head.

'Transport number fourteen,' he said.

Door buzzed and I'd walked out through the front door. Sun came down on me like I was under the spotlight in some old detective movie. Some kind of crooked con getting it hard from the investigating officer. Took me a few minutes to blink my eyes normal. Get adjusted to the glare. Headed up the path

to the blue van with the black number fourteen stuck to the rear fender. The cannon-armed driver was leaning up against the door talking to one of the house guards. Guard looked at me for a second. Screwed up his face and looked up at the sky.

‘Boy,’ he said. ‘You are going to burn down to nothing.’ Looked at me again and shook his head. ‘Can’t you feel the heat?’

‘Sure I feel it.’ Looked down at my shirt. Swiped a hand across my chest like I had something to clean away. Looked back up at the guy. ‘This is out of respect for my mother.’

Wasn’t feeling the same conviction at the cemetery. Walking up the path I wished I’d stuck with the khaki shorts and white t-shirt.

*She’s dead and gone, Joe. Who the hell you trying to impress coming out here looking like Johnny Fuckin’ Cash?*

Farther I got from the air-conditioned van the more my shoulders got the itch from the heat. Sun traced me like a hunter’s scope on a fourteen point buck. Had me in the sights and I wasn’t all too comfortable about it. Turned for a second and walked backwards. Gravel grinding under dragging heels. Checked on the driver. Looked back to see if he was talking on his oversized car phone. Calling back to the house so he could let that guard friend of his know how bad I had it. How much I was feeling it. Walking in the sun dressed like a priest. But he wasn’t on the phone. He’d got back in the van. Was already sitting in the driver’s seat with the chair slanted back. Hands behind his head. He brought a hand round to give me a wave like I should keep going. Like he was a backyard quarterback telling me he was planning to throw the longest pass of his life – and he was expecting me to catch it.

*Remember kid, go fifty feet and turn right. Then pass maybe twenty graves. That's where you're going to find your momma.*

'I'll find her alright,' I said.

Twisted on my heels and started walking faster. Feeling good for getting away from the van. Escaping all the institution routine. It wasn't all that bad. Too much shit had fallen for the house to be clean, but it could've been worse. I'd done the foster family thing and seems like everybody knows that didn't work out. Court hearings and dodging all the therapy sessions with Collings had been getting to me. I was tired of telling them the same thing every time I was asked.

*So, what happened?*

*Charles Vincent McLean got too personal.*

That's what I told them. Every damned time. It was always followed by a long silence. I'd use those silences to think about better times than these. Collings used the silence to figure out what he was going to ask next. Chewed his pen and looked at his clipboard like it was directing him. Like it had instructions on how to chew a pen like a real man. He never used the silence well cause he was always asking me the same thing.

*And what happened then?*

*You know, Einstein said insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting the outcome to be different. And you think I'm crazy.*

*This is meant to help you, Joe.*

*Thanks for the concern.*

They all wanted to know about Charles Vincent cause he'd made the papers. He was the reason they couldn't get me homed. That's what they were calling it. Collings and all the other administrative people at St Martins. All the

other folks I came across who were employed by the state. They all wanted me homed. Thing is it's hard to home a guy like me. Like I was back then. And it all had to do with Charles Vincent - my first foster brother - if there's such a thing. A kid belonging to the man and woman assigned by the state to look after me when my mother hung herself. After my old man went to jail for killing Dean Gillespie. Charles and his brother were real interested in my old man. Thought maybe me and my old man were real similar.

*Are you like your father, Joseph?* Charles had asked me. *You a kid killer?* Had me sat down in a chair. Him and his brother hovering over me. They kept at it. Whenever it was just us they tried their luck.

*I don't know, I'd told them. But it wasn't enough.*

*Come on,* Charles said. Moved his face up close to mine. *Do you have it in you? Is it in there, Joseph?*

It was all too much. Not just little Charles Vincent and his shadow of a brother. It was everything. Round that time I was never alone. Cameras. People waiting outside whenever I went to leave their house. Hovering like neighbours do when there's trouble brewing. None of those people liked me being in their community. I'd come outside and they'd all shake their heads and look real sad at me. They'd try to talk to me. Thing is I'd been told not to speak with anybody. But it didn't stop the questions. Made it so I couldn't go anywhere on my own. That just wasn't something I could deal with. There wasn't any space. Then there was Charles Vincent.

*Come on, Joseph. I'm waiting!*

So I decided to give him what he wanted. Answered his question with everything I had. Then I gave him some more. Lucky for me the judge put my

reaction down to hardship. Down to the lifetime of abuse at the hands of my old man. What I did to him didn't make it into the papers. Not all the details. His broken nose was in the papers and so was his arm. Not how I'd pulled it back and used my knee for leverage. They left that out, but wrote about how it was a 'significant break' that ole Charlie had suffered. They printed stuff about how Charles Vincent needed surgery to piece the elbow back together. The work they had to do to fix his eye didn't hit print and neither did the part about his teeth. How he didn't have any left up front. What I did to Charles Vincent was enough to land me in a court of my own. I found myself in an orange jumpsuit with hands clasped over my crotch. A judge looking down at me from his high chair. His voice roaring same as the judge must have roared at my old man.

*You've been found guilty of serious assault, Mister Pullman.*

'Damned straight,' I said. Called out to the hot sky same as I'd wanted to call up to the judge. While I stood looking up at him with my mouth shut and my hands stuck together and sweating into cotton of my slacks. Feeling all the hate and anger swelling up inside me I'd chewed at the inside of my cheek. Chewed it so hard the skin came off between my teeth. Sucked at the blood that was leaking out. Soaking back into my gums. Falling back toward my throat. I'd kept quiet.

Walked up the hill. Counting off the feet as I went.

*Thirty.*

*Forty.*

*Taking into consideration the life you have lived, Joseph, I feel it is not in your best interests to impose time at a correctional facility. However, I do feel you require supervision and you need guidance.*

‘Well, I’m getting that now,’ I sang. ‘I’m getting more guidance than I can handle, your honour.’

*Fifty.*

Turned right and started past the first grave. Looked back at the van. Couldn’t see past the glowing yellow of the sun on the windscreen. Turned my head forward and kept walking. Cooking inside my shirt and wondering how long it would be before I passed out. How long I’d have to be unconscious before the big councillor couldn’t bring me back. Till I was so far gone they’d just dig up my mother’s grave and chuck me down there beside her.

After the fifth headstone I started reading the names. Looking at the dates and making the fast calculation to how old the people were when they died. Fifties and sixties. Mothers. Fathers. Grandfathers. There was a baby too. Born and died on the same day. Thought it was weird that it didn’t have the same name as the people round it. There weren’t any empty plots either. No space for when her parents died. No space to be added into the ground next to her. That got to me. At the time I figured it was cause of the heat. Later I decided it was because I’d be in the same place one day. Eventually I’d be stuck between strangers. Trouble was people wouldn’t even pass my name and think it was strange. I wasn’t young enough for it to cross the mind. I was my own person now. Almost a man. Maybe already a man.

I was dragging my boots through the dried blades of grass. Finally came to the grave. Turned to it and looked down. A small black square with my mother’s name dug into it. *Clarisse Pullman*. Seeing her name like that surprised me. Didn’t think she’d have my father’s name anymore. Figured she’d have gone back to her old family name. Maybe she didn’t have a choice in it. Maybe after a

person hangs themselves you have to bury them by their real name. One they choked out with in the end. *Can't change to birth names in cases of suicide. It's just not Christian.* All kinds of crazy things were going through my head.

The plaque was simple. Shining black. Her name etched and white.

Clarisse Pullman

Born May, 3 1948

Died April 16, 1987

Nothing about a loving mother. Devoted wife. Screaming victim. Just Clarisse Pullman and when she came and when she went. Dropped the flowers on the headstone and looked back at the van. Wondered if I was being watched or if the big guy had fallen asleep behind the wheel. Part of me was yelling out to chance it. Cut off for the woods and see how far I could get before someone tracked me down. Then again I didn't think there was much of a chance that I could get far enough to make a difference. Eventually they would get me. Chances were good that they would get me before the day was finished.

*He's got scars all over him. Look for the wishbone thing that cuts up over his left eye. You see that and you know we got our man.*

With that I sat on the grass in front of my mother's grave. Crossed my legs like an Indian and felt the sun burning against my back. Skin on my neck was turning hot. It was a good feeling. Better than feeling the heat through my shirt. That was starting to get irritating. That heat straight on my neck was a different kind of burn. It hurt, but not in a bad way.

Took my shirt off and sat there looking at the headstone. Remembered my mother the way she had been towards the end. Kneeling in the kitchen of our house on Westchester Drive. Kneeling like she was praying for something - screaming up at the kitchen ceiling. Screaming until the veins in her neck swelled up thick as snakes. Then there was the way she had looked at me. Stared at me with her red eyes looking desperate - me watching her through the sliding glass door.

‘What a mess,’ I said. Reached out and touched the headstone. It was marked same as the glasses get marked when you wash them in hard water. A thin white dust coating that’s left when the water dries. Ran my fingers over the headstone and left lines where I touched it. Looked at my fingers and felt the grit. Used my thumb to rub the ghost-white dust into my fingertips. ‘You weren’t even there.’

Felt a fool talking to her like that. Talking to the headstone. But it felt right too. Hearing my voice and being alone again. It felt normal. There was distance from everything. From St Martin’s and from the trouble waiting there. It felt good because I hadn’t closed the book on everything. It’s not that I wanted my mother to know I was angry that she left me. Angry that she wasn’t able to take care of things like she was supposed to. As a mother she had failed me. She let it all blow apart in the end. Didn’t hold it against her that my father beat the shit out of me. Knocked me round like church bells at lunchtime.

*For whom the bell tolls, Joe-Joe. Well, it’s not you, fella!*

‘You didn’t have half the strength I have,’ I said. Looked down at the grave and figured it was probably because of her that I was able to get through it

all. Cause of her I didn't let my old man break me. Didn't hold any of the stuff that happened to me against her, but I wasn't visiting her grave to tell her that.

Leaned over her grave and tried to judge where her head would be. Where the top of her coffin would be deep down there. Got close to the headstone and put my face to the grass. Took a deep breath and smelled the dry earth. Caught a strong smell of wild onions. Sucked it all up in my nose and when I was full I shouted until my lungs went empty.

'He's gone! He's gone! All that time laying his hands on me. Who's the tough one now, ma? Me! That's who. Me.'

With that I laughed. Laughed until my stomach ached. Until my throat felt raw. Until I couldn't see from the water that was swimming in my eyes. Rolled over and felt the grass against my back and the sun finding new pale skin. Blinked until my eyes were clear again. Until I could see the sky over me. Felt the dried blades of grass pressing into my back. Last of the laugh shook away from my shoulders. Put my hands behind my head and stretched my body out and took the heat that was burning against my skin.

'Goddamn, that was a crazy summer. You know it was crazy.' Looked at her grave like she would be there. Like she'd be laying on her side. Maybe with her hands crossed over her chest. Legs crossed at the ankles. Fresh as the good days she used to have. Days when she looked like things could be different. When she was close to becoming real again.

'You want to know what happened?'

Had to stop laughing again before I told her the story. From beginning to end. Started talking and didn't look anywhere but the blue sky over me. Crossed my hands over my chest and legs at my ankles and started talking. Took me a

couple hours cause I didn't leave anything out. Never stopped to look and see if there was anyone close by. Someone walking up through the paths in the woods to lay flowers on a grave. Someone getting close without knowing I was even there. Without me knowing they were there. I just kept talking. Telling the story like it needed to be told. And when I was finished I felt drained.

Felt sick in my guts. Felt relief. Peace.

'That's it,' I said. 'Now that sonofabitch is rotting. He's locked up and rotting away.'

Horn on the van stopped me from saying anything else. Looked up and saw the van pulling up the hill. Turning onto the waving line that reached out to the highway. Stood up and found my skin had gone all tight in my shoulders. Pushed a finger against my chest. Pulled it away and saw a white impression where it had been. It filled in with red the same as the rest.

'Look at that,' I said. 'Haven't been burned that bad before. Think I'll suffer for this one?'

Looked at the grave and had a sense that I'd see it again. Didn't know it was going to be almost twenty years before I made it back. It would still look the same when the day came. When I would be standing over it with my son at my side. Trying to explain to him that my mother was different from real mothers. That she had problems and she'd decided to end her problems with a rope and a good sturdy tree.

Another blast of the horn and I stood up. Waved at the driver and started walking away. Looked down at the grave one last time.

'They're gone,' I told her. 'For good.'

Got back in the van without saying anything. Laid down across the seat and closed my eyes. Skin was on fire with some hardcore itching already setting in, but not enough to keep me from sleeping. Went out and stayed out for a while. Didn't wake up until the door of the van swung open. Looked and saw the entrance of St Martin's. Gravel path leading from the van and going right up to the main door. Hopped out and tried to stretch my shoulders. Thousand pins went in deep so I let my arms down again.

Started walking off toward the entrance. Up the gravel path. Small rocks crunching under my feet. Felt unbalanced, like I could fall down any second. So I focused on the front door and kept moving for it.

'You alright after today?' the driver asked me.

'Sure. Everything's good.'

He walked beside me all the way. It was already evening and the sun was low in the sky. He must have stopped off somewhere and grabbed some food along the way. Don't know where or when. I'd been out cold. All I know is that my skin was tight and my guts were empty. Walked faster up the path and he kept with me. Stopped at the door and he punched a button next to the metal speaker and a voice called back.

'Escorting Joseph Pullman into the building,' he said.

Electronic voice cracked something else. He looked down at me and shook his head. Figured it was cause of the sunburn. Cause of the state I was in swaying and looking awful. Maybe it was cause I'd just visited my mother's grave. Felt sorry for me or something cause it was just me now. Before the guys showed up on the other side of the door to let us in cannon-arms aimed a finger

at me. Reached it out like he was going to touch it to my chest. Stopped before we connected.

‘You hang in there, Pullman. There’s a chance for you.’

He nodded his head. Smiled so big I got a look at all his teeth. There were a lot of them and they gleamed white. He stuck out his hand and I shook it. When the door opened I walked through it and left my driver behind. Took a left down the hall and signed in at the reception desk.

Two days of pain followed.

Then there was peeling.

*This is your suffering, Joe. You can’t have something you want without paying for it, can you? No, not you, Joe-Joe.*

On the fifth day I had a knock on my door. Answered it and looked at the guy for a while without talking. Tried real hard not to smile too much and give away what I was thinking. He was the new head boy. Since Stokes got sick - since he was taken to the medical ward coughing up blood – this was the new assignment. He was just as big as Stokes, but not half as hard. Could tell that much from his smooth face and soft eyes.

‘Pullman,’ he said. ‘Get dressed and report to meeting room four.’

He walked away.

Short as he was with me I figured it was official. Started to worry that they had connected me with Stokes’ bad weed. Got dressed in my best digs and tried to decide if Krantz had the balls to finger me if they’d got to him. With all his stash he’d be needing to make a deal just so he would go up state as an adult. So I was sweating it hardcore. Was still thinking about it when I checked myself in the mirror. White button up with blue tie. Blue slacks and black socks. Slip-on

shoes cause that's what they give you for formal meetings when you were in D Class. Figured it was important to look good with the way the head boy was so tight with the facts. No smile or sneer or anything. All bottled up.

*Maybe they've got something to tell you about your old man. Want to know how you're holding up after the graveyard visit. Maybe just some kind of meeting that Dean Littlejohn could put in your file to let everyone who gives a shit know what you've been doing with tax payers money.*

Went down the hall. Nobody was out so I couldn't stop anyone and ask if they knew what was happening. All the way to Meeting Room Four the place was dead. Like it had shut down and no one had told me before they left. D class head boy was still around – sitting on a chair at the end of the hall reading a copy of *Franny and Zooey*. Passed him by without making like it was a big deal. Waited outside the meeting room door and listened for voices. Wondering if maybe it was a bunch of Stokes' friends wanting to speak with me about the bad joint he'd smoked. Wanting to know how his stash got fixed with poison weed. Wasn't likely but it was still there. The chance that I was in for a real ass-kicking.

Knocked on the door and opened it before anyone on the other side had chance to respond.

'Joe,' Councillor Jason Clements said. He stood from his chair and turned to me. 'Thanks for coming down.'

Clements had shaved his beard off and looked ten years younger. Almost as young as me and the other flunkies at St Martin's. Only he was wearing a better set of clothes. His cost more than a couple bucks and were made of materials that bent when he bent. Clements put out his hand. Wasn't usual for

him. He liked distance and was always jumpy when we were together. Still, I played along and took his hand in mine. Shook his soft palm for longer than either of us liked. We stopped shaking and I looked at the man and woman sitting on the other side of the table. They looked concerned, only I couldn't decide if it was for me or about me. Nodded my head at the man and he stood up. The woman stayed put in her chair.

'Joe,' Jason Clements said, 'I'd like you to meet Edgerton Meaks and his wife Mona. They are very interested in speaking with you.'

Stepped closer to the table when the Edgerton fella reached a hand toward me. He leaned so his left hand was on the table, holding him up. We shook hands and I watched his face real close. Tried to place him. Maybe see if I remembered another Meaks I'd met along the way. Someone who looked similar to this guy. Checked his face to see if he had the same features as someone I remembered. Someone I'd had some kind of problem with.

'Pleased to meet you, sir.' He had a tight grip on me. With his hand still in mine I said: 'Can I ask why you're interested in meeting me?'

'Well, we're...' Edgerton looked at Clements and seemed to be lost for a few seconds.

'The Meaks, Joe, are interested in fostering you.' He paused for a moment and made a weird kind of sound in his throat. He tilted his head like he was going to look at the Meaks, but never put his eyes on them. Kind of like me when I was around a real attractive girl. I'd want to look, but there was just something that kept me from taking the chance. Made me come across as being real awkward. Clements was no better.

‘Well, the possibility of it anyway.’ He didn’t have any trouble putting his eyes on me. Even tried for a smile.

I kept shaking Edgerton’s hand. Turned so I could look at his eyes and wondered when the catch was going to come snapping into place. Tried to figure out what was going to go wrong before the whole thing even started. The woman next to Edgerton Meaks was looking at my face. She had a hand up to her chin. Fingers touching her white skin like her face was made from porcelain. Like she was afraid she’d break if she touched it too hard. While I shook the man’s hand I smiled at his wife. She didn’t know what to do. Her hand kept moving round her chin. Touched it all over like she thought it was going to disappear. Felt almost sorry for her. Not for the last time either. Six months later I’d be in their house in a place called Henderson. Place that looked like it got built for the sake of an early edition of a *National Geographic* magazine. Picture heading: American Small Town Lives On.

Before we got to that stage I still needed to get them convinced I was worth the risk they were thinking about taking. They both looked like they were slow moving and simple people. Wearing church clothes almost. That concern they came in with never really went away. Maybe that was for me or for themselves for coming out to meet me. It was hard to tell, but the feeling I had was a good one. Like there was a real chance to get away from the home.

‘My name’s Joe, ma’am,’ I told the woman while she moved her hand up to her mouth. ‘Joseph Reginald Pullman. It’s a real pleasure to meet you. Both of you.’

‘Well, Joe,’ the woman said. ‘It’s very nice to meet you.’

I'd stopped shaking Edgerton's hand and offered it to his wife. She looked at it for a moment. Wasn't until she looked up and caught my smile that she set her hand in mine. I held it real gentle like I was going to lift her off the chair for a slow dance. After a soft shake I let it go. Was almost embarrassed at how relieved she looked when her hand fell away from mine. How she took hold of it and set it in her lap.

'How was it you decided on me?' I asked.

'I'm sorry?' Edgerton said. He had started to sit down, but stopped. Made his back straight again. Then he pushed his hands in his pockets like he was intending to keep standing for a while.

'Of all the people to foster. All the kids in all the state, I mean. Why'd you choose me?'

'Well, we heard your story. Then we read about you in the papers. Saw about your ...' He looked at Clements for support, but kept talking. 'Read about your father and his case. When he was convicted... sentenced, we felt it was a shame for you to have no one left. So we called the state board and registered and requested to come out and meet you.'

'Well,' I said. 'That's real kind of you. Sure is a real kind thing to do.'

From that we talked for a while. Small talk to pass the time. Mostly questions from Edgerton Meaks with me answering in a kind of unsure way. Jason Clements kept out of it and that was alright by me. Edgerton told me folks from his town called him Pop. He and his wife ran a funeral home. When he mentioned the business he was in he went all quiet. Made me think of a salesman. Make a pitch and wait for the customer to respond sort of business.

Keep silent as long as you have to. It was a long silence so I decided to help him out.

‘It’s a job that’ll always be in demand,’ I said.

Even got a half smile out of his long crooked face. He went back to asking his questions. After every one I’d take a deep breath and nod my head like I was considering the answer. Thing is I didn’t need the time. I was just putting on a show. They weren’t the first people to come out and meet me. They were the first who weren’t funded by a newspaper or some other conductor, player or fan of the media circus. I wasn’t too sure about them at first, but after a while I felt like they were alright. Like they were maybe even genuine.

During a long silence I decided to throw them a bone.

*Give them something, Joe. Something with meat on it. Make it juicy, see how fast they bite.*

‘Went to see my mother’s grave the other day,’ I said. Edgerton looked at me. His right eyebrow was raised up in a cartoon arch. His last question had been something concerning history. We’d talked a lot about history to that point. The papers had me pegged as a history buff. According to Edgerton Meaks I was considered to have an exceptional grasp of the subject. I figured there was a lot about me and my interest in history cause people coming to see me were always loaded with questions about what I was reading.

‘How do you feel after seeing her grave, Joe?’ Mona Meaks asked me.

She was looking at me with something different in her eyes. She was interested in hearing what I was about to say. There was something else there too. She was apprehensive. That much I could tell from the way she was holding

her hands together just above the surface of the table. Holding them there like she was wanting me to see just how hard she was squeezing them together.

‘Well, ma’am,’ I said. ‘I feel better for taking the time to speak with her. To share my thoughts. It’s been a long time since it was just me and my mother. You’ll know from the papers all about my father.’ I looked over at Jason Clements to see how he was going to gauge my comments. He sat forward and nodded his head too fast for it to be anything less than confusion. He just didn’t know how to take me and all my past baggage. ‘Well, then you’ll know we didn’t have a very good relationship. After my mother was taken away he just left me to get on with things. Made the house a real uncomfortable place to live in.’

Ran my fingers over the scars on the side of my head. Kept doing it for a few seconds. Usually it was out of habit. Running my fingers across them to feel how deep they were. How much the past was still a part of me. With Edgerton and Mona Meaks looking at me I did it for show. So I wouldn’t have to talk about the beatings my father dealt out. Rubbing the wounds acknowledged that I was damaged goods. Enough said.

‘That’s just horrible,’ Edgerton said. ‘And you never got out to see her?’

‘No sir. Not before now.’ Looked over at Mona even when I was talking to her husband. She seemed to need more of my attention. Seemed to have a need to hear me speak about my mother. Somehow it wasn’t a hard thing to do, telling Mona about the experience. ‘To answer your question more thoroughly, ma’am, I feel like a burden has been taken from me. I’ve been able to talk about things that have been stuck in my throat up to now. Wasn’t comfortable to let some of the things out. At my mother’s grave it came out. All of it. And then some.’

Smile. She smiled back.

‘Felt good too. You understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yes, Joe. I understand you.’ She touched her chin again. Then she dropped her hands to her lap. Her shoulders bounced and she said: ‘I understand you entirely, Joe.’

With that I sat back and let the room go quiet for a while. In that silence I decided that I would do whatever I needed to do to keep Edgerton and Mona Meaks coming back to St Martin’s. I’d play the good kid and see how far the ride was going to take me. If things worked out I’d make damned sure I went on the straight.

That’s just what I did. Kept at it for a long while too.

## Chapter One

Edgerton Meaks was standing in front of me. He was at the other side of the table with his head shaking one second then still as a rock the next. He'd be like that for a few seconds. Head steady. Face without emotion. Then it'd start shaking again and he'd look all angry. Even raised up his hand. Index finger stuck up in the air like he wanted me to look at the ceiling. Only what he was wanting me to look at was the red tip of his finger. Same one he'd just wiped along the surface of the table I was sitting at. Stripe his finger made through the middle of the table was slow to fill back in. Watched him until he'd gone back to shaking his head again. Finger stuck up between us. Red was making a slow crawl down toward his wrist.

I looked away. Just couldn't take the sight of him any more. He was old and tired and confused. A different man to the one I'd met as a boy. Made me think of all the time I'd known him. How much I owed him for all that time. Couldn't watch his face with those kinds of thoughts going through my head. After I looked away he started talking.

'What's wrong with you, Joe? What's happening?'

Shook my head at him and hoped he'd clear out like everyone else.

The lounge bar had been full when Edge stopped by to see me. Folks had come in for the cheap beers and out-of-the-way secrecy. It's the two things the Trapper's Paradise provides – that and three small guestrooms upstairs. Me and some alcoholic the locals called Chip were using two of the rooms. The other had a steady run of tenants, but it was never occupied for more than a few hours at a

time. Came down from my room that evening and found a spare seat in the lounge. Familiar faces all round. Faces that sunk down into the shadows when I'd looked at them with too much interest. Place was full, but there was no one to speak with. That suited me fine.

After a few minutes of waiting Lenny came by my table. He's a hunched-shoulder kind of guy. Nothing wrong with him. Spine's not bent and he's not long-time sick. He's just got lazy shoulders and it makes him look weak all the time. Quiet voice and a mouth that moves too much for his words don't help his cause either. He's awkward to look at and speak to so folks don't often try. He's lonely. That doesn't make him change his ways. He still can't look at you for long during a conversation. Even when you're answering his questions.

He stopped by the table, asked what I was after. I ordered a couple beers and a bowl of the stew he had up on special. Pointed his attention to the chalkboard where he'd drawn a circle with shaky lines coming out of it. *Fresh stew! Get it while it's hot!* He went away with my order and I was still looking at the sign when he came back. Set the beers down on the table and told me the stew was off.

'Smells too bad to chance it, Joe. I don't really want to heat it up.'

'I'll just settle for these then,' I told him. Used one of my beer bottles to touch the neck of the other. It made a small clink sound that got Lenny looking at it. He kind of faded off like he usually does. Not much of a talker. Even less of a cook.

About the time I got through with my first beer Edge came by. Told me he was after some company. He knew where to find me. We doubled the count of beer bottles collecting at the centre of my table. Drank without talking for a

while. Nothing more than the usual thing between me and Edge. Same as it had been for years. We'd got real easy with one another. I called him Pop and he let me stay quiet. I appreciated him taking me away from all the shit and he appreciated me being around. Years had passed and we granted one another what we needed and not much more.

*You doing alright?*

*Yeah.*

*Spoke with Carole yet?*

*Nope.*

*Maybe you should try...*

Wasn't much of a conversation, but it was enough to last us. We measured time in beer bottles and after four each the conversation was even less important. A dozen bottles in and the smell of bad stew was filling the room. Steaming bowls were coming through the doors leading from the kitchen. Lenny passed by on the second round and leaned in close to my head. Lifted a bowl so I could get a look at it. Liquid was like thick dark blood with a silver slick cutting a shape through it. Grey stones of meat poked up through the surface.

'You wanting to take a chance on it?' he asked.

Shook my head and he faded away again.

'You've got a duty, Joe. If not to yourself then to Marty.' He made like he was going to stand. Took in a deep breath and puffed out his chest. He sat like that and looked at me for a while before he said: 'Don't forget about him. He's a good kid and he needs you.'

'Don't put it on me, Pop.'

'Alright,' he said. 'But you better remember he's got expectation.'

‘It’s shit for everybody.’ Raised my bottle and tilted it at him. Emphasising my point. Letting him know I took his too. ‘This whole thing is real shit.’

‘Well, then you go back home and straighten it out.’

Drank my beer bottle dry and looked across the table at Pop. Gave real thought to what it was I should be telling him. *Carole’s got this idea that my past is littered with bones. See, Pop, she’s wanting me to fill her in on all the happenings. All the years before the Home. Before you and Mona came out and fulfilled your Christian need to save a soul. Well, I started... I gave her some of what she wanted. You know where it got me? Got me a cheap room at a guest house that doubles as a brothel, Pop. That’s what it got me.*

‘What’s going on in your head, son?’

‘Nothing, Pop. Just thinking how it’s all gone wrong again.’

Pop started jabbering on about something. Chances this and opportunities that. Thing is I didn’t get all of what he was saying. Over his shoulder I’d caught a shape in the doorway. Colin Lowell. Not a man I was interested in seeing. He walked through the entrance to the lounge and stood under the dim light. Eyes all screwed up. He kept his hands in his pocket while he looked round for somebody. Stopped when his chin was pointed in my direction. Hands came out of his jacket pockets and my reaction was to stand and leave. Give myself a chance of avoiding him. He still needed to wade through a few tables to get to mine. Would need to get past Pop and I figured that wasn’t going to happen. Pop didn’t want the trouble between me and Colin to kick off all over again.

‘Joe,’ he called out. ‘Wait there, Joe. I just need to speak with you.’

That's the first indication I had that my body was reacting faster than my head. I'd stood up already. Shoved my chair back in the same motion. Looked down and had a couple seconds where everything felt strange. Like I'd lost something. So I just stood there wishing I'd ditched before Colin got up close.

He was at the table by then. Hands up like he was already trying to call me down. Like he was expecting me to go back to old tricks. Show him how upset I was with the hard side of my hands. Pop stood from his chair like he was thinking the same thing. Leaned toward me and put his arm out. Reached over and touched a hand to my shirt. Used his other hand to paw at Colin. Doing his best to get him moving back.

'It was a bad idea coming here, Colin.'

Pop looked round and saw the familiar faces were peeling back from the shadows. Expressions were already changing.

'Now, I've been here for a few weeks,' I said. 'So we can all figure this wasn't some kind of an accident. One of your famous chance encounters.'

'No, it's nothing like that,' Colin said. 'Listen, all that other stuff doesn't matter. I'm here cause I need to talk to you.'

Stood for a while shaking my head. Listening to the sound of spoons clinking against the inside of empty bowls. Throats getting cleared. Voices talking and getting hushed down at the same time.

'We've done all our talking.'

'It's about Carole.'

'Now, you can stop right there,' Pop had told him. He'd made his back straight again. Kept his hand on Colin and tried to push him away. Colin moved, but not far. Stepped round Pop and came to the table. Pop pushed on him and

sent Colin to the side. 'Listen here. Joe's got enough to think about right now. He doesn't need any more trouble from the likes of you.'

'I'm not bringing trouble, Mister Meaks.' Colin looked at him all loaded up with sincerity. Like he was hurt the old man had made out he was trying to cause a fuss. 'This isn't about anything but what's going on now. It's about Carole. Everything else is finished. That's all way in the past.'

'What do you need to tell me about my wife?' I said.

Pop stopped pressing at Colin's shirt. I didn't know how many people were still round. For some reason it seemed important to know. Looked to the left and saw the tables were empty. Over on the right too. The last of the folks were bent down and moving through the entrance door. Same way you see people move on the news. When a bomb's gone off and everybody's clearing out.

'What's this about my wife?' I repeated.

'She's been out, Joe. All over the place. Since you've been here it's been happening even more.'

'So you're following my wife now,' I said. 'Wasn't enough with me. Now you're getting a liking for Carole.'

'No. Oh, hell, Joe. Listen to me. It's nothing like that. But I've seen her round. Sure, this has got to sound real weird, but I've seen her. You need to know about it.'

'Get the hell out of here, Colin.'

'Mister Meaks, he's got a right to know. As a man he has the right.'

*As a man you have the right, Joe. As a man...*

After that it all goes kind of hazy. I'd moved, but it wasn't until after everything went messy that I knew I'd moved. That I was aware of my muscles burning hot. There was Colin's face one second. Then it was gone. Then it was back again. Gone again. Back again. Each time he flashed up in front of me his face was looking worse. Red all over the place. His nose getting wider. Fatter. Mouth worked up in a wild shape that was shaking. Shaking like a rubber band flying through the air.

Gone. Back again.

That's when Pop's face started shaking. Then it froze. My chest was pounding. Pulse took up a place deep inside my head. Thundering away. Went back to my seat. Stepped back into it and settled so I could look up at Pop. He was standing in front of me with that confused look on his face. Head moving. Shake. Stop. Shake. His mouth moving again.

*What's happening to you?*

It was to be expected with all the commotion that was going on. A lot of noise. My hands were aching. Arms wet. Head felt like I was all filled up with blue electric. Charged up with something wild. A quiet humming sound deep in there that was making me listen. No way to ignore it. I'd have given it more attention, but there was Pop over me. *Shake. Stop. Shake.* Colin was gone but his voice was still coming through the humming. Making its way through all the noise.

*Hear that, Joe? That's Colin Lowell. What's that he's saying? That guy's really bellyaching about something. Something about bleeding. Bleeding real bad.*

'What's happened to you?' Pop said.

*Something about a crazy fuck.*

I was slumped back in the chair. One of the twelve bottles of beer smashed and scattered on the table in front of me. Looked round and saw Colin Lowell was off in the corner of the bar. Back behind a fallen table. Laid out on his side with his legs moving like he wanted to go back even farther. His hands up to his face. Couldn't see just how bad the cut was and how bad the bleeding was going to get.

'Jesus Christ, Joe,' Pop was saying. 'Goddamned it, son!'

He was a mess. Pop was real shocked at the whole scene. He looked back over his shoulder at Colin and I followed his lead and checked on him myself. Nothing changing. Red still making a slow stream through his fingers. Time didn't exist. Wasn't counting it in beer bottles any more. Still watching Colin when I noticed Officer Jody Verring standing next to me. He'd come by with a quickness that just didn't seem real. Didn't even see him make it through the entrance hall. Wasn't long before another officer came into the room. He went over and kneeled down near Colin. Tried a few times to get those hands away from his face. Each time he went for them Colin would kick out with his legs. Shift like a fish on a hot bank of sand. Turning so the cop just couldn't get a look in there.

'The hell happened here?' Jody Verring asked me.

'He fell,' I said.

'Why's there so much busted glass, Pullman?'

'He fell on my bottles.'

Verring's hand dropped on my shoulder. My muscles jumped and he went with them. Hand pulled away and when it fell on me again he had a tighter

grip. This time he tried to turn me. I wouldn't go so he pushed hard and I went with him. Chest hit the table. Chin fell down on a piece of glass. Cut in, but it didn't hurt. Like pushing a nail into an orange. Felt the skin break and the glass go in easy, but there was nothing after that. I'd been numb for a while.

'Hold it there, Pullman.'

'Sure thing, bud.'

'Now you leave him be, Jody,' Pop said.

'It's alright, Pop. Just let him do his thing.'

'I can't let this happen. Joe's just been defending himself. Get your hands off.'

'Pop,' I said. 'Just leave it.'

'Mister Meaks, I'll have to ask you to keep out of this.'

Verring lifted me off the table and slammed me down on it again. I made a grunt sound that got Pop stirring.

'He's alright,' the other cop said. Caught sight of him. He was a young guy with a lot of teeth. Looked over at him from where I was laying on the table. 'He's not cut. Can't see a scratch on him even.' He looked back at Colin who was twisting fish-style away from him. 'Just hold there, sir. I'm needing to have a look at you.'

Colin was saying something. Muffled it into his hands and all I heard was this wet kind of sound. Red bubbles moved up between his fingers.

'He came in here and started throwing round accusations. Telling Joe that Carole's been...'

'Pop,' I said. 'Just leave it alone. For christsakes I don't want...'

‘Shut it, Pullman.’ Verring shoved his hand down hard on my back. It was starting to work on my nerves. I’d laid steady for a while figuring Colin was in a real bad way. All busted up thanks to my quick temper and the way his face knocked against my table. If he wasn’t all that bad I didn’t see why I should be spread out with Colin’s blood soaking into my clothes. Least not with Jody Verring’s thigh resting between my ass cheeks and his hand pressing down on the middle of my back.

‘Let me up, Verring,’ I said. ‘You heard your man. Colin’s not even all that hurt.’

‘You can’t just go smacking somebody around like that and expect to get away with it. That’s assault, Pullman. That gets you locked up.’

‘Goddamn it,’ I said. Made like I was going to stand up and Verring pushed down hard again. Hand firm between my shoulders. This time I kept moving on him. Standing up while he was trying to shove me down. He couldn’t keep me there with just one hand so he put the other one on me. Felt his baton digging into my right shoulder. Wondered how long it was going to be before he decided shoving wasn’t going to be enough.

‘Leave him,’ Pop said. ‘Don’t even think about it.’

Didn’t know who Pop was talking to. Verring or me. Couldn’t look up to see. Verring slipped his arm round the front and pulled his elbow in tight under my chin. Grabbed hold round back and started a tight choke. Leaned back into him so I wouldn’t go out. Took a good hold on his arm and tried to pull it loose. Just get enough space there so I could get a breath in. Pop was coming round the table. Moving between the scattered chairs. Kicked over the tall pot Lenny uses to store umbrellas for his guests.

‘Now wait there,’ Pop said. Still coming. Still moving on us. ‘That’s enough of that.’

‘Verring!’ the voice came out of the air. Through the haze of smoke that was clouding up high against the ceiling. Smoke that was crawling in a hypnotic way making it hard for me to keep from going out in Verring’s choke. Arm round my neck loosed up. Took a breath and my head went weird. Drained empty. Legs were somewhere down below me. Couldn’t seem to find them. They weren’t connected to me anymore. Not enough for them to work the way they were supposed to. Do what I wanted.

‘Set him down in the chair and back the hell off.’

‘Sheriff, he was resisting.’

‘I don’t give a good dadgum what he was doing. You put him down on the chair and back off like I told you.’

Was getting moved to the right. Sank until there was a chair under me. Head was coming back and I felt a hand round my neck. Rubbing. Took a few deep breaths. Found out the hand belonged to me. Stopped rubbing and swayed a bit and put my hands on the table. Knocked away a few shards of broken glass so I wouldn’t have them in front of me. So it was a clear place to set my head down.

‘What in the hell happened here?’ Nat was asking me.

‘I’d rather not talk about it, Sheriff.’

He nodded his head. His big white cowboy hat dipping each time his head came forward. Rose every time his head went back. A ship on a slow sea. He reached up and took the hat off his head. Studied it for a few seconds and looked at me again. Long enough to shake his head and make me feel like I’d done something wrong. Show me he wasn’t too interested in what I wanted. Then he

looked over at the corner of the bar. At Colin Lowell and the deputy kneeling beside him.

‘How’s he holding up?’ Nat asked.

‘He’s not taking his hands away so I can’t tell for sure.’ Kid was stooped down on his haunches. Twisted to look at Nat. Shook his head. ‘Most I can see he’s not all that bad, Sheriff.’

‘Colin, quit dicking around,’ Nat called out. ‘Take your hands away so he can see your face.’

Colin dropped his hands. It was a red mess. Real dark looking stuff running down toward his mouth. Looked like a cut at first. Maybe a fat one at that. Then he went to speak and the dark mess moved with him. Couldn’t understand him so he wiped a hand across his mouth. Dark mess went to the other side of his face. He opened his mouth again and showed his teeth. They were all accounted for from where I was sitting. Still, it didn’t bring me the sense of relief that it probably should have brought me.

Room was quiet while Colin checked himself out. Fingers in his mouth. Nose between thumb and bloodied fingers. He yelped and looked embarrassed after that. Looked like a damned fool.

‘I’m alright,’ he said. Looked at the blood on his hands. Spat something on the floor between him and the deputy. He ran his hand over his face again. Taking inventory and making sure it was all in the place he thought it should be. ‘Yeah, I think I’m alright.’

‘The hell you down there hollering like that for?’

‘Joe.’ Nat had his hand out. Like he’d caught me walking down a path he didn’t want me walking down. ‘Enough from you. Colin, all that from your nose?’

‘Yessir,’ Colin said. ‘I think that’s where it’s coming from.’

‘Jody, go back there and find Lenny. Tell him we’re needing a towel or something. Make it damp.’ Nat turned his head like he was going to speak to me. ‘And Jody, make sure you thank him for the call. This could have got worse I’m sure.’ Nat raised an eyebrow at me. Took it like he was questioning me.

‘It wasn’t going to get any worse than that,’ I said. Pointed to Colin who was struggling to get to his feet. ‘All the stuff beforehand was just words. They were getting loud. We disturbed the folks who were here and I apologise for that. Thing is...’

‘Better be good.’

‘He came by to tell me some things about Carole I wasn’t interested in hearing.’

‘Well,’ Nat said with his forehead all wrinkled by his thoughts. ‘Now I can see how that could make a man react. Specially one in your situation.’

‘It’s just the details. So I guess I stopped him. Didn’t want him to get too far into a story with other people round.’

‘This all hitting the mark, Colin?’

‘I’m sorry for the trouble, sheriff.’ His eyes flashed at me for a second then they were away. Scanning for something in the pattern on the carpet. ‘Joe, I’m just trying to save you some hassle later on.’

Verring came back with the towel. Handed it to Nat, but Pop took hold of it and reached it across. Stuck it under Colin's nose and pushed until Colin's head went back.

'Van's outside,' Pop said. 'Could take him down to the medical centre. May be better off lying down.'

'Yeah, Edge,' Nat said. 'You been drinking these?'

Pop looked down at the four beer bottles still on the table. Nat put his boot on one of the bottles that had hit the floor. He rolled it under the sole of his boot.

'Just had a few,' Pop said.

Nat nodded.

'You go on ahead then. Jody, you follow and make sure they get down there alright.'

Verring wasn't too please about the assignment. Showed me what he would never have the balls to show Nat Upshaw. Contempt. His eyes were filled with it. Swimming in it. Anticipation for what he would be missing. Must have been eating holes in that poor bastard. Anger that he'd been so close to choking me out. Close as hell, but just not able to finish it off.

Nat waited for the room to clear. He moved round the other side of the table from me. Looked at the surface for a few seconds and then pulled up a chair that had been knocked to the side when Colin had tumbled back. Nat sat down. Took his time getting comfortable. Held his hat like he didn't know what to do with it. Then he looked at me. He was different. Nat Upshaw the calm man. Same one I'd met when I first arrived in Henderson. Like Pop I'd seen Nat age. Turn white, but still keep the same core of the man. Even tempered and

deliberate. Still, I got a sense there was something more to him. Another depth that would take some hard digging to reach.

‘I want you to tell me a story,’ he said.

*Oh, we’ve heard this one before, Joe. This never ends well.*

‘Kind of a story are you wanting to hear?’

‘Well, we can start with what’s been keeping you here.’ His hands reached out to the sides. Simple gesture, but it was effective too. Made me look round and evaluate the surroundings. Look at the dark wood panelling on the walls. Moulding deer head over the unlit fireplace. It was a small room that felt smaller because of the dim lighting. Felt small cause Nat Upshaw had directed me to look at it. Making me consider where I was in my life.

‘I’m here cause me and Carole are having some problems.’

‘Yeah, well I got that much. Most of us got that much a few weeks back when you took a room. Words are fast as the wind, Joe. News got back to me before your bag was unpacked. Probably before you even had the key in your door for the first time. Could have been more discreet about it. Bunked in with your Pop for a few weeks. Put a cot in the office down at the funeral home. It’s not ideal, but folks wouldn’t be any the wiser. What people don’t know in this town is what keeps life normal. Soon as a sniff of scandal hits the gossips it’s a dadgum frenzy.’

He stopped looking at me. Paid too much attention to the fist he’d just balled up between us. One he was holding above the table. ‘Let it blow over and get back to things. That’s what you need to do.’

Nodded my head and said: ‘This isn’t going to blow over.’

Nat wasn't comfortable with that. Shoulders moved and he shifted forward in his chair. Fist opened up. He went to looking at his fingers. Checking his nails for something.

'Got a reason why not?'

'It's not a reason,' I said. 'More a feeling. It's not a real good feeling either.'

'You should go home, Joe. Get back and talk to Carole. These things can get out of hand. You can make them right or you can watch them go wrong.'

'Yeah,' I told him.

'Get your things,' he said. 'I'll give you a ride home.'

## Chapter Two

We didn't talk much during the drive. Nat's Bronco was skidding in the snow. More snow was falling and Nat was doing all he could to keep us on the road. Snow falling from the sky was like flakes of white ash. Fat chunks of burning paper that danced past the headlights. Streets were empty and the snow looked blue from the moonlight. Glowing bright crystals reflecting in the full moon. A moon that looked too close. Like an eye hanging out of the socket. Close enough for you to reach out and shove it back up into the night sky.

'Those boys will be glad you're home,' Nat said.

'They're at Carole's folks.'

Kept watching the snow travel by the window. Didn't want to talk any more. Just wanted to get back to the house to ice my knuckles and chin. Put a hand to my face and felt the slick plastic of the butterfly bandages Nat gave me from the first-aid kit in his glove box. He'd watched while I fingered out a piece of glass. He'd waited until I'd taped the wound shut before driving away from Trapper's Paradise.

'Should get that checked out.'

Nodded my head and said: 'It's fine.'

'What are the boys doing up in Fairfax?'

'Carole wanted to talk. Sent them away so we could do it without interruptions.'

'So why are you at the guest house?'

Didn't like the way Nat was looking at me. Way he slowed the truck down so much he didn't have to concentrate on the road ahead. Just kept his hand on the wheel and his chin pointed at the side of my head.

'We don't have much to talk about.'

'Things can't be as bad as you're making out, Joe.'

'Sure they can, Nat.' I looked at him and this time he looked away from me. For a second we connected and his smile melted off his grey face. Drained like ice in a fire. Must have seen something in my eyes he didn't like. 'Things can be just that bad.'

He squeezed the wheel and we went back to being quiet again - stayed that way until we got back to the house. He pulled the Bronco into the driveway. All but one of the windows of my house were black. A light inside was shining a bright strip through the hall curtain. Figured it was coming from the lamp on the living-room table. Carole always left a light on for me. Made it easy for when I was coming back to pick up a change of clothes. Show face for a family dinner. Spend time in the place so Marty would remember he had a father.

'Go on in, Joe,' Nat said. He was watching me again. This time he had his regular face on again. One that was easy to look at and hard not to like. 'Take your time speaking with her.'

'I'll do that, Sheriff.'

He put his hand out and I shook it. Nat made like he was going to say something else. Shook the thought from his head while he kept a tight hold on my hand. I squeezed back and pulled away, then I was out of the truck and staggering through a frozen crust of snow toward my front door. Wanting get inside so I wouldn't have to feel Nat Upshaw's eyes on me. Worried about what

Carole was going to say when I got in and I had enough time to think about it. Key didn't fit the lock. After a shot of panic I switched to another one on my chain. Looked to the side and spotted Edith Krantz. Old bitch of a neighbour had her curtain pulled wide. She was trying to work something out with all that crazy juice she had swilling round in her small brain. Trying to muster up why the local undertaker was getting dropped off at home by the sheriff. Last thing I wanted to do was to feed her story. Tried not to look too drunk, but it wasn't easy to keep steady.

Slid in the new key and turned the lock. The door went in. I went in with it. Shut it without waving Nat along. All the excitement got my insides working. Had a hot feeling burning inside my gut. Wasn't the way I wanted to start things off. Stood against the door breathing deep. Doing all I could not to lose it in the foyer. In through the nose out through the mouth. Got a rhythm going and after a while felt like I could hold my own.

'You home?' I called out. With my words there came a pang of freedom. Probably cause I'd gotten used to being in a room at the boarding house. Cooped up and hemmed in. Silent and routine. Room to lounge bar. Back to room. Turned and looked at the living room. The sofa and the chairs - a lot of places to settle into. Dropped the bag on the tiles. Headed to the kitchen and went for the fridge. Had the copper taste of an empty mouth. Already thinking about a cold one. A refresher before I had to face whatever was coming next.

House was quiet. That wasn't a big deal. Quiet was good. Carole didn't like music all that much. She'd been a dancer when we met. Nothing with poles and stages and tight silver bikinis - but she liked to move. Turn the music on and she'd get around the place. There was this crazy kind of walk she did. Moved her

arms like she was in water and she'd sway her hips. Stepping slow the whole while, keeping time with the music. I'd get up close to her. Right up behind her and she'd keep going with her eyes closed like I wasn't even there. I'd called her something.

*The hell was it you called her, Joe? That name you gave her...*

'Got no idea,' I said. 'That's long gone.'

But there had been a name once and I'd used it when I came up behind her. Put my hands on her and felt her push back on me. I had a name for her and I'd use it all the time. She'd push into me and she'd laugh. *Goddamn that was a laugh.* If there was music on she sure as hell would dance. *Once upon a time there was a better world than this.* She didn't play music anymore.

I pulled the fridge door open and looked inside. A line of beer bottles standing to attention. No matter how long I was away Carole always had something waiting for me. Reached in and for the first time I felt a sense of guilt. A guilt that had been absent in me for a long time. Took a bottle from the top shelf and felt like I was stealing. Taking from a place where I didn't belong. Waited with my hand hovering in front of the shelf. Decided to take two before closing the door.

'You've been a lazy man, Joe,' I told myself. 'A bad and lazy man.'

Said it loud almost like I was talking to someone else. Suppose I was trying to anyway. Somehow hoping Carole could hear what I was saying. Hoping it would make some kind of amends for what I'd been doing. For all the time I'd spent away from her. Sound of my voice brought back the feeling of being alone. Set the bottles on the counter and waited. Listened. Silence was all I had so I made some noise. Fumbled round in the drawers until I found the bottle opener.

Topped the bottles and let the caps rattle to a halt on the countertop. They spun round like coins and went down slow.

Same as I watched the bottle tops spin and come to a halt, I watched my marriage fail. My tendency has always been to watch things fade. Took solace in being able to survive it. Same way I watched Pop age over the years. Watched the way he died a little after Mona passed. Watched him go to pieces with her sickness. It took her slow, but took him fast. Second Maitland told her she was dying Pop started the fade. Met him when he was already an old man and I took a sick kind of peace from the way time was taking his colour away. Turning his skin that ashen grey. Stripping his hair to strands of ragged white cotton. Took the same easy view with my marriage. Sure, I saw it going. Drifting. Witnessed it unravelling and while Carole was making plans I sat and waited. Played witness. Even left toward the end cause it was easier than watching it up close. And so it went. Everyday Carole was becoming more distant. Creating more quiet. I kept telling myself it'll get better, but I didn't do anything to keep her around. *It's just got to get better*, I'd say to myself.

First beer went down with the ease and speed of water. Set the bottle on the counter and looked at the other. Beads of condensation collecting and falling from the side. Leaned in close and waited while drops collected with other drops. Watched and listened. It was all dead. House. Sound. Marriage.

Pulled out the change I had in my pocket. Set it on the counter. Silver spilled out. Remnants of paper money I'd spent on coffee. Change from Darnell's that still had a slick coating of bacon grease. An orange crisp of special sauce caught in the grooves. Smell of charred lard and decaying mayonnaise stronger than the copper of the pennies. The change rattled to a stop on the glass

cutting-board and I waited for the sound of the moving change to die down before I stopped looking. Halfway to getting the bottle to my mouth I spotted the note. It was pegged to the fridge door with a magnet. A magnet shaped like a tin of baked beans. Centred perfectly on the note and set just under the Hotpoint label. My name written across the damned thing.

*Joe Pullman*

Drank from the bottle and swallowed hard and kept my eyes on my name. With the bottle tipped back I turned my head. Still kept an eye on it. *Joe Pullman*. It was an awkward way to read a note – with my head back. But it got my mind working. Thoughts rattling away in my head as loud as greasy coins rattling on a glass cutting board.

*The hell's Carole thinking sticking something like that under a Heinz magnet? Nothing wrong at all, man. But, Joe Pullman. Not just Joe. Usually just J. Didn't have time to write it all out. J - gone out. See you later. J - will call. J - dinner's in the freezer.*

This was written different. All those evening-classes in arts and crafts had done her proud. Sitting all night with Nancy Lowell in some classroom at the local high school. Just to get away from home. Needing to get away from the absent husband. I never complained, but I never saw anything she'd been working on either.

'What is it you're doing now?' I'd asked. One of the few times I'd tried to break down the thing we were putting up between us. I'd come back to the house to get a fresh suit. Me and Ted had a call for a pickup and I was looking kind of lame. Smelled stale from the mattress I'd been sleeping on at Trappers Paradise. So I went back for a fresh suit and a real shower. While I was there I'd

followed Carole into the study. She'd been in there doing something when I came in. Didn't think anything of it either. But she looked scared sitting behind my desk. Sitting in my chair with her hands going through the files in my drawers. She looked shocked when her eyes came up and met me leaning inside the doorway.

'So?' I said. Her head snapped up like I'd jabbed her with a cattle prod. Hair stuck to her red face. She tried a smile and when she saw I wasn't buying it she went to chewing her lip. Chewed it until the smile died off. Until the red spread and filled in the rest of her face. 'What is it you're doing now?'

'What do you mean?' she said.

'In your class.' She looked confused. 'Your evening class with Nancy. Last quarter it was macramé. Calligraphy before that. See, I remember these things.' Tried to make a joke out of it. But she wasn't laughing and I didn't have the energy to raise the smile. 'What're you doing now?'

'Pottery,' she said and pulled her hair behind her left ear. Her smile was uneasy and I couldn't tell if it was because she was going through my desk drawers or if she just didn't want to talk about her new pottery class.

'When are you going to bring some of it home?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Soon.'

'What about the macramé? You have any of that?'

'I wasn't very good,' she said. 'I left it at the class. Didn't really think it was anything we could use.'

'You need help finding something in my desk?'

'No,' she said and made a sort of laugh that neither of us were comfortable with. 'I just thought you'd have an envelope. I'm going to send

Lynda a cheque. She's short this month. So I told her I'd send her something to tide her over.'

'Top left,' I said. 'Should be a couple left in there.'

Carole never did bring home any pottery. Two months later I was standing with a beer in my hand looking at a note she'd left me. Staring at the damned thing - wondering when she'd written it. Wondering what expression was on her face when she stuck it up with the magnet. Scared as hell about what I was going to read when I finally opened it.

*Joe Pullman.*

*Now it would've been bad news if she'd used your middle name, Joe. Women always use the middle name when shit's in flight and the fan's in range.*

Turned the note over. Carole's gone to see her mother. That's the way I called it. Figured I had it pegged too. Decided she didn't want the boys to go to her parents on their own after all. All that shit about spending time talking things through. Just us, without distractions. Figure out where to go next. Bullshit.

*Maybe she's gone off to see Lynda. Maybe she's delivering another one of your cheques to that useless bitch of a sister. Always puffing on about welfare cause you just can't get enough. Oh, and there's never more than bare necessities. Fat, lazy twat knows all the trailer-trash talk-show guests on personal terms, Joe. Boyfriend in a New York Prison even. Who the fuck meets a crook over the internet? How's that for poor? Welfare living with internet access and low-rent mobile-trailer accommodation.*

Reached up and pulled the note from under the magnet. Pushed a finger under the lip of the note. Opened it up and before reading it I lifted the bottle. Took a couple heavy pulls. Kept a mouthful of beer until it went warm over my

tongue. Let the bubbles fizz out. Swallowed hard. Set the bottle down and took the note in two hands. Peeled back the flaps. Turned it over and looked at the other side. Nothing there. Just my name. Still I looked at the crease she'd made when bending it in half. Looked at it like I needed to figure out how it was all put together in case I needed to get it back in shape. So I could put it away and make believe I never read it before. An easy way of dealing with bad news.

*Joe Pullman*

*Don't look for me. I'm not in the house. I'm not in this town either, Joe.*

*It may take some time, but you'll understand. Eventually, you will.*

*Take care of Donald and Marty.*

*Good-bye, Joe.*

*Carole Felicia Quincy*

Lifted the bottle and filled my mouth. Set the note on the counter and kept looking at it while I topped a third bottle. Lifted the bottle and grabbed the phone off the wall. Used my thumb to mash a bunch of buttons. A phone number I dialled only when Carole wasn't around. The other times we'd had problems and she'd decided she needed to get away. It was all without thought that I dialled. A reaction because it had happened before - without the note, but with Carole's sudden disappearing trick. Fucking magic. That strip-joint thing. Poof. Gone. Then I'd started talking in my sleep. Presto chango. The Great and Secret Show of Carole Felicity Quincy. Abracadabra. Alone again.

*Thank you and good night!*

‘Come on, Fran,’ I said. ‘Pick up the phone.’

What had Fran called me that time?

*Dirty Handy Andy. What kind of a man ...*

‘Hello?’

‘Frances.’ I took a breath. Moved the beer bottle away from my mouth.

‘Carole there with you?’

‘Joe?’

‘Yep. Listen, Frances. I need to speak with Carole for a minute. I’m beat.

Had a real tough day.’

‘Carole’s not here,’ she said. ‘Why on earth would Carole be here?’

‘Right. Okay.’ I brought the bottle close and took a drink.

‘Is something wrong?’ Her voice dulled for a second. She was talking but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. I stopped drinking and tried to listen. Moved the bottle away like it was going to make some kind of difference. Her voice came back again. ‘Wasn’t she supposed to be home? Weren’t you two supposed to talk?’

*Jesus Christ, Carole.*

‘She’s supposed to be home everyday, Fran.’

‘It’s not like her to just leave,’ she said. ‘What have you done now?’

‘I’m not following you.’ I finished the beer while I listened to her make the same gulping sounds on the other end of the phone. Squeezed the bottle in my hand like I was trying to reshape the glass. Kept at it while walking through to the kitchen. I dumped the bottle into the trash bin. Turned for the fridge, but stopped cause I needed to think. Didn’t need another beer for that to happen.

‘I’m here, Frances and I’m waiting for Carole. We’ve got plans,’ I said.  
‘I’m cooking, see. It’s my turn to cook tonight.’

‘But you’re tired. You told me so.’

‘That’s besides the point.’ I gritted my teeth - the only way to get through a conversation with Frances Quincy, mother-in-law. Gnashing my teeth together until the pain was bright and large inside my head. ‘She’s supposed to be here. That’s all. I figured she maybe drove out to your place.’

‘Why would she do that? It’s a long drive, Joe.’

*Joe Pullman*

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I’m aware of that. That’s what I’m figuring now, Fran. Too long a drive for Carole to make.’

‘Did you do something?’ She had her suspicious voice on again.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Sometimes she needs to get away.’ She faded again. Talking into the back of her hand. Her wrinkled soft palm covering the receiver. Rambling her quick-fire words at someone. *Carole Felicia Quincy*. I felt tired. Cranky and irritated and speaking with Frances wasn’t making it any easier. Wished it was my hand over her mouth muffling her words. Wished I could make out what the hell she was saying or who the hell she was saying it to.

‘Fran.’ She kept talking. Sounding distant. ‘Frances. Listen to me.’ She was still covering that handset. Still talking to someone else. ‘Damnit, Fran! She’s not here. I didn’t do anything. I just came back to fix dinner.’

I listened to her breathing. To the small gulping sound she was making now and again.

‘I can have Paul call you when he gets in with the boys,’ she said. ‘I’ll do that much.’ She set the phone down. I followed suit before the deadline sound came pulsing out of the handset.

Went through and sat down on the sofa. Turned on the television and switched channels until I found the news. There was something happening in the Middle East. Dust and sand and smoke. A white reporter in a flak jacket was talking into a mike that was covered in grey fur. He was standing on top of a tan-coloured building. They are all tan-coloured buildings. They are all made from the same sand that was blowing up from the ground. I thought about a conversation I’d had at Darnell’s over coffee. World politics Henderson-style.

‘You hear what’s going on in the Missile East?’ Brian Allbright asked. His way of remaining political and being humorous at the same time. He wasn’t a funny guy and he’s too weak to be a good councilman, but we used to chuckle for his benefit. Me and Ted and Pop. All of us in a booth with Allbright. Sitting in the front window of the diner and watching cars pass by on Beaumont. The Missile East and Afpakistan. That’s how Brian started off conversations about things happening half-way round the world. The rest of us had concerns about the soldiers. Men that looked too young to be there. Even under all the dust and heat they looked too young. We didn’t bring it up in conversation. Just listened to Allbright and his critique on a country made of sand.

I watched the news all the way through and turned over to watch sports when the phone rang. I’d found my nerve again after the conversation with Frances. I didn’t want to get into it again so there was half-hesitation in picking up the receiver. Decided it was best on the fourth ring to play it safe and picked it up. Gave a grunt for a greeting.

‘Joe, it’s Frances. Paul’s just back with the boys. I’ll pass the phone across.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. Impressed that I kept my voice so steady.

‘Joe,’ a man grumbled. ‘It’s Paul.’

‘How’s the back?’ I tried to sound interested. It didn’t work.

‘Still there.’ He coughed his old man cough. ‘After sixteen frames at the bowling alley I’m expecting hell. Think I may have to cry uncle early tonight. Take my old man pills and hit the sack.’

‘Sixteen’s better than usual.’

‘Yeah. At least I’m not laid out like one of your stiff,’ he said. There was a silence. It gave me time to get through to the kitchen and pull another beer from the fridge. I stepped back and fell onto a chair at the kitchen table. Slid the bottles to the centre next to the fruit bowl. Looked at the bottle for a while and tried to decide if I should open it. Then I thought about Marty. Thought about the note. Tried not to think about having to tell him about it. Knowing it was going to be a tough thing to do.

‘So you and the boys doing okay?’ I said.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Hold on and you can ask Marty all about it while I use the head.’

There was a pause. Small commotion while Paul corralled Marty and handed over the phone.

‘Hey, dad,’ he said. ‘You at home?’

‘Yeah, just sitting here waiting on your mom.’

‘Cool,’ he said. ‘We went bowling in town and coming back we passed this accident. You should have seen it. Some car spun out and went right under a

truck. Didn't get to see it happen, but it just went under. The cops weren't even there yet.'

'That's terrible, Marty.'

'Yeah,' he said, sounding less enthusiastic. 'But you would've looked too.'

I could see him standing next to the table at the front of the house. Dark oak shining like a sailor's shoes. Like Paul when he was still on board the USS whatever. Paul Quincy prancing round the hull of the ship telling everyone he had to use the head. Being stern and stoic because that's all he knew. That's all he will ever know.

'Marty,' I said. 'You have a good long weekend. Don't give your gran and Paul any trouble.'

'Sure,' he said. 'See you next week, alright?'

'Yeah, bud.'

Another small commotion and Paul was back on the line.

'Fran tells me you're looking for Carole.'

'Yeah. She's not here. It's no big deal, Paul. Really.'

'Two of you having ... I mean ... She been down or anything?'

'No more than usual.'

'Huh,' the old man grunted.

I hated that. The old man's 'huh'. There's nothing Carole's parents did that got under my skin more. Not the questions they always ask. *You two got enough money? Donald needing anything?* Even the way Frances would reminisce. *Remember when you and Kevin took Donald for that holiday in Canada? Now that was a real family trip. The three of you. That was your sixth*

*anniversary trip wasn't it? And Donald loved his daddy. He's looking more like Kevin every day.* That didn't get me as deep as Paul's 'huh'. That uninterested way he marked parts of the conversation. It'd be easier if the old fuck would just come out and tell me what's on his mind.

*Joe, you're a real pain in this family's ass. I'm bored of this conversation. I'm changing the subject in hopes you'll hand the phone back to my daughter. Better yet, I hope you'll crawl off somewhere remote and die. I've got guns if you'd prefer that to poison...*

'Carole's always ...'

The doorbell rang. Heavy dinging of Big Ben's chimes echoing in the foyer. Paul must have heard because he stopped talking. He waited. I waited. Listened for something to happen from his end. Paul's heavy breathing filling my ear enough to make me move the phone away. I kept the phone down at my side and went to the front door. Went for the handle the same time knuckles rapped against the other side. Turned the knob and opened the door.

'Plumbjet,' the man said. He was tall and thin and wearing blue coveralls. They were padded at the knees. His baseball cap was turned backwards. A thick sprout of steel grey hair puffed from the opening in the cap. He had a streak of something again his cheek. I hoped it wasn't shit.

'Yeah?'

'Plumbjet,' the man said again. I watched the guy's Adam's apple move when he spoke. Looked like he had a golf ball stuck in his neck. 'I got a work order for this address.' He handed over a slip of yellow paper.

I took the note and read it aloud: 'Something stinking in kitchen.'

‘Yeah,’ the man said. ‘Don’t get offended. I don’t make these up. I write down only what I’m told. That’s what dispatch quoted was the problem.’

‘Sure,’ I said. Found myself nodding and didn’t know why. ‘You know who called it in?’ The guy reached his hand and pointed at the bottom of the yellow page where he’d written ‘Mrs C Pullman’. I nodded my head. ‘Yeah. Come on in.’

I stepped aside to let the guy past. He bent down and lifted a metal toolbox from the porch. On the side of the box was a Cincinnati Reds sticker. It was streaked with something too. I’m not one to be rude and I like to get to know people, but at that moment I figured when this guy was finished I’d sign a cheque and hand it over. No handshake. No pat on the back. Send him on his way without getting my hands dirty.

‘...ou there? Joe?’

The guy stopped halfway to the kitchen and looked down at the phone in my hand. He frowned for a second and then looked at me. He went into the kitchen and started whistling and I listened to him, then looked down at the phone. Thought about pushing the green button again. Cutting good old Paul Quincy off. Paul with his stiff back and annoying ‘huh’ habit. Hovered a finger for a second before lifting the phone to my ear.

‘Here, Paul.’ I cleared my throat louder than I needed to. ‘That’s the plumber arrived.’

‘You got a leak?’ he asked.

‘Stink. Something in the kitchen.’

‘That’ll cost a bomb,’ Paul said. He made a whistling sound just to dig the knife in a little deeper. ‘Out of hours service.’

‘Yeah.’ I felt my head easing up. ‘Look. Doesn’t matter anyway.’

‘Just smelled it today?’

‘Huh?’

‘That smell,’ he said. ‘The stink in the kitchen. Just found it today?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Carole found it. I didn’t notice anything. She called the plumber earlier.’

‘So you’ve spoken with her today?’

I shook my head while drinking from the bottle. Realised he couldn’t see me and took the bottle away. Said: ‘No, but I got her note.’ The phone was dead silent for a second. I heard Paul breathe, otherwise I may have hung up.

‘Note’s that, Joe?’ It was deadpan. Paul had a voice that didn’t have much character. Rubbery and deep and always the same level and tone. This was different. This was probing in a way Paul hadn’t been probing for a long time. Not to me. Sounded like a detective in one of those old black and whites. Some Sam Spade flick toward the end when the crook’s about to crumble.

‘Not really a note. A memo. One of those slips from a sticky pad. Said she was stepping out for a while.’ I cleared my throat. Started to wish I hadn’t been drinking. Wished I’d stopped before telling him about the note. ‘Said to expect her back.’

‘Huh.’ *Fucking bastard!* ‘She say anything else in that note, Joe. That memo.’

‘Not a thing. Look, Paul. I’ve got to go. Plumber’s got a few questions for me.’

Mr Plumbjet was in the kitchen hovering at the sink. He had his nose in the air. His nostrils flaring. Then he’d turn his head and his nostrils would puff

out again. His head was turned to the sink when he stopped and looked at me. He frowned and started to flare his nose again.

‘You hear from Carole, let her know to call home.’

‘Paul,’ I said. ‘If I hear from Carole she will be home.’

‘Just have her give us a ring.’

‘Sure.’

Hit the green button. Dropped my head and took a few deep breaths. Went back to the sofa and put the phone back on the charger. The plumber was making a racket in the kitchen. Let him do his thing a while. Finally got up and turned my head round the corner. Saw the guy had the cabinets open. He was leaning over the counter. Holding a flashlight and craning his long neck. Looking down into the sink.

‘Tell you the truth, bud, I don’t smell a thing,’ I said. ‘My wife’s the one that must have called you guys.’

He nodded his head and kept looking down into the sink.

‘I smell it.’ He nodded his head. ‘There’s something gone ripe.’

‘Sure.’ I walked into the kitchen. Picked up the beer bottle I’d left on the table. ‘You needing a drink?’

‘I’m working now. Had to sign a waiver stating that I wouldn’t take a drink of anything offered from clients unless it comes from a sealed container.’ The plumber turned his head and stared down his long face at me. ‘Can’t be alcoholic though. Only soda. I’m not needing anything now anyway. But those are the rules.’

‘Alright, I’ll be through there.’ Tossed a thumb to indicate the next room. ‘If you’re needing anything just holler.’

‘I’ll let you know when I’ve located the source.’

‘Any idea how much this is going to cost?’

The guy shook his head.

‘Not till I find the source.’

‘Figured that.’

I left the room.

Hours later I was passed out. Sometime after that I got woken up to sign some papers the plumber put in front of me. He woke me up by shaking me with his shit-covered hand. He took all my details while I sat comfortable. When it was all squared away he saw himself out. After that I somehow got myself up to the bedroom. Only thing I remember was a half-hope that Carole was going to be there waiting for me. I didn’t put the lights on and when I got to the bed I fell down hard on her side. Hit the mattress and stayed flat out for a while. Listening to the house. Searching through the silence for a sound that might have been Carole moving. After a while I gave up.

If I dreamed I can’t remember.

## Chapter Three

The doorbell rang four times. I laid there on the bed listening to the sound of the chime. Watched the way the morning sun burned bright through the slats of the Venetian blind. Picked out the flecks of dust floating in the air. Lit them up like fireflies. After a while I got up and went to see who was down there. Curious to see who it was that was so anxious for me to open the door. I kept my distance from the window so I wouldn't get spotted. Tried to keep out of sight in case I decided the visit wasn't worth my time. Was glad I'd played it safe when I saw it was Nancy Lowell.

I stood there and watched Nancy pacing out in front of the house. First time she'd walked to the door she'd left deep footprints in the snow. Watched while she took her time going back to her car. Sticking her shoes down in the holes she'd already made. Tossed her bag into the car and seemed to settle herself in. Looked like she was about to start it up and drive off. No big deal. No trouble at all. That would have suited me fine. Then the phone started ringing. I looked at the phone sitting on the side table next to Carole's side of the bed. That's as much interest as I gave it. Turned my attention to Nancy. She was still in her car. Watched while she lifted her mobile phone from her lap to her ear. Watched her and tried reading her lips through the slats of the Venetian blinds.

*Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.*

'Go away, Nancy,' I said. 'Just drive away.'

She tried a couple more times before her car door opened. She came back and it was almost enough to break me. Almost enough for me to take pity and go downstairs to open the door for her. Thing is I wasn't feeling like entertaining a

visitor. Especially not someone who was friends with my wife. I just wasn't up for it. All the same, watching her pushing her feet back in the shoe-shaped holes in the snow made me think she needed something. Deserved something maybe. She looked all jumpy. Hands moving too fast and doing nothing. Real desperate.

She came back for more and I lost her when she stepped onto the porch. Still, I kept an eye on the shingles of the porch roof. She was standing down there, pumping the glowing circle and waiting. Listening for feet to follow the electronic ping sound. The idiotic door chime Carole had to have. Sound of it was driving me nuts. Waiting for the sound to stop. Anticipating the long figure of Nancy Lowell in her woollen trench coat. After a while she came back into view. Slipped off the porch and made it out into the snow. Still careful to put shoe into print. She turned round and looked up at the house. Looked up at my bedroom window. I was sure as sure can be that I was out of sight. Far enough in the room to stay hidden. She stood with her head tilted back. Face aimed up at the window. Whatever was on her mind was too important to take away with her. She shook her head some more. Her mouth moving.

*Don't know what the hell you're saying, darlin'. But I sure can tell you're hating the wait.*

When she disappeared under the patio roof again I was already away from the window. Out of the bedroom and heading through the hall and down the stairs. Almost holding the brass handle of the front door before she got chance to knock on the other side with her small fist. Let her have a crack at it while I got myself ready to face her.

Pulled it open.

'Sorry, Nancy,' I said. 'Kind of fell asleep.'

‘You don’t look tired, Joe.’

‘Well, I’m not. Not any more.’ Cleared my throat. Out of habit more than need. But it fit with what I was trying to do. Make her think that I was agitated. Annoyed. Just brought out of a slumber. ‘Carole’s not here.’

‘I’m not here to see Carole.’ She turned and checked the street. Looked up and down the road like she was expecting someone was following her. Even took the time to look at the windows of the houses across the way. Then she brought her head back round. Looked at my face and focused her eyes on something behind me. Something in my house. ‘I came to see you, Joe.’

‘That’s odd.’

‘Yes, well what I need to speak with you about is ...’

Got tired of waiting for her to finish the thought and asked: ‘You need to come inside?’

‘It is cold out here.’

So I let her in. It was against my better judgement. The neighbours would be watching and no matter how hideous the prospect was the telephones would already be in hand. Numbers dialled. Chins moving while tongues spilled out the stories of what was happening behind closed doors. Right now I was having an affair with Nancy Fucking Lowell. A woman I disliked. A person I didn’t trust - and so what was happening in other homes frightened me. It was all about what they imagine to be taking place in my home. That’s the trouble with small towns. Idle minds can start up the worst kind of trouble.

*Some of them have probably been wondering about your missing wife, Joe. Maybe not sharing the idea yet, but some of them must be getting awful*

*curious. Her car's been gone. She's been gone. And the kids... Where are the kids?*

'What's on your mind, Nancy?' I asked.

'Would you mind making me a cup of coffee, Joe? Tea if it's easier for you,' she said. She was already taking her gloves off. Going for the top button of her coat. She was planning to be round for a while. 'I've been sitting in my car. Even with the heater on I'm frozen stiff.'

'I'll brew some if you need,' I said.

'Don't go to any trouble.' She placed her gloves in her handbag. Her attention was on something else. Since she wasn't looking at anything in particular – just the overturned magazine on my coffee table - I kind of sensed that the something on her mind was what she came to see me about.

'No trouble, Nancy.'

'That's fine then. Coffee would be fine.'

So I went into the kitchen and filled the coffee pot with water. Measured out the beans and flicked the switch. The jolt and sound of the grinder kicking on and the sound of the beans getting cut to pieces sent a shock through my system. Starting with my hand and digging deep inside. Didn't know just how edgy I'd become. But I was really starting to feel it right then. The beans finished cutting and I loaded the filter. All the while I listened to the silence in the other room. Worried that I'd go back in there to find the neighbours weren't all that far off base. Maybe they had it right on the mark.

*Get ready, Joe. You're in for it now. Bet she's butt naked on my sofa. Legs apart and her mouth smiling in some kind of sick way. You know the kind. Saying nothing and asking for attention. Get ready, buddy boy.*

‘Nancy,’ I called out. ‘You alright in there?’

‘Fine, Joe.’

‘So what is it you need to see me about?’

She moved up off the sofa. Sound of her moving toward the kitchen brought me back to reality. There was a clicking noise. She was wearing shoes, but then they always wore shoes during affairs. They do in movies and on TV anyway. Even when they were wearing nothing but a smile they had their goddamned heels on. So the feeling was back in my stomach for a second or two. I didn’t want this to be happening in my house. Not like I wanted ...

‘It’s difficult to start, Joe.’

She was in the archway. Turned my head and must have looked a sight. Eyes wide and all shocked. Let go of all the air I’d been holding.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said and started a laugh. Just had enough air left to get one going. Not a big laugh, but I didn’t need to be. Nancy was standing in the archway in her woollen trench coat. It was still buttoned to the neck with her brown dress dangling underneath. Black tights and blue lace-up shoes finished her off. This wasn’t a trip to seduce. If it was she’d lost her touch along the way. Over the years she’d been pulling in men like a fox taking rabbits from a hutch. Real easy. Somehow I don’t think it’s a skill that ever entirely goes away. So I laughed some more and started to feel good about things. Good as I could feel with all the mess I was in. This time the laugh came with more sound and energy.

Nancy frowned and looked like she was about to speak.

‘Sorry,’ I said. Put a hand in the air to make her think I was being sincere.

‘You ever have a moment when something goes through your head that shouldn’t

have been there? You know, like a thought that's not placed right. Some weird idea. Like it's come out of someone else's head and found a way straight into yours.'

She wasn't laughing. The way she was holding her hands in front of her made me think of widows at a wake. I choked down the rest of my laugh. It went with all of my relief. Wiped the back of my hand over my eyes and tried to make a face that apologised.

'You know what I'm talking about,' I said.

'Yes, Joe. That's why I'm here. It's why we need to talk.'

Swallowed hard.

'Sometimes I have that same thing happen to me. More than occasionally.'

Looked down at her hands cause her face was too blank to read. Knuckles on her hands were turning white. Fingers looked red from the way she was squeezing. I gave her face one last chance. She didn't look any better. Didn't have any expression that told me what was going on in her head.

'Sit down for a bit,' I said. 'I'll bring the coffee when it's ready.'

She went through and I waited for the pot to finish brewing. Wished it would take so long she'd change her mind about seeing me. Wished like hell she'd decide it was a bad idea to sit with Joe Pullman and discuss her thoughts. Seemed kind of pointless with all the stuff that was going on in my life. Having a woman round who didn't have a connection to me. Having a woman round at all was a bad idea.

*Carole, what the hell have you done?*

Made the coffee and took it back through to the family room. Set one mug on the table in front of Nancy, kept hold of the other and took a seat on my recliner. Safest place when you're not wanting company. Same way Pop got rid of the salesman Mona used to let in the house. He'd take his place in the blue recliner and open up a copy of the paper.

*Personal space, Joe. Reflects need for solitude.*

Nancy didn't get the hint. She was like those salesmen with their dinnerware and vacuum cleaners. Pulled off her trench coat and folded it across her lap. What was underneath transformed her into an Amish farm-wife. Real traditional.

'How much do you know about me, Joe?'

'Not much,' I said. *You've got too much time on your hands. You prefer evening classes to bars and you stick your nose in other people's business like a mutt sticks his nose in a stranger's crotch. Oh, yeah, and you were a whore once...* 'Carole's good at keeping her friends to herself.'

'So you don't know about my ...'

After giving me that much she cut off. Went dead quiet, but kept looking at me like she was still talking. Like I should be taking it all in. Waited for her to finish, but it didn't look likely to happen. Couldn't handle the silence, not while I was having to look at her eyes anyway. They weren't blinking, She seemed kind of lost. Staring at me, but it wasn't like she was doing it for the conversation. It's like she was doing it to disrupt me. To get me worked up and get me to respond.

'I know you're into night classes,' I said. It came out fast like I'd said it just to get her to blink. Smiled at her and raised the mug to my mouth. Drank and used the motion to break the connection between our eyes.

She started to shake her head, but stopped. Gave me a shy kind of look and cleared her throat. Stared down at the coffee she'd wanted so badly. Mug was still full. Her brown lipstick not given the chance to mark the sides. She frowned and took a breath. Tight collar of her blouse looked like it was going to burst round her expanding neck. With the deep breath out she looked at me. Less intense now.

'I have an ability, Joe.' She kept her eyes on the coffee mug. 'I can see things that no one else can see.'

'Such as ...'

'Has Carole mentioned the Spiritualist Church?'

'Nope,' I said, and drank again. Watched Nancy while she stared into the steam coming off her coffee. 'But I know about it. Take it that's the one off Linston? Behind the Farmer's Market?'

'That's the premises, yes.' She nodded her head and she set her mug on the table. Looked at it for a few seconds. Thinking about lifting it maybe. Saw something with her crazy power dancing up out of the steam maybe. She finally sat back and looked at me and then at her hands. She was wringing them and rolling them in a ball. Worked at it with a real intense quality. Like she was made of clay and was smoothing rough edges on her fingers. 'I'm a member.'

'So is that what you needed to tell me? Some kind of big secret revealed. An induction ceremony. Well,' I said, 'I'm fine with that. Just don't try to convert me.' I was standing and walking towards the door. Hoping she would follow me.

'No,' she said. 'I'm getting to that. But, this isn't easy so I'll have to take my time.'

*Shit.*

‘I’ve got some things I need to do.’

‘I’m certain you do.’

She went quiet again like she didn’t care. My time didn’t matter any more. Had all the time in the world according to Nancy Lowell. Trouble was she was almost right about that. It just didn’t sit well with me. I had lost a wife. That was a hard fact to get over. While Nancy sat there in silence I started wondering about Carole. Wondering where the hell she was right then. In some hotel maybe. Laying back with a cheap television on. Foil wrapped round the antenna to take away some of the salt and pepper haze clouding the picture. Haze that made the people in the picture less visible. Don’t know why I thought about Carole that way. Didn’t think she’d be in a bar. That’s not Carole. She’d be on her own. Someplace quiet. Off somewhere on her own. Thinking.

Nancy was rolling her hands again. One over the another. I watched her with a weird kind of hope that Carole was going to come through the door. Drop her purse and tell me she’d made a mistake. I’d have forgiven her if she’d walked in right then. No questions asked. As long as she came over and took my place and listened to Nancy’s confession about her Spiritualist connections I’d be fine. I’d take her coat and settle her in. Then I’d be off. Out the door and heading down to the parlour with a smile on my face. Not a worry in the world.

‘Why are you looking at the door?’ Nancy asked.

‘Thought I heard something.’

She cleared her throat. Then she started to tell me just what was on her mind. I didn’t interrupt or try to stop her. I drank my coffee and when it was finished I set the mug on the table. Then I leaned forward and listened some

more. Still waiting for Carole to come through the door. Maybe Donald and Marty had decided to cut their visit short. They always got tired of Paul and Frances after a few days. Almost hoped Paul would show with the boys then. I'd even take Paul Quincy over Nancy Lowell and her quack faith talk.

I didn't try to stop Nancy from talking. At first it didn't make sense. I didn't need to hear about her religious side. Being as distant from religion as I am there wasn't a reason for Nancy to bring it to me. I'm used to it. I put people in the ground from all denominations. Henderson's even had a few Muslims over the years. Researched burial rights and traditions and conducted ceremonials for them all. Never had a complaint. Not for the service and not cause I'm an agnostic. A pessimistic agnostic at that. My toes were hanging over the edge to atheism, but I guess hope was holding me back. Keeping me from falling all the way in.

Checked my watch and shook my head. I was tired of playing the good guy. Nancy must have sensed her time was running low cause she stopped her talk about ghosts and spirits and all her other mumbo-jumbo.

'You shouldn't be such a cynic, Joe.'

'I was born this way,' I told her. 'And what I wasn't when I was born my father created.'

'Pop?' she asked.

Shook my head. She swallowed and watched her hands.

'You don't like being around water,' she said. 'Not on boats anyway. You don't walk over piles of leaves either. You have to check that there is ground underneath. You worry about the ground opening up.' She had her eyes closed. Like people do when they are thinking real hard. Her face softened up,

but she kept her eyes closed. 'There is a boy and you think about him. You visit him as much as he visits you.'

I didn't like where it was going. So I tried to cut it short.

'Didn't know you were into the local folklore too.'

'The boy is near ground that always moves,' she said. 'He comes to you in dreams.' She opened her eyes and looked at me. She wasn't worried anymore. There wasn't the slightest bit of concern in her eyes. 'He's always around you.'

'Okay.' That's all I could manage. I didn't say any more cause there was nothing that seemed right to say. My mind was wandering, but not to cheap hotels. Not to my wife. I wasn't hoping more than ever for the front door to come open. That silent, dead feeling was back. It was a heavy world again only I wasn't surrounded by police deputies. Didn't have the social workers trying to make friendly while they told me about foster families. While they gave me a kid-easy definition of ward of the state. It was just me and Nancy Lowell in my living-room, but the world was closing in just as fast as it did when I lost my family.

'That's just so you understand what I'm talking about, Joe. So you understand this isn't some fantasy. So, you can spare me a bit of time.' She leaned towards me. Still keeping her distance, but moving closer so I was forced to look at her. 'Please. Just hear me out.'

My head was nodding. I could feel my head moving back and forward. A broken scarecrow in a soft breeze.

'You'll have to hear all of what I'm about to say before you interrupt. I'm not sure I can keep going if you stop me,' she said. 'It's a tough thing to hear and

I can assure you it's a tough thing to talk about. But you're in trouble, Joe. So, listen to me and don't interrupt. Someone is dead because of you ...'

She played with her coat. Draped like a skin over her legs. She kept tightening it into shape. She folded in all the pieces that were sticking out. She finally lifted it and set it on the cushion next to her. She started up again like she'd never even taken a breath.

'That boy has come to visit me. He keeps coming back. So I went to the church and tried to get help. Herman Dorlund is a friend of mine. He has the gift too. So I went to sit with him and we tried together. Tried to see what was happening. To see if we could help this boy. His spirit,' she said. She waved her hand in the air. She watched it move like she could see stars trailing behind it. 'But Herman couldn't get contact. That didn't help me much at all. But Herman wasn't surprised. He told me it was because I was losing the gift. That's the trouble, Joe. Only a few of us have it in them to make contact. To see these things when we ask to see. It takes away the attention that some people need. So Herman was hoping it was a sign that I was going empty. He's been troubled by the attention I receive, Joe. So he was upset when I was getting such clear contact. Then there was nothing.

'Thing is, it wasn't me,' she said. 'It was Herman.'

Nancy went silent. She stayed silent for a long while.

'So what are you telling me?' I asked.

'I've seen the boy again.'

'And what does this boy have to do with me?'

'He asks for you,' she said. Her head nodding. Moving slow back and then forward again. Becoming a scarecrow.

‘What’s his name?’ I asked. ‘This boy.’

‘I don’t know.’

We went silent again.

‘Bullshit,’ I said. ‘I don’t have time for this. I need to be some place.’

‘I’ve got a bad feeling, Joe.’

‘So do I, Nancy.’ Lifting my empty coffee mug from the table. My hands had stopped shaking. I didn’t feel I’d shown too much of my inner tensions while listening to her. I needed to have something in my hands. Something to do with my hands. Just holding something was better than thinking about them. Thinking about my empty hands shaking. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling that I’m going to be late. I’ve got a bad feeling that you’re spreading stories about me round town.’

‘No,’ she said.

‘Don’t you think enough people are still suspicious, Nancy? All the fucking stories already flying around about me. No thanks to your fucking husband. You think making up a few more stories about mean old Joe Pullman’s going to make a difference?’

‘I’m not doing this to hurt you,’ she said.

I turned away from her. Shaking my head and squeezing at the mug. Gripped on to it until I thought it would shatter in my hands.

‘That’s a fascinating story,’ I said. ‘Visited by the spirit of a boy. I didn’t know you had it in you. I can’t see the relation between me and this kid.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Neither can I. But I’ve got a feeling. So I wanted to stop by and tell you about it. I think it’s because of what you...’

‘What’s that, Nancy?’ I turned round. Watched her for a second then stepped forward. She didn’t like me getting closer to her. Even with the coffee

table between us. She moved farther back on the sofa. 'What was it that I did before?'

'When you were young,' she said. 'In Maritime.'

'Maritime?' I asked and tried to smile. 'What's this have to do with ...' I started and couldn't bring myself to finish.

'It's that history,' Nancy said. 'Where you come from and what happened to you.'

'And what is it you think happened to me?'

'You were involved...' she started.

I didn't make out like it meant anything to me. Just watched her until she couldn't look at me anymore.

'Well I wasn't.'

*That's not going to convince anyone, Joe. That's a pussy voice you're using.*

'You could be, Joe.' She leaned forward this time. Her hands dangling over the mug of coffee she never touched. 'You could be involved in this...'

'Just what the fuck are you accusing me of?'

'I'm not accusing you,' she said. 'Oh, God, no. Heavens...'

'Then we can agree this is a waste of time. You don't need to be here.'

'He was scared,' she said. 'He told me just how scared.'

That kind of did it for me. All of a sudden I felt like I'd been going along with a joke for too long. Then she delivered the punch-line. Something like that is too far out there to get me laughing. Nancy was telling me I'd been involved in something. That scared the shit out of me. I went right back to the night I came home from celebrating Kevin Linsey's baby being born. Came home and Carole

asked me all the questions about what happened in Maritime. She'd asked me to tell her everything.

She was drunk. I was drunk. She held onto my shoulders and shook me and told me we couldn't go on any more. Unless I told her what happened and why I was so broken as a man. Why I couldn't connect with her anymore. She was talking and I was listening and it didn't make sense to me.

I'd shushed her down. Put a hand over her mouth and told her she needed to calm down. Told her she was going to wake the boys, but she was shaking her head. Telling me she'd taken them over to Pop's.

*What did you do, Joe?*

*Nothing. What are you talking about?*

*That boy. What did you do to him?*

*What boy?*

*Dean, she said.*

*I didn't do anything to him.*

*Then why do you dream about him, Joe? Why are you talking about him?*

*I don't, I said. Not anymore.*

*You talk, she said. You talk and I listen to you.*

*I don't remember talking.*

*What did you do to him?*

'I suppose that's normal for little spirit boys,' I said. 'When he comes back tell him Joe Pullman says howdy.' By that time I'd convinced myself it was just a hoax. I didn't know how much Nancy got from her dreams and how much she picked up from Carole jabbering while they drove to the high school for basket weaving lessons. I'd been scared up until Nancy mentioned about the

future thing. That psychic mumbo jumbo's a crock. She mentioned about predictions and precognitions and that was me. She'd lifted the lid off the jar and let me out right then. I wasn't scared any more. All of a sudden I was just pissed off and running late.

'Did Carole put you up to this?' I asked.

'God, no. Joe, this is something I'm doing for you. This is so you don't go out there and screw your life up.'

'Yeah,' I said. I nodded my head. Thought about what she'd just told me. Relived the impact one more time - a heavy thump that travelled through my hands and through my bones. Tried to take it all in and make good out of everything. Nancy told me a hell of a story. My story was different.

I mulled over Nancy's words for a while. Took Nancy's story and mine and put them together in a carbon-copy kind of way. Laying one over the other and looked for differences. Trouble was she had it pretty close and that was a bad thing to consider. The more I thought about it the less I liked the idea of Nancy Lowell sitting on my sofa. Being in my house. I couldn't wait for her to make a decision to leave so I decided to make it for her.

'That's some story, Nancy. Trouble is, I've got things to do.'

'Yes, Joe. I remember.'

'One thing,' I said. She looked at me with thoughtful eyes. Eyes waiting for me to ask her for help. Eyes that told me she was willing to give me just the help I was after, whatever it might be. 'Who else is in on this with you?'

'No one, Joe. It's just me.'

'And Herman?' I asked.

She looked shy for a second. Just long enough for me to get anxious. She spotted it straight off and went to make some kind of amends.

‘Now, Joe. You just hold it right there. Herman’s a good man. He’s not going to go making trouble. When I’m having a vision I get into a state. I start rambling and I can’t control it.’

‘So you’re in a state now?’ I asked. ‘Cause it sure sounds like you’re rambling a load of shit to me.’

‘Herman would never do anything to jeopardise my trust.’

‘It’s not your trust I’m worried about, Nancy. Now you better head off.’

She stood. I showed her to the door.

‘Thanks for stopping by,’ I said.

‘Be careful, Joe.’

‘I’ll do that,’ I said. ‘Do me a favour and keep my name out of your séances until I’m dead. It’s out of respect.’

‘Oh, Joe.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ I said. ‘One more thing. Next time you see my invisible wife tell her I’m thinking about her. Tell her that her sons are both thinking about her too. Let her know she’s really shaken us all up. This new adventure of hers has kicked me where it hurts. That should put a smile on her face. Make a big deal out of that one for me. Make sure she knows I’m all broke up over her. Tell her that for me will you, Nancy?’

She looked at my smile. She looked uneasy about it.

‘Is she gone, Joe?’

‘Don’t act like you don’t know,’ I said.

‘I haven’t seen Carole for a while now, Joe. I can swear to you.’

‘That’s amazing. So who else is putting you up to this?’

She turned. While she walked to her car I watched the windows of my neighbour’s houses. Bright winter sunshine was reflecting back at me. Couldn’t make out who was standing behind the glass watching me. There were people watching, I’m sure. Calculating times and making notes. Working out what I’d just done with my wife’s friend. Suburban equations running through the arithmetic of adultery:

One man minus wife. Add in midday meeting with wife’s best friend. Subtract sons during school hours. Add time of entry (through the front door) and exit. Equals: **SOMETHING DIRTY.**

I could imagine them sniggering to themselves. All my churchgoing neighbours sorting out creative ways of leading me into their conversations with other members of the Neighbourhood Watch. Getting quietly excited at the prospect of something having just happened behind the safety and security of a deadbolt door. Only I didn’t give them much time. Nancy was in and out in less than twenty minutes. So if it was a fling it was hardly worthwhile. But they would all have theories. Some would be making phone calls and starting rumours. Phone lines in Henderson were buzzing with news of my bare-assed infidelity.

The truth of the situation was much worse. In the small town of Henderson there lives a self-proclaimed psychic who says she’s seen something happen. Suddenly I was involved. She’s been speaking to people and that’s never a good thing. Not when I’ve been dropped in the deep-end with an absent spouse. Women in Henderson don’t leave their husbands. They spend the days

complaining to friends. They spend evenings at bridge clubs. Men go to the bowling alley or to Thompson's. Anyplace to get away from it for a while. But you always come back. If you don't, people talk. It's just not worth the hassle.

The curtain twitched in Gladys Munro's window.

She may have worked out another story about what just took place in my home. Story she'd be itching to share like the rest of the street. Dishing it out to family while handing over dinners cooked in the microwave. Over drinks from bottles of spirits hidden away in dark cupboards. Stories they would act excited to hear. Seem content to elaborate on. Stories that became vivid and real in their own little minds. As this happened in different homes – in different forms with varying scenarios – the reality lay within the minds of two people – three counting Herman Dorman.

There may just be a victim out there. It was a thought that got me shivering.

Didn't even register that a phone was ringing. Sounded way off somewhere. Guess I was way off somewhere for a while. Even when I came to enough to figure out the ringing phone was mine and that it wasn't more than a couple feet from my hand it took me a while to answer it.

'Yeah, hello,' I said. Then I listened to the quiet on the other end of the line. Not entirely silence. Just quiet. 'Who's on the line?' I asked.

Someone sniffed. Sounded to me like they started to laugh. Like a kid giggling.

'You're an asshole,' I said. I hung up the phone. With my car keys in hand and my arms pushed inside my coat I went through the front door. The phone rang again. This time I turned round and looked at it. Gave it a second's

thought and decided I was going to get real worked up if I didn't have anything more than some sniffing prick on the other end. So I pulled the door shut behind me and turned the key. The phone stopped ringing right about the same time I pulled my key out of the lock. And damned if it didn't start up again just before I made it out to the van. It was a softer sound by then. I was far enough away from it. But I heard it just the same.

## Chapter Four

Sometimes in a fight you can't wait for the guy who's staring you down to throw the first punch. You got to take the early chance and while he's bowing up just blast him one. You take the first opportunity to shoot one on him. Fire the big punch and hope like hell it takes him by surprise. Trouble is that kind of thing only works half the time. You either miss and look like a dick or you connect and if luck goes your way it's enough to put him out – at least for a few seconds while you get a head start.

I drove round Henderson for a while and tried to figure out my next move. Went up to the north side of Apple Mount and parked the van in a place on the side of the road. Shut the engine off and looked across the valley at the sawmill. Watched all the smoke lifting up out of the metal roof. Rolled down the window and listened to the screaming tools echoing from inside. Sat there long enough to get my mind back to normal - to take the edge off my nerves and remind me of times worse than these. Then I drove back down the hill. Took the road straight back into town where I stopped by the market and picked up a couple packs of fresh beef jerky from Jimmy Neilson.

Jimmy was in the mood for talking, but I only humoured him long enough for another customer to come along. He started chewing their ear and I left. Raised a hand on my way out and he did the same back. From the market I drove the van back to the house. Before I pulled up into the drive I had it figured out. I needed to take the chance where Nancy left off and instead of waiting for something to happen that was going to get me down I was going to take my

swing. I'm still undecided if that swing landed hard and heavy or if it hit nothing but cold air. Things kind of went nuts round about then. Not just after I made the call. But things sure did take a turn for the worse.

Went inside and put the van keys on the side table near the front door. Kept my jacket on and walked across the room with snow layered up on my boots. There just wasn't time to get things ready. Didn't feel I had a chance to prepare. I just needed to get things sorted out. So I went into the room and lifted the phone and dialled.

'Henderson Police and Rescue, what's your emergency?'

'Anne,' I said. My voice was sounding kind of weak so I cleared my throat and tried again. 'Hey Anne, it's Joe Pullman.'

'Well hello there, Joe. You needing to speak with Nat?'

'That would be fine,' I said.

'He's not here right now, but I can get a message out to him.'

'Tell him I need to see him,' I said. 'Let him know I'll be at the house for a while. He can stop by or give me a buzz. Let him know it's kind of urgent I speak with him.'

'Alright then.'

I was still holding the phone when it went dead. An electric hum sunk into my ear so fast it felt like the inside of my head was filled with ants. Hung up the phone and went to sit down at the kitchen table. Didn't make coffee. Didn't get a beer from the fridge. I just sat there and waited. Half an hour later the doorbell went. Got up and took a deep breath. What was I going to tell Nat Upshaw? Thought I had it all figured out. Had almost felt relaxed. Then I opened

the door and saw the young cop standing in front of me. All that confidence and certainty left me.

‘I take it you didn’t get that mat here in Henderson,’ he said. He was pointing down at his shoes. Looking down and reading the message etched across the welcome mat on my front porch. ‘My wife would like to have one of those.’

‘Where’s Nat?’

The kid looked at me with his smile melting off one side of his face.

‘Well, he’s out on a call...’ He pointed to the mat again and said: ‘Mind if I come in?’ I stepped to the side and let him pass. I recognised him. He’d accompanied me on a few removals, but I couldn’t remember his name. Felt awkward for what I was about to tell him. Would have been easier with Nat. With this kid I wasn’t sure just how much I wanted to go into detail. Just how much background I was going to be able to give him.

‘You having a good afternoon, Mister Pullman?’ he said. He was standing in front of my sofa. Looking round the room like a kid in a museum. He sat on the sofa and stopped scoping the place out when he caught sight of the painting over the mantle. He screwed his eyes up while he looked at it. Then he took a note pad from his breast pocket and flipped it open. I had a look at it while passing by him. Trying to get to my chair where I hoped I would feel more comfortable. More at home. His pad was the blue line spiral-bound kind. Simple convenience store note pad set inside a fancy black leather folder. Looked professional enough, but it didn’t fill me with much confidence. He held a pen in his hand. Flicked it back and forward in the air, conducting some kind of tune in his head. When the song finished he used his thumb to click the button on the

end. It made a small nib poke out. Then he clicked it again and the nib disappeared.

‘You need a coffee?’

‘No sir,’ he said. He looked up from the note pad and frowned. ‘I’m here to see if I can help out in the sheriff’s absence. Understand you called up for him.’

‘Yeah, I called when I got back from the market.’

‘When was that?’ he asked.

‘Maybe half hour ago.’

He looked at his notepad. Then he looked at me, at my boots and the legs of my jeans.

‘You going out somewhere?’ he asked.

‘No. I just haven’t changed out of the stuff I was wearing.’ It all seemed suspicious to me. I’d started to sweat while I sat at the table in the kitchen so I’d opened up my coat. The snow had melted from my boots and made puddles on the linoleum floor under the table. But I didn’t take them off. I just leaned over and pulled a towel from the countertop. Tossed it under the table and watched it turn dark with all the moisture.

‘Well, like I said, I’m here on request of the sheriff. He passed the message on to me that you called. I’ll do my best to be of assistance. Sheriff told me to take notes. He’s asked me to make it real clear to you that he would be here if circumstances were different.’

‘Well, this is kind of a difficult thing,’ I said. ‘See, I’m needing to report a missing person.’

The kid-cop looked at me, then at his pad. Seemed to be reading something. I hadn't seen him writing anything down yet. So we had the same expressions on our faces. Last I'd looked his clicking pen hadn't done so much as make a dot, dash or slash across his page. He was looking at nothing more than straight blue lines. I watched his eyes work from side to side just like he was reading the newspaper. His eyebrows were big brown furry caterpillars and they were lively. Both of them. They fell down and lifted back up while I was watching him. He looked up at me and the caterpillars rose up high on his brow.

'It's not one of the dead people is it?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'From your funeral home, I mean.' He moved himself forward on the sofa. Reached the pad out toward me and brought it back to his chest. 'A client of yours. Family member of your client, I guess it would be.'

'I was hoping that's what you meant,' I said. 'But no. It's not one of the dead people. My clients, in other words. I'm fortunate in the sense that all of my dead clients choose not to break contract by leaving the funeral home.'

He nodded his head. I wanted to reach across and shake him. Bring him back to reality. Return him to the here and now and see if we could get on with things. I felt like I was on the clock. Up against a final buzzer that was going to go off at any time and put an end to my game. While he was dicking around I had a feeling that psychic idiot Herman Dorlund was spreading the word about Nancy's visits from a dead kid named Dean. That made my guts burn.

'Well,' he said. 'Who is it that's missing, Mister Pullman?'

'My wife.'

He nodded his head and looked at the blank sheet in front of him. While I moved on my chair he kept nodding his head. The nodding slowed until he was just looking at the pad of paper. The two worms over his eyes were falling asleep. Slouching down and making his eyes look small.

‘You can write that down if you want,’ I told him. ‘May come in handy later on.’

He started nodding his head again, but stopped when he lowered it to write on his notepad. He finished and leaned back and looked at me. We just looked at one another for a moment. I didn’t like sitting in a quiet room with the young cop. Having the experience while staring at him made it that much more difficult to handle. He must have sensed it was going bad. He smiled out of the side of his mouth.

‘Can you tell me what happened?’ he said.

‘Well, I can tell you she’s not here. I can tell you I wasn’t around and when I came back she was gone. Is that enough for you?’

‘Well, I could use all the details you are able to give me, Mister Pullman. You talk and I’ll write.’

Spent a long while going through the motions. Telling him about my morning. Going over what happened the night before from when Nat Upshaw drove me back from the Trapper’s Paradise. Gave him times of when the plumber arrived and the phone call I’d made to Paul and Frances. Told him what time the plumber had left. After that I went back to the last time I’d seen Carole. When I’d stopped by the house to pick up the boys. That was on Friday when I’d drove them up to meet Paul at the McDonald’s in Columbia. Told him about coming back to Henderson by Route 43 cause I wanted to stop for something to

eat. Passed by Darnell's and saw all the trucks and rigs and station wagons out front and gave it a miss. I gave him all the details except for going by the funeral parlour. Gave him details of how I'd come back and found my house empty and how I went back to the guest house and drank until Lenny close the bar.

I finished the story and waited for the next question - something that would get me thinking. Anything at all would be better than the quiet. Silence was too much and it made the room seem so damned small. It was weighing me down like an anchor on a sinking ship. Stuck me in place long enough for the choking feeling to set in. Made the air go thin. I watched the cop and sat forward, leaned my elbow into my knees. Waited there until my knees hurt from the bones pressing in. Then I sat back. He looked at the notepad and I could see the page was still half-empty. He hadn't started writing again during the silence. He just read his few words over and over again.

'So, you come home and find a note.'

'That's right,' I said. 'The same note I told you about. Couple times over.'

'Sure you did,' he said and moved his hand over his close-cropped hair. Rubbing it like he was taking some kind of ease from the action. Petting a dog to calm it down. This kid-cop was petting himself and I didn't like it, but I wasn't in a position to say anything. I was annoyed that things were moving so slow. He was still in my house and there was nothing happening between the two of us. I watched him and he watched his notepad. I told him the story and now he was rubbing his head.

*He has ears like a monkey, Joe. Sure as Christ he's got monkey ears. Big and thin and pale. Look how they hang off the sides of his head. Like someone is sitting back there pushing them forward. Holding them in place.*

'This is not what I need right now,' I said.

'What's that, Mister Pullman?'

'Can we just get on with this?'

He nodded his head. I watched his ears to see if they flopped with the motion. They didn't.

'I mean I know that's what you said.' He looked up from the pad. 'I know you said about the note already.'

'Sure you did,' I replied. 'You can write it down if you want. There's nothing wrong with touching your pen to that paper. If it helps you to remember go ahead and scribble, bud.'

He nodded.

'This is the first missing person I've been asked to deal with, Mister Pullman. And I'm kind of nervous cause I know you're an important man in town. So this is a high profile case.'

'Look, bud. I appreciate you're nervous. But I'm not important and this isn't high profile. So I need you to write some notes. Once you have the whole story I need you to take them back to the courthouse and make some calls. Put my wife's face on fliers or in a computer system or whatever it is that you do. Then you can put the pictures in police cruisers. Then you can all start looking for her.'

He sat back and let out a breath. The way he scratched his head made me think he didn't really have a clue about what to do next.

I said: 'May even find her if you leave my living-room.'

'It's just. Well, Mister Pullman. If your wife left a note I can't list her as a missing person.'

*Jesus Christ!*

'The note,' I repeated. 'Let's forget about the note. How about that. Just take it that my wife is gone. Not here. Missing. Out of sight. Whatever you guys call it nowadays. Then you can have a look for her. Am I right in saying that?'

'I can't forget about the note, Mister Pullman.' He tapped that fucking pen of his against the pad of paper. 'It's right here that you told me about the note. So...'

'Huh? What is it?' I asked. 'What's the major problem you are having with this?'

'Well, it's a technicality, sir. But that's the criteria we have to work by.'

I shook my head and told him: 'But she's not here.'

'Yeah,' said the cop. *Officer Leonard*. I finally caught sight of his brass nameplate. Youngish and clean cut. Vulnerable and a real achiever. His badge and shoes must have been polished to the last layer of metal and leather.

'Well?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he said. He made a pause that I thought was more for effect than contemplation. 'Well, she's not missing if you know she's gone.'

'I don't follow you.'

'What I mean is she's told you she's going. That tells me that it was her intention to go through the door and not come back. When a person does that on their own free will it's not a crime. I can't put in for a missing person report if there's not been a crime, Mister Pullman.'

I could see I wasn't going to get very far. So I went for another angle. Something that I hoped would spark some kind of interest. Some kind of technicality that Officer Leonard would write down. Maybe even act on.

'Her son's still here.' I sat forward again. Leaned an elbow into a knee and used my free hand to wipe at my mouth. 'Her son Donald's still living here and she's gone away. We've got a kid together, but Donald's not really mine. Isn't that kind of weird? Isn't there some kind of law against that?'

'He's your stepson,' Officer Leonard said. Nodding his head with eyes wide open making him appear to have understood what I was saying. With great interest he was following every word. 'Good wrestler too. From what I hear, I mean.'

'What? Come on now... Yeah, he's my stepson and he's still here and I'm taking care of him and she's gone. Nowhere in sight. From the note she left behind she's got no intention of coming back.'

'I agree with you.'

'With what part?' I asked.

'That she's not coming back.' His pen touches at the paper. 'From the letter I mean. Her note to you. Address...' He read from his notepad. 'Addressed to Joe Pullman and not just Joe. That's what I understand.'

'Okay. So I've got her son to raise until he leaves for pastures new.' I put my hands out to the side. 'I'm raising her kid from here on out.'

'It seems that way. Yes, sir. Sure it does.'

'And that's not a crime for her to do that? Dumping responsibility? Abandoning her children?'

‘Mister Pullman,’ Leonard said. He closed his notebook while sucking in his lower lip. ‘I think you’ve lost me along the way.’

‘And we were doing so well,’ I said falling back into the sofa.

Leonard let out a laugh. Adjusted his holster before shifting himself closer to the edge of the sofa.

‘Donald ... your stepson. He’s been your responsibility since you married Carole.’ He looked away. Checked the door like he was calculating distance. Making sure it hadn’t moved since he’d walked through it. ‘I’m not going to out step my boundaries, Mister Pullman. I’m not part of social services, but I’d say you’ve been responsible for the boy since you and his mother got together.’

‘A package deal.’

Leonard used the same laugh as before. It wasn’t any easier for me to hear the second time round.

‘When a package is late, officer,’ I said, ‘It can arrive stale. That’s kind of what happened. Donald’s been with us quite a few years. I like the kid. Care for him. But I kind of liked the package deal when it was all together. It’s not a package any longer. See what I’m getting at?’

‘If you’re not willing to look after him ...’ Officer Leonard paused. He looked back at me and rubbed a finger over his brow. ‘I could contact services in the city and have the boy placed in foster care.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not saying I don’t want him around. Christ this is so messed up.’

‘Maybe I could have Doc Maitland set up counselling, Mister Pullman.’

‘Shit. He’ll be fine. We all will. My son included. Screwed up, yeah. Like any kid would be if his mother ran out on him.’

‘I was meaning for you, sir.’

I sat straight, lifting a coaster from the coffee table. Looked at it and wondered how far I could throw the thing. Looked down and saw the three bottle tops to beers I’d downed the other night. Sitting through the small hours and drinking while reading the note over and over again. Pacing and reading. Sitting and reading. Standing and reading. I watched the cop’s shoes. They were gleaming on my oriental rug. Four dimples pressed into the rug where the legs once rested.

‘Anything in the world more important than having mirror black shoes?’ I asked.

‘Sir?’

I shook my head. Already knowing the answer. Not to Officer Leonard of Henderson Township Police Department there wasn’t. I lifted the bottle tops from the table and squeezed them in my hand until the sharp teeth cut into my skin.

‘I don’t need help,’ I said. ‘Never been that kind of guy.’

‘What kind of guy would that be, Mister Pullman?’

‘A kind that’s not like me.’

‘Do you drink often?’

‘I drink.’

‘Is this possibly why your wife left?’

‘Look,’ I said, pointing a finger at the kid-cop’s face - squared it up on his straight nose. ‘Don’t come into my house and suggest I’m a cause.’

‘Let’s calm down.’

‘She left everything behind. Everything. And I’m sitting here talking to you about it. And still you’re asking me if I drink. Yes. That’s your answer if you still need one.’ I shook the bottle tops in my hand. Shook them at the cop and dropped them on to the coffee table. They danced round like dice. We both watched as they fell. Looked at them like a couple old gamblers betting on sevens.

‘Yeah. I drink. And if you started having trouble with your wife - everything is fine then the shit falls out the bottom of things - you’d drink too. I guarantee you’d fucking drink.’

‘Okay, Mister Pullman. I’m not belittling your loss.’

‘Loss?’ I yelled. ‘No, Officer Leonard, loss would suggest something’s missing. There’s nothing missing! We *know* she’s fucking gone!’

‘I’ll have to ask you to calm down.’

‘Just get out.’ I stepped away from the sofa. Moved a few steps towards the door by the time he stood from the sofa. ‘I’ll even open the door for you.’

‘You have to understand that your wife doesn’t fall within the missing person’s remit. I’m really sorry for your upset, Mister Pullman. But there’s nothing we can do for you.’

‘I’ll find her.’

‘That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing I want to hear.’

‘What do you suggest I say?’

The cop met me eye to eye. Adjusted his belt and kept his thumbs perched near the buckle. Rolled his shoulders and pursed his lips. Another look for show. I wondered how much of this shit they were teaching at some backwoods Ohio Police Academy. Target practice in the morning. Hand-to-hand

combat in the afternoon. Dinner and fake gestures seminar followed by refreshments.

‘I’d like to hear you’re going to get on with things.’

‘Look, bud. I brought you into this. Called through to the station because my wife’s gone. I thought maybe you could do something. Offer a bit of help even. Bad mistake. If I hadn’t showed you the note you’d have put her on the books, right?’

Officer Leonard nodded his manicured head.

‘Hell, man. I bet she’d be on a milk carton by the end of the goddamned week. But since she decided to leave a note on the fridge door all’s not lost. She just got tired of life in the suburbs so she’s off. Leaving her sons behind. Shrugging responsibility. Hitting the road.’

‘That the problem you’re having with this, sir?’

I looked at the cop. Felt awkward for the first time.

‘She beat you to the punch,’ Officer Leonard said.

‘Thanks for your help.’

‘I’ll make some enquiries, Mister Pullman.’

I nodded.

‘Forget about it. I’ll get over it.’

‘Sure, Mister Pullman,’ he said.

I shut the door.

## Chapter Five

After the cop left I laid down on the sofa and tried to sleep. May have drifted off now and again, but sleep wasn't coming. It wasn't like I was tired and it wasn't like I needed it. I just wanted something that would stop the thoughts that were coming into my head. After a while I pulled a pillow over my face and pulled it down hard. It was a good feeling. Stopped when the phone started ringing. Tossed the pillow aside and went to lift the receiver.

'Yeah,' I said.

*Silence.*

'Hello. You there?'

Listened for a few seconds and could hear something more than a dead line. Something like wind blowing over a microphone. A kind of whoosh sound that came in and out. The ocean maybe. Too quiet to be that, but that's what I was thinking.

'Carole?'

Something moved against the phone. Something scraped the receiver on the other end of the line.

'Who is this?'

*Silence.* A few seconds later and the line went dead.

Set the phone on the cradle and lifted it up again. Hit the button to check the number. Saw it hadn't registered. Wasn't much of a surprise. When someone wants to be gone they do all they can to stay gone. After that I decided I couldn't stay in the house. Grabbed my keys from the side table and took my coat off the hook in the foyer. Went out the door.

Took the van up to the funeral home and saw Ted's car parked out front so I passed on by. Figured he'd have the place under control. Gave thought to taking the long way round Henderson. Going out of town using the logger route and bringing the highway back in. Got as far as Darnell's and decided I didn't need to be sitting in a car. It was the way my hands were shaking while I was holding the wheel that made up my mind. Just couldn't calm myself down. So I pulled up in front of Darnell's and waited a while. Sat in the van and watched the customers eating their dinners. Let some of the outsiders finish their meals and clear out before going in.

Went up to the counter and stood next to an old man. He was sitting on one of the stools eating an all-day breakfast and working on a coffee Sheila Hunter had set out for him. Looked over at the guy and didn't like how he was give me more than a once over. Figured he was slow in the head. Maybe too old to know any better than to stare at a fella. Things were all going crazy in my head and an old man with too much curiosity wasn't going to rattle me much. Not any more than I was already feeling.

I waved a hand at Sheila and ordered the usual. Coffee to go. Ordered it by pointing my finger at her and smiling with the side of my mouth. I'm a man of habit so it's easy to know what it is that I'm after. She waved back with an order pad in her hand before turning to the coffee pot. I was feeling low after my conversation with Officer Leonard and so I was glad she wasn't close enough to start talking. But that wasn't going to stop the outsider from trying his luck on me.

Put my boot up on the chrome foot bar and set my elbows on the red service counter. Then I waited like I always did for my order to arrive. Out the

corner of my eye I could see the old guy looking at me. Really spending the time to see all there was to see. With Sheila down the counter I tried to convince myself he wasn't spending all his attention on me. *Maybe he's looking past you, Joe. Maybe just had a thought so strong in his mind that he forgot what it was he was looking at when it first came to him. Staring like mad at you, but he's only seeing that thing that's stuck in his head.*

Didn't make me feel all that much better with his eyes aimed in my direction. Still, I made like it didn't bother me and started scoping for folks I knew. Spun round away from the old man so he knew I wasn't interested in talking. Tables were mostly empty. It was midweek and evening time. Past the dinner rush, but too early to catch the drunks. They'd be slipping down from Pin Kings or Thompson's Liquors round eleven. Would keep a steady flow of custom until late. Drinking black coffee and eating dollar burgers to soak up the booze. Getting something in their guts so they could get back in their cars and motor on home. Until they started coming in the place was going to be quiet.

There were some outsiders and a few people I recognised from round town. Couldn't put names to their faces, but the couple of them that were looking my way got my nod. They did the same back. Then there was Mel Trainer off in the corner. Sitting all quiet in the far booth and looking anxious as ever. He was sitting there waiting for me to spot him. Poor fool almost jumped when I finally got round to him. He half-stood up from the bench and got caught in a real awkward way. His legs jammed in place between the table and the bench he was sitting on. Started fumbling with himself like a wrestler trying to get out of a hold. Stopped trying when I shook my head at him. Pointed a finger at my watch before I whipped a thumb toward the door.

He nodded his head real slow. Moved back down into the booth and turned his face to the window. He was wearing his heavy coat. Unzipped and the hood was pulled back off his head. With the way the shoulders were dry I figured he'd been in the diner for a good long while. Mel's a simple man. He'll sit for hours and look out the window. Picking at the leftover tinsel that Sheila hadn't got round to clearing off the sill. He'd look at it a while and then looked out through the window again. Stared across Beaumont Avenue to where the iron gates of Potter's Cemetery cut up out of the ground. Stood there like the opening to some kind of black fortress. Always looks worse in the winter months. Round here it's a long winter too. Sky goes grey one morning and stays that way for what feel like a year.

Mel looked over at me again to see if I'd changed my mind. I do that sometimes. Change my mind and go over to sit with him. Let him talk for a while so he can go back to that shack of his up there in the cemetery feeling some kind of relief. Maybe feeling like he could settle down for a while. He's always got a story to tell, but there aren't many people who want to hear him spin his yarn. Usually I don't mind, but not that day. I was feeling real low.

Behind me the outsider started coughing. Not a deep cough like it was out of his control. More like a cough to get someone's attention. My attention. Made a slow twist of my head and came round to look at him. Damned if he didn't keep staring when I set eyes on him. Guy was bordering on ancient. Pockmarked skin with silver-yellow hair coming from every small hole in his head. Nose and ears sprouting the stuff. Long strands of it.

He seemed to find something real interesting in me. He stopped coughing and touched his lip with the side of his finger. Dabbed at it in a gentle way.

Something you'd expect a woman to do. Real delicate. I nodded to him cause it was what I'd learned to do. Then I looked forward and did my best to ignore him. He was looking at the side of my head for a long while. Sitting there all quiet with a white Darnell's Diner coffee mug held up to his mouth. Tipping it back real slow while taking a hard look at my face.

I went to concentrating on the steel wheel up on the service window. A metal ring with hooks all round it. Hooks where Sheila sticks all her pink order slips. There were two pieces of paper on it and I was watching them blow in the breeze. A wind from the cook's fan was tossing them round. Tried to find some peace in the way they blew and bent. Tried to keep from getting annoyed at the old guy cause he wasn't letting up on checking me out. Made it even worse the way he was slurping his coffee like it was too hot to drink. His eyes right on me, staring. Making too much noise for my liking. Sucking down his goddamned coffee.

He lowered the mug and rapped his knuckles on the countertop. Same as you do when you come up to a door of someone you know. Hit it hard and with some familiar kind of authority. Not a sense of hesitation about it. After that he went back to being quiet and leaned back on his stool. With him back so far I couldn't tell if he was looking at me. Thought maybe he was trying to get Sheila's attention for something. Maybe leaning back and holding his hand up. Waving it round in the air to get her attention. Sheila had her back to us. Her wide ass topped off with the single bow she'd tied into her stained apron strings.

'That's some set of scars you've got,' the outsider said. I ignored him. Took in a heavy breath through my teeth and went back to watching the slips of

paper moving on the order wheel. Blowing and bending. 'You deaf too?' He leaned forward again and put his face too close for my liking.

'No,' I said. 'It's just not all that polite to be so direct.'

'Well, I apologise, friend. It's just there's not many people with so much character on their face.'

'That's a new way of describing it.'

'Well, that's what it is. Mind if I ask how you got them?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I mind.' Didn't look at him. Closed my hands up and dropped them so they were set on the counter. Kept them out in the open so he could see they were fists. Good and hard fists that were scarred up just as bad as my face. 'Let's just say it was an accident. A lot of accidents.'

He ate some of the eggs on his plate. Chewed with his eyes on me. Eggs falling out his mouth and landing back on his plate - making sick wet sounds when they connected. He kept chewing what made it in his mouth. Kept going like he didn't notice anything other than the scars on my face. I made a sound that wasn't too far off from a growl. Seemed to come out of me without a thought. Sheila came over and I was so far gone I didn't even notice. She was there across the counter from me and set one of her hands down on mine. Squeezed it same as she always did when she caught me off guard. When I wasn't able to get my hand away before she could take a hold of it.

'I'm real sorry, hun,' she said. 'Coffee's stale and I'm having to brew some fresh. Be ready for you in a jiff.'

'I'll take what you've got,' I said. Pulled my hand away and went for my wallet.

‘Now, Joe, you just relax for once in your life,’ she said. ‘Sit yourself down on that stool and I’ll bring you a fresh cup when it’s ready.’

‘Heard what the lady said.’ The outsider used a long bent finger and pointed at the stool next to him. Same one I was standing over already. ‘Take a load off.’

‘Sure.’ Took the stool and leaned my elbows up on the counter. It was wet from the rag Sheila had just dragged across it. It didn’t matter to me. Sat there for a minute and breathed deep. Couldn’t take the old guy looking at me. Didn’t like Sheila standing so close. Even though she wasn’t doing anything more than write something on her order pad.

Held my head in my hands and breathed deep.

‘How’re the boys?’ Sheila asked.

Nodded my head without looking at her.

‘Donald’s playing basketball again I see.’ Touched my arm like she was checking to see if I was still alive. I nodded my head again and she started talking to the top of my head. ‘Saw his name in the paper. Shame he didn’t make the picture though. Should really have been there for that. He’s the best looking boy on that team, you know.’

‘That your son?’ the outsider asked.

‘It’s his stepson, yeah,’ Sheila said. ‘He’s got another boy too. His son’s name is Marty. A real firecracker that one. He’s like a small man. Swear it. Comes out with some of the darndest things.’

Dragged my fingers through my hair and hoped like hell Sheila was going to stop talking. Sound of the old man sucking his coffee again wasn’t all that annoying anymore. So I listened to him and dropped my head again. Kept my

fingers in my hair. Felt it was getting long. It was for me anyway. It let me hide my eyes for a while. Didn't make an effort to pull it away.

'You're safer now I take it,' the outsider said.

I laughed. It was more to keep me from getting angry with the guy. But I was laughing too cause it was so damned off centre. Such a spit in the wind. See where it lands kind of thing. Sure, he was lonely. He was allowed to talk. A bit of company and all of that, but I wasn't the guy to give it to him. Not when I was feeling so damned low. I just nodded and hoped he would leave it alone. Leave me alone.

'Was it trouble?' he asked.

Sheila looked up from her pad. Caught me staring at her and from the look on her face I could tell she wasn't too interested in staying around to hear what I had to say next. I waited while she walked down the counter and took her place at the coffee machine. Way down the end of the counter. Got under my skin the way she was standing there. Wasn't going to get that stale coffee and the fresh wasn't going to taste any better. I'd have to wait for what I could have already had.

She was tapping her foot and scribbling something else on her order pad. Tucked her hand in the front pocket of her apron and pulled out some change. Counted it with her thumb. Move the change round the palm of her hand. Her mouth moved like she was talking numbers, but she was being quiet about it. At least, I couldn't hear what it was she was saying. Dumped the change back in her pocket and wrote on her pad again. Foot kept tapping all the while.

'So what was it?'

'It was trouble.'

The outsider nodded. That much I got from the reflection in the wall clock behind the counter. He nodded his head and went on drinking his coffee. This time making less noise.

*Thank Christ for that one.*

‘Comes blowing in like the wind sometimes, don’t it?’

Didn’t give him any more a response than another nod of my head.

‘You can’t choose the things the wind brings you,’ he said. ‘Looks like your winds brought some kind of heavy burden. Slapped it right down on you.’

*Sure as hell did.*

‘If you’re needing to talk you can go ahead, bud.’ I turned to face him. Made a good long contact with him – eye to eye. Sonofabitch didn’t flinch and he didn’t blink either. Gave it to him with all I had. Malice. Menace. Everything. But the look didn’t do the do. Maybe cause I was so tired. Maybe cause I had gone soft. It had been a long time since trouble had come my way. I was getting used to the easy life. My winds hadn’t been blowing too much trouble in my direction. But I knew it would have to kick up something before too long. It could never last.

‘Tell me your story if you need to. But, when my coffee comes I’m gone.’

‘No trouble,’ he said. ‘None at all. Like I tell you I’ve been round a while and haven’t seen many faces like yours.’

‘I see it everyday. Nothing special about it.’

He tried to put some more eggs in his mouth. Lost them to his plate. Dropped more on top of his bacon than what he made in his mouth. Still, he chewed on what he got in there and made a big deal of it too.

‘I used to sit with my boy,’ he said. He went on chewing and swallowed before finishing what he’d started. ‘We’d go out to this place he used to like when he was real small. I’d lock the wheels on his chair so he wouldn’t go rolling anywhere. Then I’d walk round and pick up leaves and sticks and pinecones. Everything. It was a big field. Real open.’ He stretched his arms out. Moved one in front of me and I got the feeling like he was really trying to rile me. Something he’d be doing a damned fine job with. ‘I’d gather it all up and I’d put it in my shirt. Held the bottom out and load it up. Like half a sack. See?’

He was holding the bottom of his flannel shirt. Stretching it away from his waist - letting it droop like it was full of something.

‘Just like that. Then I’d go back to him. I’d set all that stuff on the ground. Then I’d take each one of the things I’d found and I’d put them in his hand. I’d take his hand like this, see...’ He reached for my arm, but I pulled it away. Got off my stool and stepped back from him. He went on like nothing strange happened. ‘It was a waiting game after that. Watching him after every new thing I put in his hand. Just waiting for him to make something out of it. Let me know somehow that he recognised something. Anything.’

‘That’s some story,’ I said. Turned to look for Sheila. Not wanting the coffee anymore. Just wanting to get the hell out.

‘Oh, it’s not finished.’ He smiled at me, but there wasn’t too much that was friendly about the look. His mouth was crooked and his eyes were crushed down real small. ‘See I kept at it for years. Wheeling him out there and putting things in his hand. Waiting. I didn’t want to do it after a while. But there wasn’t anybody else to do it for me. No one left to take him out and put something new in his hand, see. It’s like everyone went away.’

‘Listen, bud,’ I said. ‘No disrespect, but I’m real beat.’

He nodded his head. Breathed out in a slow tired way that left his head drooping.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’ll be heading back home soon anyhow. I’ll thank you for your time,’ he said. His face came up and he was back to being the old man again. Interested and ready to watch me for a spell. His hand reaching out to me, waiting for me to take it. I almost did. Almost reached my hand up and took hold of his, but I couldn’t. Looked at his hand and saw the way it was shaking. Couldn’t bring myself to touch it. We both froze up for a while. Silent while we both looked down at his hand - watched it shaking between us.

Then he said something that I didn’t want to hear.

‘I stay in a place called Maritime. Nice town. Peaceful. Good people mainly. Always a bad seed now and again. But, it’s a good place.’

Felt my mouth moving. Heat surfacing across my face. Heat creeping over me in a slow-motion wave. Finding its way down through my neck. My hands started burning so I opened them. Turned so I could set them on the counter. Leaned my weight against it.

‘You know anything about Maritime, Mister Pullman?’

Couldn’t speak. Not able to make a damned word come out of my mouth. My mind was locked on one thing. The name of a place. *Maritime*. I was watching the old man and all I could think about was the white colonial house my old man had bought there. My mother inside it going bad like rotting wood. The sounds my old man made in the basement. Sounds that came up through the house – echoing up through the laundry chute. Sounds that rattled the place like it was a house made of bones. Kept thinking of the house while the outsider

moved his mouth. Speaking again, but I couldn't hear him for the sound of my mother screaming. Couldn't stop the sound of my father's tools shaking inside the walls. My lungs filling so much they hurt. Same as they did when I ran into the forests. Into the open space that cut through Maritime. Ran to get away.

'Mister Pullman?' he said.

'How do you know who I am?' I asked. Came out in a whisper. Cleared my throat and tried to say it again. Came out just as quiet – just as lame and affected. 'How do you know me?'

The old man smiled.

'So now you want to talk,' he said. Nodded his head at me and made his mouth crooked. Maybe a smile, but it looked pained. 'Seems you know Maritime.'

He spun on the stool and faced his plate. Dug in his fork and this time got the eggs to his mouth. His head bouncing on his shoulders. Mouth chewing fast like he hadn't eaten in weeks. His eyes closed. He kept like that while I looked at the side of his face. Old bastard seemed almost peaceful - looked like he was really savouring the moment. Kept looking at the side of his head and waited for him to speak again.

'How do you know who I am?' I asked.

He nodded his head.

'That's not a fucking answer.'

'That waitress said your name.' He looked at me chewed for a few seconds. Then he pointed his fork at my forehead and said: 'That's a dead giveaway.'

'She called me Joe.'

He dropped the fork on his plate and used the paper napkin to wipe his mouth.

‘I’ll check with folks back home and see if they remember you. Maybe some of them will come back here for a visit. Catch up on lost time.’ He cocked his head to the side and asked me: ‘How long ago was it you left again?’

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

He shook his head.

‘You wouldn’t know me, friend.’ He smiled. Teeth grey as granite. Gums white like a trout’s belly. ‘Same as I don’t know you. We’re different people.’

‘Why are you here?’

‘Passing through,’ he said. ‘Spent some time with friends in Meridian. They told me about a market here in town. Said I’d have to come by and check it out.’ He looked past my shoulder and focussed on something. ‘There’s a man in there selling jerky strips as wide as three fingers. Real nice too.’

Wanted to say something, but Sheila was coming back. She was walking and singing to herself. Low hum of a song like she was warning of the approach.

‘Here’s the coffee, Joe.’ She pushed the large Styrofoam cup across the counter to me. I looked at it and nodded at her. She hung round. Kept her hands either side of my coffee. ‘You two know each other?’

‘Well,’ the outsider said. He leaned forward on the counter like he was getting ready to tell Sheila a secret. She smiled in return like what he was going to tell her was a secret she couldn’t live without hearing. ‘Can’t really place him. You think he can remember me?’

‘No,’ I said.

Sheila frowned at the old man. Kept her face aimed at him, but shifted her eyes so they were looking at me.

‘What’s you’re name?’ she asked the old man.

He broke the smile he’d been aiming at Sheila. Turned it on me.

‘Name’s Jules, ma’am.’ I was waiting for it and was damned sure I could take anything he was about to say after that. Man, was I wrong. ‘My name is Jules Lewiston. But, like I say, Mister Pullman. You probably can’t remember me. We’re different people now.’

I tried to keep my eyes on him. Not feeling anger any more. Everything inside me changed to a wild mix of breathing and panic. Familiar feelings of pain and fear started moving in. A feeling that had been left behind in another place. Left on the lot of the white colonial when I travelled away in the squad car. A fear that melted away while the officer drove up Westchester Drive in a slow crawl – making his siren bark to clear the way. The fear kept drifting away while we passed the familiar faces of neighbours. Faces hanging round to catch a glimpse of the beaten boy. Westchester Drive fading away like paper burning. Fear falling to black ash and scattering so no one could put it back together again.

Only this man could.

‘What’s the matter, friend?’ Lewiston touched my leg. I moved back fast. He sat up like he was expecting me to lay one on him. Latch hold on his neck and keep squeezing until there was nothing left. His chin went heavy and pulled his face into a long expression. Almost fell off his stool - had to grab the counter to keep himself from going over. ‘Hold on now,’ he said. ‘Hold on now, Mister.’

‘Joe,’ Sheila said. ‘What’s got into you?’

‘I’ve got to go,’ I said.

‘Your coffee,’ she said.

I took it off the counter. Didn’t slip any money out of my pocket. Didn’t think about leaving anything behind for Shiela. Just needed to get out of there. Needed to move far away from Jules Lewiston. Get distance between us. Sure I remembered him. I remembered a younger man. Twenty years hadn’t been kind to him. His hair had fallen out. Not much left when I last saw him, but what he had still stuck to his head had gone silver. His skin had sucked in close to his bones. But, he was still the same man. Sure I remembered him.

*What do you want?* he’d asked when he opened the door. Really blowing out of his house like he’d been expecting someone else. Someone he didn’t like. Looked over my shoulder and out into the street.

*I came for Oz. Wanting to see how he’s been doing,* I’d said while standing on his porch. Dean Gillespie laying on the ground behind me. Laying near the hedge in the Lewiston’s front garden. Knocked over when Jules Lewiston had come crashing out of his front door. *We came, I mean. To see if he’s okay and all.*

*He’s not okay.*

Thing is I already knew that. Hearing him say it didn’t make me feel too good. Didn’t take the edge off my nerves hearing him talk about Oz. Confirming that he was inside the house in a real bad way. Sure, I’d seen what Dean had done to him. Watched it happen and felt sick deep inside my guts for not stopping him. But, I didn’t want to be round him anymore. Right when we showed up. Right when I’d hit the door with my knuckles. When Jules Lewiston

had thrown it open with the wild look on his face. I didn't want to be there any more.

He'd known who I was. He'd called me back when I'd turned to leave. He'd said a few things about Oz being on medications. Having been through a lot, but he wasn't telling us too much. Stood there looking at him while he talked to me. He was running his hand over his head.

*Right now he's not the kid you know. Or knew even. Not my kid either. He's someplace else.*

Hit the front door of Darnell's with my hand and sent the bell ringing. Fumbled round in my pocket for the keys to the van. Felt like the old man was going to be out of the diner any second. Hollering for my attention again. Calling me to turn around so he could tell me something else about Oz. Something he hadn't told me when I was last standing in front of him. Got to the van with the same feeling running right through me. Feeling like someone was behind me. Someone was real close and not too interested in letting me get back to the good life. Got the door of the van open and jumped inside. Slammed myself in. Locked the door and sat there with the key stuck between my shaking fingers. Had a feeling what Jules Lewiston would have said next. If he'd had the chance. He'd said enough to me inside the diner to paint the damned picture so well he'd never have to show it to me.

*He's was always someplace else, Joe. Right up to the end. Right up to when I couldn't take his chair to the park anymore. When I couldn't do it and there was no one else to take him.*

Watched the front door of Darnell's. Looked at all the people inside sitting under the too-bright lights. Wondered what the old man was telling Sheila.

She was leaning over the counter. Biting at her lower lip and shaking her head. Same as she always did when she was listening real hard. Saving it all up inside her head for when she might need it later.

It was too much to watch. Too much to think about. I drove back to the house. Took a bottle from the cabinet. A bottle I'd been saving for a good long while. Dropped down into my chair and started to work. Thought about the old man. It was hard to see what time had done to him. I raised the bottle to him. Then I raised it to his son.

'Oz,' I said. 'I'm sorry for what happened. Man, I really am.'

Somewhere in all my apologies I went out. It's what I was hoping was going to happen. With my drinking there is always a means to and end. It's when the thinking stops and the darkness begins. I don't know how long it lasted but it's never long enough.

Pop shook me until I came round.

'Joe,' he said shaking my shoulder. Almost pulling me out of my chair. 'It's late, son. Wake up.'

I blinked for a while and Pop waited until I'd cleared my head. Until I was able to talk to him.

'Got yourself into another state,' he said. He was looking at the bottle I'd set at the foot of my chair. He shook it and made a face at me when the bottle didn't make a sound. 'Marty's up in his bed. He'll probably be up to see you early tomorrow. Poor boy's drained with all his worrying.'

'What's going on?' I said. 'He's here?'

'Paul's been filling his head with all sorts of nonsense. He's told the boys that Carole's gone away. Tried to make out like they were going to have to live

with him and Frances. Donald got all bothered about it and when he couldn't get a hold of you he called me. So I went up there and brought them back.'

'Long drive,' I said. Pop was nodding his head. 'I didn't get any calls.'

'Course you didn't.' He was looking at the bottle while he was talking to me. He was never good at hiding his disappointment.

'I'll speak with both of them tomorrow.'

'You're going to have to spend some time. They're both needing to let loose. They need someone they can open up to.' Pop helped me up from my chair without really trying. 'They're good kids, Joe. Don't screw them up.' I nodded my head and followed Pop to the front door. He turned round and touched my shoulder. 'Get some sleep. Then you take Marty out tomorrow and ask him what's on his mind.'

'How much does he know?'

'That's not for me to say.' He looked outside. Out into the dark just outside my front door. He turned his head and caught me staring at his face. Caught me looking at the lines that hadn't been there a few years back. 'Get yourself straightened out. Then you spend some time with Marty. Talk to Donald too. They need you. You'll know all about that.'

'Yeah,' I said.

'He's a thinker,' Pop said. 'Marty thinks and lets it stew in there. And when it gets all jumbled he keeps thinking.'

'Gets it from Carole.'

'I remember another young man who kept things to himself. Bottled it all up until he went off like a rocket.' Pop wasn't smiling and I knew he wasn't

making light of the trouble I'd caused him. 'Brought some groceries for you too. Filled up some of the necessities. Breakfast for the boys and all that.'

'Thanks, Pop. Really appreciate the help.'

Nodded his head.

'Get yourself straightened out, Joe. It's just you now. Can't keep messing up and relying on other people. We're not always going to be around for you.'

Waited for him to go out to his truck. Waited for him to get it started and back it out of the driveway. Shut the door and I went up to bed. Didn't make it under the covers. It seemed like too much of an effort to pull them back. Don't remember the position I fell asleep, but it must have been close to the same one I woke up in.

## **Henderson Crier January 13, 2007**

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### *Missing Member of the Community*

A request has been received from the family of Carole Pullman to assist in the search for her whereabouts. Mrs Pullman has not been seen since Tuesday when her husband, Joe Pullman of Pullman Funeral and Ambulance Services, returned home to find her missing. Mrs Pullman was last seen at Oswald Market at mid-day on the Friday the 11th. Police searches have been unsuccessful in finding any clues.

Sightings of Mrs Pullman or information as to her possible whereabouts should be directed to Henderson Police on 652-4601.

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## Chapter Six

Next morning I woke up and got a hint of what life was going to be like. It came printed on a small card. It was delivered through the mail slot on my front door. Slipped in with the daily mail. Seven words centred on a heavy business card. High-grade solid paper. Watermarked even. Only one stationers in Henderson that printed business cards. With home computers you can print a card yourself, but this one was quality. Much as it got me riled I had to admit it was a damned fine card. Real good work. So was the acid burst of anger in my guts. *Why don't you drive over to Frampton's Business Products and slap Ty's pudgy face around? That's option number one, Joe. Got to be high on your list. Top of the brand new angry agenda.* It was an option that rattled round in my head for a while. Not so much that I went for my keys. Didn't even go for my shoes. Instead I stood at the front door. Looked down at the business card I'd lifted off the pile of mail. All caps like he was yelling.

*Sonofabitch really took the time.*

## **PEOPLE IN SMALL TOWNS HAVE LONG MEMORIES**

'Don't I fucking know it,' I said.

Bones in my back creaked when I bent down for the rest of the mail. Took it to the kitchen, dropped it on the table, and started to manoeuvre like I

wanted the day to happen. Made the effort cause I wanted things to get back on track. Something inside wasn't right. Something in my gut was cramping up. My muscles were sluggish. In my head and in my body I just didn't feel right. I was slowing down. Making me wish like hell Carole would just show up and get these monkeys off my back. Monkeys like Ty Frampton. Fat little round speckled prick. I needed Carole back to balance things out. To put the wrongs to right and get some kind of normality back in place.

I went to the cabinet and took out the paper filters and metal canister labelled 'high octane'. Filled the coffee pot. First water, then the ground beans. It was a race. The water was already bubbling. Starting to sputter and spit by the time the paper funnel was filled with fresh ground. A hot spray of steam caught my finger when I was shutting the flap. But I beat it. Somehow it mattered. Even something as small as beating the hot water with the ground beans. Some crazy coffee pot game.

*That's what you've been reduced to, Joe. Can you get any worse?*

Carole laughed at my games. Years back. When times were still young between us. When Marty was just born. Before that too, but Marty came along and rejuvenated us. Our relationship started over when Carole fell pregnant. Made it new to be together. Life and marriage and us – all of us. Marty came before Donald. Gave me a hint about fatherhood. If Donald had been first then things would have been different. Maybe he would have come between me and Carole. But Marty changed things. It helped that he was my kid. Ours. Donald was Carole's. Hers with some other dipshit. Guy named Kevin that shrugged off responsibility for the kid like most people shrug off rain. So it wasn't easy. I

made it alright for him. As best as I could. But some people don't like living with a funeral director.

The coffee pot finished brewing. Poured a mug full and sat down at the table. Set my coffee mug on the placemat. Moved it over the specks and stains of dried food. Lifted the cup and took a sip. Felt tired after the memory. Felt something inside that wasn't balanced. As fast as the memories come they slip away. I looked into the mug. Watched the black coffee settle when Donald walked in.

Looked at him and gave him a smile.

'You alright, Joe?'

'Yeah, kid.'

He dropped his hair to cover half his face.

'Your eyes look red,' he told me.

I rubbed a hand across the bridge of my nose.

'I've been feeling allergies coming on,' I said. Made a laugh so the kid would understand. 'They really get me sometimes. Worst of all during the cold seasons. Heating in the house kicks up old dust.'

Donald looked real uncomfortable standing there. Like he was wanting to ask me something but didn't know how to start the conversation. I figured I knew what was on his mind, but wasn't all that interested in starting things off.

'Happened to you guys?' I asked. 'Thought you were up with your old folks until next week.'

'I needed to get away. Couldn't sleep. It's not my bed. You know what I mean? Grandma's place has that smell. That and I've got to share with Marty.'

'Why didn't you take the sofa?'

‘They wouldn’t let me. Grandpa said he wakes up early and likes to read the paper and drink his orange juice without anybody around. So he wouldn’t let me sleep on the sofa in case I disturbed him.’

‘He’s a loon,’ I said.

Donald’s head moved and I caught a sliver of the smile behind the hair covering his face.

‘Anything to eat?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, bud. Pop stopped by Solomon’s and picked up some grub. Should be in the bag there. Help yourself.’

‘Cool.’

Donald pushed off the wall and pulled the bag open. He went through it without taking anything out. Finally pulled out a bag of donuts and held it up to his face. Turned it round and spent some time looking at it. Chewed his lip and after a while the warning of fat was not enough to keep him from digging in.

‘You want something to drink?’ I asked. ‘Brewed some coffee.’

He shook his head.

‘Hey, Joe.’ He finished chewing what was in his mouth and swallowed it down. ‘You know where mom’s at?’

I shook my head. Drank some of the coffee and rubbed at my sore eyes.

‘Why are you still in your clothes from last night?’ He hadn’t turned his head round far enough to look at me. I used my foot to push the chair out across from me. He bit into another donut and looked at the chair. Sat down.

‘Didn’t have the energy to chair.’ Put my hands out to kind of surrender to him. Feeling pitiful already. Feeling sick in a weird sort of way. Half-expected him to start picking me to pieces. Thing is I felt like I deserved it. He’d lost his

mom and that was down to me. Raised my arms to the side so he could get a better look at my shirt. Wrinkled with dark spots where I'd sweated into it. Stayed like that a while. A dramatic way to tell him I'd been caught and he was the man that had caught me.

*I'm rough, bud. I'm feeling it already and your mother's only been gone a few days. How much worse can we expect it to get?*

'Never got round to changing,' I said. 'I'll get myself sorted out.'

'You sleep in your chair all night?' he asked.

'Nope. I went up to my bed. Slept some and then I came back down early this morning. Sat on the sofa and kept an eye on my watch for a while.' He frowned at me and reached round for the fridge door without looking away. 'I had a suspicion that time was going to stand still,' I told him. He stopped trying to tug the fridge door open. Had his eyes on me. They were looking tired. Opened a fraction more when I smiled at him. Took a deep breath cause I was starting to feel sick in my guts.

'I don't get it,' he said.

'Feel free to join my club,' I told him. 'I don't get what's happened with your mom. I don't get anything right now. So I sat on the sofa and waited for something to happen. For an idea to come into my head. For a place to maybe spring up. Some town that your mom was always talking about. Always wanted to go, but felt like I was holding her back. Someplace I can go and look for her.'

He stood and went to the fridge. Took out the gallon of milk and set it on the counter. Took a glass from the cabinet and filled the glass halfway with milk and stood with his back to me. He drank the glass empty and filled it again.

‘Where is it you think my mom’s gone?’ He turned round and ran a sleeve of his shirt across his mouth. ‘When grandpa said she had left I figured she probably just left for a couple days again.’ He was looking at me through his hair. Staring at me to see how I was going to react. It wasn’t easy to watch him, but I didn’t want to stir up trouble by calling him down. ‘She hasn’t called yet, right?’

*Quiet lines, Joe. Silence with the ocean breeze.*

Shook my head at him.

‘You better sit for a minute,’ I said. Pointed at the chair across from me. Felt like an asshole doing it, but it was just one of those gestures that happened without thought. Something a father does to a son when the kid’s lost his way. Never did that kind of thing with Donald cause it wasn’t my place to be acting like his father. But without any kind of warning there we were – in a house together. No one else to deal with him. To put him on the right path. So I made the gesture and he sat down. Watching him fall into the seat like that made me feel different about it. Like somehow I needed to help the kid along every way I could. I owed it to him to try and make things right. At least a little easier for him. I’d pointed out the chair he should drop ass in and took the look he gave me like I deserved it. Cause I did.

From the way he sat on the edge it was clear he wasn’t planning to stay for long. Didn’t even put the glass of milk on the table. Set it on his knee instead. No matter what it was I was about to tell him he wasn’t going to hang around. We looked at each other across the kitchen table. He pulled the hair away from his eyes. It fell back again, but he didn’t move it away.

‘Marty told you about what he’s feeling?’ I asked.

‘Nope.’

‘Paul tell you anything about the note?’

Donald shook his head.

‘Okay,’ I said. Took a deep breath and lifted the coffee. Swirled it round for a couple seconds and set it back on the table without taking a drink. ‘I came back from dropping you guys off and found a note on the fridge. It was from your mom.’ I looked at him for a few seconds. Trying to judge what was happening in his head through his reaction. He didn’t make any expression. He sniffed, but he always sniffs. ‘It says she’s gone away for a while. After I got the note... Well, that’s when I called your grandparents.’

He’d lost interest in me and started looking at his hands. Running the fingertips of his right hand over the knuckles of his left. Knuckles were white from holding hard onto the glass of milk. Stayed quiet for a while and then finally said:

‘That sucks.’

‘You’re telling me.’

‘Can I see the note?’ he said.

Leaned to the side and pulled the paper from my pocket. It was wrinkled and damp and the ink was smudged. A handkerchief would look better after being passed round a scout troop suffering from hayfever. I’d done a number on it during the night. Before handing it across to Donald I set it on the table. Used the edge of my hand to try and take some of the shape out of it. Make it flat again. But I’d sure done a number on it. I’d got so angry at some points in the night that I wanted to rip it up. Thought about finding the long matches we used to light the fireplace. Striking one and setting it up to the corner until the note

caught fire and burned to ash. Sitting at the table, trying to take the shape out of the thing, I knew why I couldn't burn it. Making it look okay before handing it to Donald to read it for himself - I knew why I kept it. Cause it wasn't mine. Not entirely.

Spread it flat on the table one last time and slid it across the tablecloth.

Donald sat with his hands in his lap. He leaned forward and looked at the note. His hands didn't move.

'Thanks,' he said, still not reaching for it. Just leaned over and blinked his eyes for a while. His hair had fallen over his eyes so I couldn't see what they were doing. What he was feeling. I couldn't clock what was going on with the kid at all. He finally lifted his left hand and hovered it over the note. His fingers moving like he was testing it for heat. Expecting the thing to reach up and take the skin off his finger tips with a blue flame.

'She'd leave notes in my room,' he said. 'Things she wanted me to do.'

He lowered his hand and pulled the note to him. Slid it poker-style - not wanted to give anything away. Not wanting to see it until it was up close. Where he could hide it. Watched him read it and watched his expression while he made it through the words. His face didn't change. What I could see of it anyway stayed the same as always. Long, white and tight in the jaw. Could see his eyes only through thin slit of his parted hair. His shoulders hung, but that's just Donald. His shoulders always hang. He pulled his hair back with one hand and held it there, away from his brow. His eyes moving over the words - travelled one way in slow motion. Then they'd rocket back and start the next line.

He finished and cleared his throat. Lifted the note and turned it over. Looked for a few seconds at the chips left in the pulp. Dropped the note onto the

table and slid it back toward the centre where I'd left it. He took his hand back and set it in his lap.

'Why Joe Pullman?' he asked. I shook my head. Donald took it that I didn't understand the questions. 'Why didn't she just write Joe. J maybe. Why'd she use your whole name?'

'Same question I had.'

'Sucks.'

I nodded cause I didn't have anything else to give him.

'Sorry about my mom,' he said. 'I know you're probably really angry about it. But, it doesn't mean anything ...'

'I'm not blaming anybody, Don.' I sat there shaking my head. Feeling sorry for myself cause I had my step-son apologising for his disappearing mother. Like Houdini's children ever said sorry for their dad sneaking into his box. There have been few times in my life where I felt so pathetic. I'd lost a wife the week before. This kid was missing his mother. Something that was causing him pain. Something I understood more than I wanted him to understand. Somehow that put a perspective on my problems. Him apologising like that just wasn't right.

'It's just,' Donald started again. He stood there shaking his head and running his fingers over the faint shade of hair he had coming through on his chin. 'I feel bad about it.'

'So do I, bud.' Gave him a smile that didn't make the plastic feeling go away. It was fake cause I didn't know how to smile at the kid. Not right then. Donald left and I finishing drinking my coffee. Had two refills. Marty was still in bed. I was expecting him to come down the stairs. Hair standing up. Eyelids

falling. Scratching himself like an old man. Carole would tell him to stop it. He'd look at her and frown. Without thinking he'd be at it again. Seven years old with the mannerisms of an old-timer. Carole always said he took his bad habits from me. She said a lot of things that made me laugh. Things that made me think. Consider the simple things that usually slip by unnoticed.

*You really miss her for that, Joe.*

Coffee was still hot, burned the roof of my mouth. Took another mouthful and held it. A small way of testing myself. Another stupid game. A sacrifice maybe. I needed to do something just so I could stop feeling sorry for myself. While the coffee burned at my mouth I looked down at the business card I'd found with the mail. Read the small black words again. Imagined Ty Frampton leaning over his printing machine. If they even use machines anymore. I'm pretty sure Ty still uses one. Setting the letters out with inked fingers. Pulling some handle to make a big roller steam down over a small square of paper. Big square of paper maybe with another machine to cut it all into bite-sized business cards.

*People in small towns have long memories*

'Fucking bastard,' I say.

'What's that?'

Looked up and saw a middle-aged midget in my doorway. His hair's stuck up like an oil-slick duck. His face frowning at me. Blinking against the bright lights of the kitchen. His hand down the front of his pyjama bottoms. Sound of fingers racking over skin muffled by the fabric.

'Hey, Marty,' I said. 'It's nothing. I'm just thinking out loud.'

'Dirty thought.'

Nodded my head.

‘I’m full of them lately.’

The telephone started ringing. Looked at Marty and thought about going for it. Give him time to come to life. He turned his head and looked at the phone on the wall. Frowned like he didn’t understand what was happening. Like the ringing was getting to him. Really annoying the hell out of him. He was growing older by the second. Never looked so much like my father. A grumpy old man in a pair of Scoobie-Doo pyjamas.

He turned and snapped his hand out. Pulled the phone from the carrier and slapped it to the side of his head. The plastic made a cracking sound when it connected. He looked more annoyed than pained. Swapped ears and stared rubbing the side he’d just clattered with the phone.

‘Yeah? Hello?’

‘Marty,’ I said. ‘Be polite.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘This is the Pullman residence. Marty Pullman speaking.’

He nodded his head a while. Looked up at the ceiling and breathed a big breath.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’ll get him for you.’

He reached his hand toward me. The phone came with it. He stretched the cord to the fullest and the thing stopped. Phone slipped from his hand. Caught him by surprise. Fell from his fingers and hit the floor. Made a sound like the plastic cracked. He looked at the phone and then at me while I was getting up off the chair.

I picked the phone up off the floor. Listening to the sound of someone on the other end. Shouting out the same words over and over again.

‘Yeah, I’m here,’ I said. ‘This is Joe Pullman.’

‘Joe, what’s going on over there?’

‘It’s nothing. Just dropping phones and making coffee.’ Touched Marty’s shoulder. Moving him toward the fridge so he could get himself started on breakfast. ‘What can I do for you sheriff?’

‘We’ve got a situation. It’s probably best if you came down to the courthouse.’

‘What’s it about?’ My chest was feeling tight. It was hard to keep pace with my breath. My lungs were working too hard.

‘It’s Daryl Evers. His daughter’s been away for a few nights.’

I thought back to what I was doing a few nights ago. Made sure I had my whereabouts scored off with some one to witness. Figured I had a few people to vouch for me. Lenny at Trapper’s Paradise for one. He probably still had my tab hidden up under the lounge bar.

‘Yeah?’ I asked.

‘Well, the boys are down in the valley. Think maybe they’ve got something. I’ve got a few other boys over at Apple Mount. Seems Milton Berrill thinks he’s seen something again. Could just be another tall tale, but I can’t take the chance this time. Either way, I think you’ll be needed. Daryl can use some support no matter what we find. I figured you’d be a good choice under the circumstances.’

‘I don’t really know him all that well, sheriff.’

‘Just come on down here, son.’ Sheriff took a moment to cough. Moved his mouth away from the phone. Came back and said: ‘The man’s pretty broke

up just now. Might have some questions about what happens next. Just to be prepared.'

'Sure,' I told him. 'I'll be right down.'

I hung up.

'Somebody dead?' Marty asked.

He was sitting at the kitchen table with his chin cupped in two hands. Looking at me same way he always looks when he's waiting for breakfast. When he's between dreamland and Marty the seven-year-old-think-tank.

'What'll it be, bud? It's got to be quick,' I told him. 'I've got to be some place.'

'You doing a removal?' he asked. His chin came up from his hands. He wiped his eyes clear with one hand. Looked aware of what was happening for the first time that morning.

'Don't know yet,' I said. 'I'm just heading down to the courthouse to lend some support to a friend.'

'Can I come?'

'Not this time,' I said. 'You hang out here. I'll get Donald to look after you until I'm back. We can see about taking that walk down by the river if you're still up for it.'

'That'll be alright,' he said.

'So what'll it be?' I asked.

'Anything.' His chin fell back onto his hands. He looked at the tablecloth. 'Just make it quick. I'm starvin' Marvin.'

## Chapter Seven

I watched the sheriff while he looked out over what we call the back of Henderson. It's woodland. There's probably quarter of a mile of paved paths. Rest has been left to nature. Streams cut through it and feed into three ponds. The back of Henderson is popular for family picnics and young people looking for privacy. It's quiet and it's peaceful. Once in a while you hear the sound of the saw mill coming through the valley, but it's never so bad it ruins the tranquillity. If the wind shifts just right you can smell the burned wood. Not unpleasant. Even adds to the spirit of the place.

Nat was standing with his hands settled against the windowsill. Pleat running the back of his police uniform puckered out whenever he went to stretch his shoulders. To that moment his shirt had puckered half a dozen times. He was getting stiff alright. There's no wonder about it. He'd been there for a long while. I'd been watching him for over an hour and felt like my guts were going to spill out the toast and coffee I'd forced down that morning. I just couldn't get settled. It's not easy to find solace under those kind of circumstances. All the commotion down in the valley. Daryl Evers sitting in the sofa across from me. Looking over once in a while. Looking at me like he wanted to say something real bad. Then there was the thing with my missing wife. It was a worry, sure. But it was also an embarrassment - now that the whole town knew about it.

Stood up and walked over to Nat's desk. Started shifting things round to pass the time. Lifting his name plaque. Dusting it off and setting it back down. Flipping through the Field and Stream without lifting it off the desk. Whatever I

could do to keep from sitting down. Keep from seeing Daryl Evers out the corner of my eye. Looking at me.

*Just get it out of your system for Christ sakes!*

Nat was big on candy. Rock candy mainly. He had a glass jar on his desk. Sheriff's badge etched on the side of it. Under the badge read: Big Man in Town. Reached in the jar and took a couple of the plastic wrapped red balls inside. Lifted one to my nose. Could smell the cinnamon before I had it to my chin.

Started unwrapping it when I looked up at Nat. Past him I saw an emergency van pulling into view. It crawled round the curve in the path. Made it past the cluster of wooden skeletons. Oaks out of their season, shaking against the cold wind without their leaves. Looking black and charred against the fresh white snow. Three hills rolled up between the rear window of the Henderson Court House. One of them started at the edge of the lake. Two more swelled behind it. Made a steady incline from the back of the red brick court house, ending in a valley at the lake. Water was silver with the sunlight flickering off the smooth gloss of ice.

A new storm was rolling in the distance. Clouds still a ways off but it was coming on with some strength. Those were the second coming of a heavy fall of snow. An earlier storm moved through and dropped long shadows across the hills. Shadows that broke and took the snow away, but not before it locked up most of the roads. Now the sun was shining hard and it blazed yellow and skimmed off the surface of the hills in bright flashes.

Shadows were coming again. Moving closer. Edging toward the hills - toward the one long slope, ready to connect all the hills by dull grey. The big slope was the backside of Apple Mount and it ended at the lake. It ended where

the emergency van drew up with flashing lights. Skidded to a stop next to a police jeep. Lights still spinning.

Then people started to move.

Nat leaned against the wooden sill of the big window and watched. The heating system kicked on and a heavy thumping sound came from inside the walls. Then the hot air blew down on him. It blew down on us all. But I watched Nat. The way he was framed by that big window. His shoulders fell when the heat touched him. Pressed into his shoulders and neck from the ceiling vent.

Weight in my guts had been too much for my legs to take. Constant rolling like I'd eaten a whole mess of something that didn't like the feel of my insides. So I went back and sat down. Fell into the chair. Unable to control the speed of my fall. When I touched down I made a noise I wished I could take back. Daryl Evers stopped wiping his glasses and looked at me. His small round eyes were narrow - not cause of me really. Just cause Daryl was blind as a mole in mud without his specs. While he watched me his eyes took shape again. Rounded out like real eyes. He started blinking fast just before he covered them up with his glasses. Blinking like he was preparing them to see again.

Nat turned his head, but he wasn't looking. Just checking things were still copasetic. Listening in to make sure me and Daryl were still present.

Daryl used the white handkerchief to wipe his mouth. He looked at it for a second and then folded it a few times. His hand was shaking and it took some doing to get it back inside his jacket pocket. He kept looking at me. Stood up and watched his feet while he moved from side to side. Unsure if he wanted to dance. That's what he looked like. After a few seconds he sat back down on the leather sofa. He sat down and all of a sudden I felt a need to go over to him. More an

impulse than a want really. I fought the feeling cause of the way my guts were churning up inside. Didn't want him to hear the sounds I was making. Kind of thing can give a man the wrong impression. So I sat back on the sofa and watched him same as I'd been watching the sheriff. It's the only thing I could do. Watch the tiny man crumble while I sat around doing nothing. There wasn't anything I could do. Times like that were just about waiting. About getting your thoughts squared up for what comes next. Besides I was a mess. I couldn't even concentrate for a few seconds before my mind was wandering off to other things.

Thinking about Marty. Wondering what was going through his mind. Hoping he'd find somebody to talk to if he needed to get it out. My hope was he didn't need to clear his mind too much. Too much of the wrong things gets out into this town and people latch onto it. No matter if it's Nancy Lowell's crazy spirit talk or Milton Berrill nattering on about seeing a man walking through the snow toward Apple Mount carrying a woman in his arms. The more of it goes round and the more stories start to pull together.

I was worried and starting to get that sick feeling again. Daryl was watching me. That much I could tell without trading a glance with him. Out of the corner of my eye I knew his face was aimed my way. Not feeling like a conversation I just sat there sweating into my shirt. Felt like the flannel was filling up with so much wet I was going to hear the water dripping out onto the floor under my chair. Any minute and it was going to happen.

Stood up and tried pacing. Found myself pushing my arms through the sleeves of my leather jacket. I'd pulled it off when I got too hot. Folded it and draped it over the back of one of the chairs. Then I'd put it back on again just so I could take it off. Four times. On. Off. Arms in. Arms out. To Daryl Evers I must

have looked a real prick. Here he was in a terrible state and I was the fool making all the noise. That stopped me pacing. Had to make myself give up and settle in. Everything I tried was going nowhere.

*Something is missing, I thought. Everything is missing.*

So I sat down again and looked at Daryl Evers. He wasn't looking at me which was a blessing of some kind. I didn't have anything to say to him. If he'd been looking at me all I had to offer was a simple smile. Simple it was too. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. Found myself guessing at what horrible images were working on his mind. Imagined he was really working on some sick ideas. His brain must have been playing with him. That much was a given. He was melting inside. So I watched him and waited for all that stuff inside to come slipping out.

'You okay, Daryl?' I finally asked.

He was sitting at the far wall - perched on the centre cushion of the long sofa. On the wall behind him was a painting of a hunting scene. Two men in the background pointing long rifles at a blue sky. A boy up close is walking forward. He is painted in detail. His head down while he makes his way forward. He's carrying two limp ducks by their legs. One in each hand. Looks like he might walk right out of the painting. It's big enough. He could've been real. Even the holes in the necks of the ducks look real. There's veins hanging out. Blood leaking.

Daryl didn't look at me. He was watching the window. I wasn't going to ask him again. Felt like an ass asking him to begin with, but I kept watching him. The way he pushed his square-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose. Pushes them up until they are pressed into his thick eyebrows. He finally nodded his head, only he didn't say anything. There wasn't really anything he could say.

We'd been in the room for two hours, maybe more, when the cloud made it to Apple Mount. That's when the snows started to fall again. I'd watched the sheriff chew through the lip of a Styrofoam cup. Took three good chews before realising it was something he didn't want to eat. Maybe shouldn't eat. He looked tired and embarrassed while he pecked the small white balls off his tongue. Picked them out of his teeth. Made a hasty effort to claw it out with his index finger. All the while he watched his good friend councilman Daryl Evers. A man who supported his family through his accountancy business. Four kids, all of them coming to their college years. All of them wanting to leave home. Daryl had been a broken man in recent years. He didn't like to see his children leave. He was waiting for the day when the first would go.

We were waiting in the sheriff's office to see how far away the first one had got to.

Daryl nodded his head. He sat there for a while, nodding away. Nat turned his head round and looked at me like I shouldn't be talking. Something I thought was probably true. It's the reason I decided to keep my mouth shut from there on in. This kind of situation always makes me uncomfortable. No one wants me around, but there are circumstances that require my services. So I get the invite now and again. Most often I mind myself fine and I keep quiet.

'I'm real scared, Joe,' Daryl said. I didn't raise my eyes to look at him. I just sat there and nodded my head to let him know I'd heard him alright. 'I suppose you don't need me to tell you that. This is not something that's new to you. Any of this really.'

He made a laugh that sounded like it wasn't meant to be heard. He coughed and took his glasses off his nose. Used a shaking hand to remove the

white handkerchief from the inside pocket of his jacket. He stood there for a long while wiping his glasses. Coughing really quiet coughs now and again. When he finished with the glasses he pushed them back up his nose.

‘Well, I suppose you’re right about that,’ I said.

‘Oh, not that,’ he said. He showed me the palms of his hands. Held them out to me like he was trying to stop traffic. ‘Not that way. Not at all. Real sorry to hear about Carole. I hope she comes home too,’ he said. ‘God, I can’t tell you how much I hope that for you.’

My smile must have been enough to make him feel alright about things. It kept him talking anyway. As long as he was talking I could stay quiet and that’s just the way I wanted it.

‘I mean in your job,’ he said. ‘It must get you used to these kind of things.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘I understand what you mean.’ And I thought I did until he felt the need to clarify.

‘I’m not talking about Carole. I read about that in the paper, but that’s not ...’

‘Not what you meant,’ I said. The smile was really hard to keep on my face. I’ll credit myself with that one. I sure kept up the appearance. ‘It’s fine, Daryl. Don’t get all worried about it.’

He stood and walked round in a circle. He went over to the ficus Nat Upshaw kept in his office. The thing had lost its leaves and was only starting to get some new ones back. Daryl stood close and pulled two of the leaves off a branch. He looked at the leaves and rubbed them between his fingers. He let them fall and watched them tumble to the floor.

He walked back and took a seat on the sofa again.

‘I’m glad you’re here as a friend,’ he said. It sounded like it was coming from a true politician. Someone up in Washington who was moving in on an election campaign. He must have felt like he was on a roll cause he added: ‘I’m glad you’re here as a good local man. That means a lot to me.’

I nodded my head and kept my face stern. Somber and sober.

‘If at any time you would like me to sit outside, Daryl I’d understand.’ I raise my head slow and steady. ‘I’m here to offer as much support as you need. If that support is giving you some space I can oblige.’

‘I’d rather you sat tight, Joe.’ Daryl Evers was looking at me with mouth moving like he had a whole lot of words inside it. His eyes were watery and looking like they were made of black glass. They were shimmering behind the thick lenses of his glasses. He’d kept the tears from falling and I’m not really sure how he was able to do that. Daryl Evers isn’t a strong man. Not in the physical or constitutional sense. But he was able to hold those tears in somehow. Half an hour of waiting and he was welling up every now and again. But the dam hadn’t busted. Still, I noticed he had the handkerchief in his hand now. It wasn’t getting folded. It wasn’t going back into his pocket. Maybe he knew it was getting close. He knew he may just need it after all.

He stared at me a long time. After a while I couldn’t help it. So I looked at him - eye to eye. Saw that the frantic waiting had turned him tired and lifeless. Made the red veins in his eyes come to the surface.

‘It’s good to have you here.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll stay.’

‘If you’re needing to leave for a while, Joe, I’ll be here,’ Nat said. He spoke to the window. I looked over and saw how his words had fogged up the glass. ‘Take a breather if you’re wanting one.’

I stood from the chair. My legs felt stiff and a bolt of pain in my forehead dug in deep. It had been there all morning, but it was gaining some length. Jabbing back in my head farther than it had before. I pulled my jacket on - this time not feeling like it was a wasted effort.

‘If you could leave the radio,’ Daryl said. His was watching the bulge in the left pocket of my black jacket. A weight pressing a shape from the inside pocket. ‘I’d appreciate if you could leave the radio in here.’

‘I’m not needing a long break, gentlemen. Just a breather.’ I paused and looked at Daryl. ‘I’m sorry, Daryl. I don’t have a radio.’ Feeling I needed to make it clear I said: ‘We use cell phones.’

‘Is that so?’ Daryl said. Eyes still on the shape in my jacket. Voice lingering.

And the room froze again. Same as it had when I walked in first thing that morning. Shaking Nat’s hand and then Daryl’s hand. We stood there a while and watched the snows falling. It was cold then and with the silence there was a real awkward feeling about the room. The silence took control and seemed to hold everything in place. The heating kicked on and rumbled through the walls. Nat Upshaw jumped back and rubbed his hands together. Leaned against the windowsill again. Took his place at the window - close up and looking down to see what was happening at the lake. He was anxious - like he thought the heater was the signal. He was edgy for something to happen. Three men in a small

office. Unable to communicate. Not certain of what to say. All waiting for a signal that in truth none of us wanted to hear.

I was certain the signal was on the way and when it came Councilman Daryl Evers was going to be in a world of hurt. Sure enough. In a real bad way. I was so sure about things that I couldn't get my heart to stop thumping. My lungs needed more and more air. I lowered my head. Couldn't turn to leave while Daryl Evers was looking at me like that. Staring without expression. Lost in his mind the way he was. So I stayed and waited. Gave the man something to focus on because it seemed the least I could offer. What was happening out in winter storm was not easy for a man like Daryl - and it hadn't even started yet.

A knock came from the door. I turned my head and Nat Upshaw followed suit. He let the second round of knocks sound off before he called out.

'It's alright,' he said.

Anne Morris pushed her face through a narrow crack.

'Sheriff, how you fellas holding up?'

'We're doing, Anne. Thanks for asking,' he said. He straightened his back. Grimaced like he felt a harsh pull at the muscles. Down low in his back something must have stretched out of place. One of those thin sharp burns. He held the position, awkward as it was, and the pain faded. I watched him move to where another pain started.

'I'll be damned,' he hollered. Stepping high and moving his shoulders. 'Just pulled something again. Sunk down deep in there too.' He groaned. Then he breathed out deeply.

'Alright, sheriff?' Daryl asked.

‘For God sakes, Daryl,’ Nat said. ‘Don’t you give a second mind to this old heap. God, no.’

‘I get you guys another coffee?’ Anne asked. ‘Maybe something to eat?’

‘No,’ Nat said. ‘You boys needing coffee?’ He looked round the room. Then he looked at Anne and smiled. It wasn’t long before the smile faded. It disappeared like his heavy jowls were just too fat for his face to hold them up anymore. ‘I think I’ve had just about as much coffee as this body’s gonna let me take.’

‘Nothing else you’re needing?’

‘No, Anne,’ he said. His eyes trailed back to the window. There was a silence that took the room. A hard silence. No one knew what else to say. So the sheriff moved forward. Placed his hands against the windowsill. Then he leaned forward and breathed out.

‘I’ll be outside if you need me.’ Anne moved her head from the door and pulled it shut.

‘And I’m glad of that.’ He turned his head without looking at the closed door. Anne was once a young woman that had too much to offer a small town. But was too good to leave it and so it crushed her down. Moulded her into what it wanted her to be. I never saw that. Not when I was there in Nat’s office. Just then I thought she was right for staying. The same as I was right for staying. All my life. No plan to leave. Nat Upshaw watched the floor.

Outside the courthouse window darkness had sneaked in. Rushed up with a winter quiet. A calm that lulls. Eases. All the while the clouds came rolling. Clouds low in the sky. Heavy with fresh snow. Carried by the wind that cuts through skin and drills down into the bone. The same wind that pressed against

the black skeletons of trees. Bending their branches and moving them to dance in the shadows. Now the white snow turned silver. Interrupted by the sweeping red and blue lights of vehicles down by the lake.

In the light of the portable halogens figures moved.

‘Ants on a pile of sugar,’ Nat said.

‘What’s that, sheriff?’ I asked.

Upshaw turned round. He smiled at the thought.

‘Heard someone say that a good few years back. Me and the boys were drinking and hunting. Up in the forest Northwest of Apple Mount. Place where the big bucks live. Wind cuts with less vengeance in the valleys up there. Still cold and rough, but we’d been doing it for years. Still do it,’ he said. ‘Preparation and stubborn conviction is how we do it. Keeps us going back for more. Battery powered thermal socks and women’s stockings. Who would have though? Woodsmen in pantyhose. Men in tights. They were part of the additions we made over the years. The socks took less convincing than the stockings, let me tell you.’

He looked past me. Stared at the wall for a second or two. Seemed lost and then said: ‘Ants on a sugar pile.’ Turned from me and looked out the window for a moment. When he twisted his head back round to look at me he was smiling. More than before.

‘Alan Meeks said it. Had to be Alan. He always came up with the simple lines that meant something to everyone. We all laughed without making a sound. Puffs of white smoke rushing from all our mouths. All four of us. Edge included. Your Pop’s mouth open and steam was pouring out like that big beard he used to have was all aflame. We were holding rifles to our shoulders. Aiming down into

the valley. All half-frozen and annoyed at the falling snow. But we held the heavy guns and waited quiet and steady. Looking down a long slope. Staring down into an opening where the moonlight dropped down. Made the whole place look like a big white sheet. Frozen over and sparkling almost.

‘There were two shrubs in the middle of the valley. Two shrubs that were still holding onto a few clusters of unclaimed berries. That still creeps in there. That memory. Two lone clumps of bright red berries. Shining too red against the white backdrop. Probably just my mind closing in on the sight of them, but I remember them being too red in a dull evening. Glowing almost. Around those shrubs was a small group of deer. Taking their time to move in. Safe against the peace of it all. Slow and graceful.

‘Then four shots rang out. Before the deer scattered one fell dead. Another made it to shelter. Hopped off through the trees and disappeared. We tracked it down. Followed the trail. Bled so much it wasn’t a problem to track and made it so it couldn’t get too far. Shot it again when it was staggering under an overhang. That one I got myself. She was still breathing when I got up close to her. Still had a fight left in her.’

The room was quiet. I was looking at Daryl who was folding his hands one into the other. He’d stop and would take a look at his palms. Searching for something. Maybe trying to tell his own future. Maybe trying to see if all his suffering had made his palms bleed. Only way it could get worse for him. After a while of looking at his palms he’d start folding his hands again. Nat was watching him too.

‘The other got away,’ Nat said. As if it was going to make a difference now. He looked out the window again.

‘Like ants on a sugar pile.’

## Chapter Eight

There was nothing in the house to eat. So me and Marty went to Solomon's. Biggest grocery store Henderon's got. Town's got small shops and butchers and the market's good too, but Solomon's has it all in one place. Best of all it's open mortician's hours. Every damned minute of every damned day. Pulled into the parking lot. Was driving toward the front of the store I spotted a car driving up along side us. Over a couple rows of spaces, but keeping pace with me. I'd been looking at Marty so I saw it in the background and it didn't mean much to me. Not at first. Looked past Marty and felt a block of something form in my throat.

Paul Quincy was holding the wheel of his Cadillac El Dorado with one hand. His other hand was hanging outside his car door. He started talking but I couldn't hear what it was he was saying. But the steam coming out of his mouth told me he was saying a lot. Look in his eyes told me he wasn't reciting poetry.

'It's cold, bud,' I said. 'So I'll drop you up at the door. You go in and get a cart ready for us.'

'Difference does it make?' Marty said. He made a laugh the same way he does with his friends. When he wants them to know he thinks they're stupid as a weed.

'Well,' I said. 'I've got a call to make. You go in and get things ready. By the time I'm finished you'll be good to go.'

'Fine,' he said.

'Good man.'

I dropped him at the front door and waited for him to go inside. Then I took the van to the first space and parked under a lamppost. I sat there looking

round the parking lot. Expected to see Paul's El Dorado facing me head-on. Pitching from side to side while he revved the engine. The only thing I had in front of me was a beat up old VW beetle with a headlight missing. I checked the rest of the cars in the lot. None of them were Paul's road boat.

Went inside and found Marty. He'd found us a cart.

I pushed the shopping cart from aisle to aisle. Not feeling like shopping. My mind was on Paul and the trip he must have taken to come out here and see me. What was he planning to do now? If he'd seen the paper he would have some serious plans. I didn't like the idea of that not one bit. Marty was talking to me, but I was only getting pieces of what he was saying. Something about his school. Some guy was picking on him. Marty didn't think it was all that big a deal cause this kid picked on everybody so I didn't listen much after that. If he needed me he would ask for it. He'd ask for me to be there. Right then he was just talking and I was thinking about my father-in-law and my missing wife. His missing daughter. I pulled a bag of rice off the shelf and tossed it into the cart and wondered what the old man had planned.

Shoved the cart into the next aisle. Acted like I was looking at the potato chips. Probably looked pathetic taking so much interest. Martin headed up the aisle and stopped. Turned round and came back. He looked at the bags of potato chips along with me. When he looked at me I shook my head and chewed on my lip. Did my best to look like I was trying to make a decision.

'Get the Ruffles, dad.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'That's what I was thinking. Was also thinking we need some more soda. I think we passed it already.'

Martin shrugged. He said: 'We can go back.'

‘How about you going back to get it for me? Save us some time.’

He headed off and I pushed the cart into the next aisle. Waited. Not for Martin. I waited and hoped Martin would take a while. Knowing he wouldn’t, but still I had hope.

‘Joe,’ the voice called out. Loud. Gruff. Direct.

‘Yep?’ I called back as if I didn’t know who I was talking to.

‘Thought you’d have taken the time,’ Paul said.

‘How’s that?’

‘My daughter goes missing and I get a phone call. Then I get nothing.’

‘There’s nothing else to tell you.’

‘Enough to make the papers.’

‘Well, that’s different.’

‘Sure it is,’ he said. He’d made it up the aisle. He stopped walking. Set a large hand on the end of my cart and gave it a shove. Side of the cart connected with my hip. It was more painful than I let on. ‘Bet you got a lot going on in that head of yours. A lot of things you’re not wanting to tell me.’

‘Listen, Paul. I meant to come out and see you. Sit down with Fran and have a talk. It’s been a tough few days ...’

‘Tough few days?’ the old man leaned against his cane. Stepped away from the cart and looked like he was going to fall. Teetered for a moment and all of a sudden looked too relaxed to regain himself. Then he was up and almost straight. Almost strong again. He used one long finger to point at my chest. Held that shaking hand out - pointing at me without saying a word.

‘What is it, Paul? What’s all this about?’

‘It’s been a tough few years, Joe. Since my girl picked up things you. I know what you’re all about. She talks to me. She tells her mother all the things you wish stayed quiet. But you know that. You’re aware that my daughter talks.’

‘This is not the place to pick a fight, Paul.’

‘You stole my daughter from me,’ he said.

‘This is not the place, Paul.’

‘No?’ he called out. ‘Where do you want to go? What kind of a place should I face you? Where? You’ve torn my family to pieces!’

‘I’d have welcomed a conversation at my office, Paul. You could have come to the house.’

‘That’s your place, Joe. You don’t tread on my land so I don’t tread on yours. Don’t take it as a matter of respect neither. It’s nothing of the sort.’

‘Listen, Paul. I’ve got ...’

‘Don’t give a damn what you got. Not the slightest care in the world. What I care about is my daughter’s gone. No trace. Not a word from her. That’s what troubles me. So what I want is an answer,’ he said. He shoved the cart again. It hit my hip. I tried pushing it back. He had his hand on it. I couldn’t get the thing to move. ‘I read about her in a paper, Joe. I open an envelope this morning and see a Henderson Crier. No note. I look through the paper and there’s a story. Highlighted. Circled. It tells me to read it. That’s a hell of a way to find out your daughter’s missing. Not just off somewhere. Missing!’

‘I understand you’re angry.’

‘Well, sure you do. You’re a smart man, Joe. You’ve kept all this to yourself. For good reason too. That’s what I think. So I’ll be speaking with the

sheriff and seeing how much more they know. And I'll be passing some of the stories I've been keeping over the years.'

'Don't make this something it's not, Paul. She left and she stuck a note to the fridge door.' I turned and looked down the aisle. Expecting to see Marty. Half hoping he was coming up. Expecting he was too smart to come down the aisle if he heard what Paul was saying. The aisle was empty. An old woman was passing with a basket in her hand. She slowed, but kept moving when she caught me looking at her.

'One question's floating round in my mind, Joe. I'm sure as hell is hot that you know just what that question is.'

'Paul, I've got no idea where Carole's gone off to.'

His cane came up. I wasn't ready for it. It took a diagonal motion. Floor to my chin. Then it was back to the floor again. I didn't see it touch the floor. I was too busy looking at the line of salsa dips. Feeling the pain swelling in my jaw. My neck seizing up with the quick way my head snapped to the side. A shock more than a crushing blow. I'd been about to tell him how sorry I was, had my mouth open, tongue forming the first words. Then the cane brought my jaw closed. My tongue was in the way. My head spun to the side.

'God damn,' I yelled.

'I got more,' Paul said. 'This is a side I keep to my own. A side of me I don't like. So I'm asking you to tell me what's what. Give me what I need so I don't have to use it again.'

I swallowed and took down some blood. Put my fingers in my mouth and touched the gap my teeth made in my tongue. Paul watched while I closed my mouth and looked at my fingers. Red lines cutting and spreading through the

saliva. Small trails of blood running over the lines of my knuckles. I sucked at my tongue and watched Paul's cane. Waiting for it to move. Considering the possibility I may finally get the chance to punch my father-in-law in his mouth. Feeling guilty about the prospect. No longer interested in have the opportunity. Still, I knew I'd take the chance if it came. If the cane moved I was going to lay one on him.

'What happened?' Paul asked.

I shook my head.

'I'll do it if I have to, Joe.'

'Do what?' Marty asked.

Paul looked past me. Marty was back there. Somewhere on my left. I relaxed for a second. Paul looked like he was going to fall to the side. Seemed destined to knock down the Pringles display on his way to the ground.

'Marty,' he said. 'I didn't see you there.'

'What do you mean, Grandpa?' Martin walked past me. Bent and set the bag of potato chips in the cart. I looked at Paul and he threw back a new expression. Just like a kid might use if he thought he'd been cheated. Traded a couple gimp baseball cards for a Cal Ripken rookie. I shook my head.

'Just mean I didn't see you there. That's all. Your dad was just telling me some things.'

Marty shrugged.

'So what's going on with you two?' Marty asked.

'Nothing,' Paul said. 'I saw your dad and wanted to check up on him. Haven't seen him around in a few days. Your grandma's wanting to know when you're coming back up.'

‘So what are you doing in Henderson?’ Marty asked.

I could’ve smiled but my mouth hurt too damned bad.

‘Came down to see a friend of mine. He’s not been well. So I wanted to come along and see if there was something I could do. Something to help get him back on his feet quicker.’

‘And grandma?’

‘She’s keeping fine, Martin. I’ll tell her you’re asking for her.’

‘She didn’t come with you?’

‘No, son. She’s been busy with other things. In the middle of organising some important things.’

‘Sounds kind of fishy,’ Marty said. ‘Who’s your friend?’

‘Well, I’m not sure you’ve ever met Fisher,’ Paul said.

‘Don’t know. What’s his whole name?’

Paul laughed. It was a struggle, but he got it out. He kept at it for a while like he was practicing. When he was finally finished Marty was looking at me. He had a frown on his face and his forehead cut with lines. He looked at Paul when the laugh was fading out. Dying off to nothing.

‘You’re a bright boy, Martin. A real bright young man.’

‘Been good seeing you,’ I said. My words were weak. Slurred. Marty was looking at me. I pulled at the shopping cart. Had to pulled it a few times before Paul looked down and realised he was holding on to it. Had his fingers through the metal grill of the cart and was squeezing it with all he had. I pulled again while he was looking at his hand. He let go finally and I turned the cart. Started walking away. Marty came along with me and looked over his shoulder. Facing

Paul and reaching out to take hold of the side of the cart he looked more concerned than ever.

‘I best finish up here,’ I said. ‘See ya later, Paul.’

‘You do that,’ Paul said. ‘Finish up and get on home. It’ll be storming again later. Big storm by morning. I’ll tell Fran you both were asking for her.’

‘Do that,’ I said.

I pushed the cart. Got to the end of the aisle and started to turn. Marty kept at my side. When Paul called out to Marty he pulled up closer to me. Pushed into my side and turned to look over his shoulder. We made it to the end of the aisle. I turned and went down the next.

‘What just happened?’ Marty asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘So why are you talking funny?’ he asked.

‘Bit my tongue.’

‘Doing what?’ he asked.

‘Just bit it,’ I said. Gave him a smile without looking down at him.

‘Grandpa was standing different when I came up the aisle, dad. Like he was real mad.’

‘Wasn’t all that happy, I guess.’

‘So he hit you with his cane?’ Marty asked.

‘No.’ I laughed out loud. Shook my head and stopped the cart. I looked at the cans on the shelf the same as I had looked at the potato chips. There was too much interest in the cans and I couldn’t help it. I finally pulled one of the jars of instant coffee from the shelf and set it in the cart. Started moving again.

‘So what was he mad about?’ Marty asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘He’s mad cause of mom.’

‘Sure he is,’ I said.

‘Thinks maybe you did something,’ Marty said.

I stopped the cart and this time I looked down at him. Didn’t feel angry, but I felt I had lost something. Another piece had fallen off somewhere. Things didn’t feel right. A weight that balanced my side of the world had chipped away. It wasn’t anger I was feeling. It was fear. Anxiety. Marty was old for his years. He could read people. See what made some people good and others bad. Some true and others false. And while I looked at him I wondered what he saw in me. If what he was looking at was a fallacy. An unfit father. A failed husband. Or even worse.

‘Why would he think that?’ I asked.

‘Cause people have been talking,’ he said. ‘It really gets on my nerves too. But people think it’s weird mom just left. Without me or Donald especially. More about Donald I think cause he’s different.’

I nodded and said: ‘Just her son.’

‘Yeah,’ Marty said. ‘So she should have taken him. That’s what I’ve got from it all. From what people are saying, you know? I get that people think she would have taken him.’

‘Taken him if what?’ I asked.

‘If she left on her own,’ he said. ‘If she was just trying to get away.’

‘Why would she want to do that, Marty?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know.’

We walked to the end of the aisle. He put his hands in his pockets and his head slumped down to his chest. His shoes started dragging against the glossy supermarket floor.

‘What have you heard?’

‘You’ve got a bad history in the town,’ he said. ‘That’s the thing that’s going round now. That you have something you don’t want people to know about. Secrets.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘That can get a man in trouble.’

‘I heard something about your dad too.’

I nodded my head. We walked the next two aisles in silence. We didn’t put anything else in the cart.

‘Dad?’ Marty asked.

My nerves were raw. I hadn’t felt that much on edge for a real long time.

‘Yeah?’ I asked.

‘You got a handkerchief on you?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. I went for my back pocket and pulled the white kerchief I keep back there wherever I go. No telling when I’ll meet up with a grieving widow. A best friend. A long-time neighbour. There’s always someone who knows someone I’ve buried. My conversations can sometimes end in tears. So I provide a service. Continued customer care. Long after the coffin is sealed and the dirt is thrown. Way past when the ashes have settled in the urn. So I took the kerchief and handed it to Marty.

He shook his head and looked past me. He stared at a woman who was pushing her cart by us. He waited until she went by.

‘Use it to wipe your mouth,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘You’ve got blood on your chin.’