



Odd Interlude 2 (Odd Thomas 4.2)

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Description: Nestled on a lonely stretch along the Pacific coast, quaint roadside outpost Harmony Corner offers everything a weary traveler needs—a cozy diner, a handy service station, a cluster of motel rooms...and the Harmony family homestead presiding over it all. But when Odd Thomas and company stop to spend the night, they discover that there's more to this secluded haven than meets the eye—and that between life and death, there is something more frightening than either.

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EIGHT

Darkness has its charms, and even in our own hometowns, the world at night can be as enchanting as any foreign port with its exotic architectures. Between dusk and dawn, the commonplace is full of visual delights that only the moon, the stars, and richly textured shadows can provide.

But pitch-black gloom offers nothing except the fevered images of our imagination. And when we share absolute lightlessness with a grotesque mummy that makes a squalling-cat sound through its mouthful of buzz-saw teeth, the desire for light becomes so intense that we might set ourselves afire to provide it, if we had a match.

Fortunately, I have no match and am spared self-immolation, but Jolie Harmony has her mini flashlight, to which she resorts (if you want my considered opinion) much too slowly under the circumstances. When at last she does switch on that little torch, she aims it at me, or, more accurately, at my knees, as I am sitting on the floor of the corridor when the lights go out and the desiccated corpse begins to shriek, but then I erupt to my feet as abruptly as a spring-loaded novelty toothpick dispenser offering an afterdinner wooden probe. The beam is so narrow that it illumines only one of my knees, and instead of shifting it to her left, where the monstrous remains were last seen, the girl angles it upward, to my face, as if she's forgotten who she brought here and needs to confirm my identity.

Jolie is twelve and I'm almost twenty-two, so it is incumbent upon me to act like the adult in the room—or the corridor. I must not scream like a little girl, because the little girl herself isn't screaming. Before this adventure reaches an end, being human, I will no doubt have made a fool of myself in any number of ways; therefore, the

longer I can delay behaving idiotically, the less humiliating it will be when I have to face her for our good-byes just before I ride off into the sunset with my faithful companion, Tonto. So with more aplomb than I expect, I blink into the light and in measured tones I say, “Show me the mummy.”

The beam travels along my stiff arms to the pistol that I have in a two-hand grip, lowers from the pistol to the floor, and sweeps a few feet to the left, revealing that my blind aim is off-target. The creature, for which I have no biological classification, is still lying on its back, in the withered posture of a juiceless death. The only part of it that moves is its left hand, the bony fingers rattling against the floor as if in life it was a pianist and still longs to pound out some hot jazz on a keyboard.

My understanding thus far has been that this fallen beast is a dry husk surrounding a brittle skeleton that encloses the dust to which all creatures—those of us who are monsters and those of us who aren’t—ultimately return. I like that understanding and can cope with it. This seeking hand is too much.

I stand over the thing, holding the pistol, pleased to see that my hands are shaking less than might be expected, certainly less than those of an octogenarian with familial tremors.

The cove lights along both sides of the corridor come on, and in that same moment, the mummy’s caterwauling ceases. Its tapping hand falls still.

As Jolie switches off her mini flashlight and puts it on the floor beside her, I wonder aloud, “What the hell just happened?”

She’s still sitting cross-legged on her folded moving blanket. She shrugs. “It never amounts to more than that.”

“You said nothing ever happens after the whummm-whummm-whummm thing.”

“I forgot about this.”

“How could you forget such a thing?”

“It doesn’t happen a whole lot. It’s rare. The hand business is like a postmortem reflex or something.”

“Totally dehydrated mummies don’t have postmortem reflexes.”

“Well, it’s something,” she says. “I’ve thought about cutting Orc open, you know, dissecting him, see what’s in there.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“Orc is harmless. And I might learn something important.”

“Yeah, you’ll learn Orc isn’t harmless. And what about the way it was screaming?”

“Wasn’t screaming,” the girl says. “Mouth didn’t move. Chest didn’t rise and fall. And if you think about it, that sound was electronic like the whummm but different, freakier. What seems to make sense is that something broadcast the sound, and Orc’s dead vocal cords or its bones or something inside it is maybe like a receiver that just happened to pick up the transmission.”

She sits there on her blanket, like little Miss Muffet on a tuffet, except that if a spider sits down beside her, she won’t be scared away. She’ll just crush it in her hand.

I lower my pistol, giving Orc the benefit of the doubt. “Good grief, kid, the first time the lights went out and you heard it, you were here alone?”

“Yeah.”

“And you came back?”

“Like I told you, after years of Hiskott, I’m not afraid of much. I’ve seen lots that’s terrible. I saw my cousin Maxy ... murdered by Hiskott using my family to do the killing.”

She has suffered so much, and that sorrows me. But she has been strong in the face of unthinkable adversity, and that inspires me.

“Please sit down, Mr. Potter.”

“How do you know my name?”

“It’s what you told Hiskott when he was controlling Uncle Donny. And he told us to stay away from you.”

I almost reveal my true identity to her. Then I realize that if she leaves this subterranean refuge and returns to the Corner, within the puppetmaster’s range, he might seize control of the girl, read her memory, and know my real name.

They say that voodoo priests, witches, and warlocks can’t lay a spell upon you if they don’t know your true name. That’s probably superstitious hogwash. Anyway, this Hiskott guy isn’t a voodoo priest or a witch or a warlock.

Nevertheless, I decide to keep my true name to myself for the time being.

Until the recent scare gave me my first white hairs, I had been sitting on the floor, facing the girl, with the mummified monstrosity a few feet to my right. Now I reposition the blanket and sit with a clear view of both Jolie and Orc.

“You said those three days in his cottage, Hiskott was sick and then he changed, he

wasn't just Hiskott anymore. What do you mean—that you don't think he had this power when he checked in, that it came to him somehow while he was staying there?"

Now Jolie, who was seven when life in the Corner changed, relies on family legend, which has been crafted and polished around dinner tables and firesides, in days of despondency and days of fragile but enduring hope, when they dared not discuss rebellion and, instead, told and retold one another the stories of their years of oppression, thereby transforming their suffering into a tale of endurance from which they could draw courage.

As that legend has it, Dr. Norris Hiskott arrives in a Mercedes S600, a far more high-end vehicle than what the average guest at their motor court drives. On first appearance,

he seems to have been born for this day. Since dawn, a cold breeze has come off the sea, tintured with an iodine scent from masses of decomposing seaweed that storm waves flung across near-shore rock formations two days earlier. The disturbing odor, the penetrating chill, and the curdled gray sky, lowering by the hour with a pending storm of predicted ferocity, have combined to raise in the Harmonys a mild, persistent disquiet. When registering Norris Hiskott in Cottage 9, Aunt Lois thinks it's curious that he's wearing Gucci loafers, expensive tailored slacks, a gold Rolex—and a hooded jersey tattered at the cuffs and stained as if he fished it out of a Dumpster. Although some people might feel the day is cold enough to justify gloves, the pair he's wearing are as peculiar as the jersey. These are gardening gloves, and he does not take them off. Likewise, he keeps the hood up throughout the registration process. Aunt Lois thinks perhaps some kid would wear a hoodie indoors, but not usually a man of about fifty and not one of this man's social position and sophistication. He seems furtive, as well, never making eye contact.

From what Jolie previously said, I hadn't inferred that the change in Hiskott that

brought him this cruel power also altered him physically in some disastrous way. But this makes sense of his envy and of his too-beautiful-to-live decrees.

Holed up in Cottage 9, he refuses maid service, on the pretense that he is gravely ill with the flu, yet he seems to have a healthy appetite, for he orders a lot of take-out from the diner. Leaving his door unlocked, he asks that the food be left on the small table beside the armchair in the sitting area, and he leaves money for the charges plus tip. Hiskott remains in the bathroom while the delivery is made.

When he has been transformed by whatever virus or invading genetic material or other contamination he contracted in his work at Fort Wyvern, he moves quickly to claim this plot of ground as his perverse kingdom. His sphere of influence reaches in most places to the boundaries of the Corner, falls short here and there, extends farther in a few areas. Because of the awful changes in his appearance, he will most likely never be able to venture into the world beyond this property.

All brain activity is electrical, and Hiskott is able to calve off an aspect of his personality: Think of it as a memory stick of everything he knows and is, but without the stick, contained instead in a coherent electric field. With certain limitations of distance, he is able to transmit this other essentially invisible self, this phantom Hiskott, through telephone land lines or by means of other systems, such as power lines and water pipes and television cables, or a combination thereof. Like a snake, this Hiskott data bundle is able to coil in a TV, a lamp, an appliance; and when a potential host ventures near enough, it can leap to him and take possession, while the real Hiskott remains in seclusion elsewhere.

Instantaneously, the data bundle, acting rather like a computer virus, does not merely seize control of whomever it invades but also downloads into the host's brain a program making that person's lifetime of memories available to Hiskott. Task complete, the phantom Hiskott returns to the real Hiskott; thereafter, within Harmony Corner, he enjoys a permanent communications link to the person whom he has

violated, as well as a control function that, at his whim, allows him to remotely operate that person's body as if it were his own.

All of this is at once fully understood by each person over whom Hiskott claims sovereignty. And each is acutely aware that his puppetmaster can kill him in an endless variety of ways, not least of all by shutting down the autonomic nervous system that controls the automatic functions of organs, blood vessels, and glands—which will bring instant death.

If one of them bolts beyond the Corner and doesn't return, retaliation will be directed upon those family members whom the escapee most loves. Their deaths will be cruel and slow and painful in the extreme, but also they will be subjected to such imaginative abominations as to fill them with humiliation, with such shame that their contempt for themselves will exceed their fear of death. The one who got away will carry a weight of guilt that eventually will make life intolerable.

Escaping with the intent to return with the police or cavalry of some other kind will be futile. The escapee will probably soon find himself needing to escape again, this time from a psychiatric ward, to which his tale of mind control has gotten him committed as surely as if he angrily claims to be Godzilla and threatens to destroy Los Angeles. In the unlikely event that authorities could be convinced of an extraordinary threat to such an apparently peaceful place as Harmony Corner, when they arrive on scene, Hiskott will take them one by one. Because those outsiders can never be allowed to return to their offices with knowledge of Norris Hiskott or with any suspicion whatsoever, he won't possess them in the same manner as he does the Harmonys, but he will instead slip deep into their minds as unobtrusively as a cold virus invading the lungs on an inhalation. He will edit and massage their thoughts without their awareness, and he will send them away with memories that he crafts for them.

Until Jolie tells me this, I have not understood how complete is the stranglehold that

Hiskott has on them. That the members of the Harmony family have persevered, held fast to their sanity, and remained hopeful is a feat almost beyond my comprehension.

Orc lies quiet.

Boo materializes and examines the mummified remains with great curiosity.

The girl doesn't see the dog. She and I sit in contemplative silence.

Finally I ask, "Hiskott, whoever he was and whatever he now is—what does he want?"

"Control. Obedience."

"But why?"

"Because of the way he now looks, he can't be seen in public, he's gross. He lives through us."

For a moment, another question more intrigues me: "What does he look like?"

"When he moved from Cottage 9 to the house he took from us, he did it at night. We weren't allowed to see."

"But in five years, taking food to him, cleaning his house—surely someone's gotten a glimpse of him."

She nods and seems to need a moment to gather herself before approaching this subject. "Only Uncle Greg and Aunt Lois. And Hiskott's made it impossible for them to share what they've seen. Implanted a prohibition in their minds."

“Prohibition?”

She is a serious girl but still a child, lively in the way of children and eager for wonder and delight, serious but not to the exclusion of the possibility of joy, as an oppressed adult might be. But now a new solemnity overcomes her, and she looks so grave that I can see the worn and weary woman that she might become as more years of enslavement grind her down, and I am almost unable to look at her because it might fall to me, and me alone, to either help or fail her.

Eyes downcast and hands plucking nervously at her denim jacket, with a tic tweaking the corner of her left eye, she says, “Greg and Lois tried. They tried to tell us. About his appearance. Twice they really tried. But each time they bit their tongues. They bite hard. Tongues, lips. Chew their lips until they bleed. The only words they can get out are obscenities. Blasphemies. Awful words they wouldn’t say unless forced to. They spit out the blood, the words, and for days their mouths are too sore to eat. They don’t dare try to tell us a third time. We don’t want them to try. We don’t need to know. It doesn’t matter. Knowing won’t change things.”

We need another silence.

Boo wanders away from Orc and along the hallway toward the doors that Jolie could not pry open.

In time I return to our previous subject. “Control. Obedience. But why?”

“Like I said. Because of how he looks, he has to live through us, me and my folks. He can eat. He can drink. But there is so much he can’t do. He’s like an oyster or something and that house on the hill is his shell. He tells us we’re his sensorium.”

Jolie raises her head, and her eyes are the green of lotus leaves. She stops plucking at her denim jacket. Like doves floating to a roost, her hands settle on her knees. The tic

is gone from the corner of her left eye. Speaking of her aunt's and

uncle's suffering distresses and agitates her. I think this subject distresses and agitates her, too, and perhaps even to a greater degree. But to speak of it at all, she needs to impose upon herself, with a kind of yogic application of willpower, a serenity that allows her to comment from the clear upper air that lies above all storm and shadow.

She says, "You know what a sensorium is?"

"No."

"Like the sensory apparatus of the body. All the sensory organs, nerves. Through me—through us—he's able to have the world that he can't be seen in anymore. Not just the sights and sounds and tastes but all of that from lots of different perspectives, from all of our perspectives instead of just one. And what he's unable to experience there in his shell, in his gross body that no eye would want to look upon or hand would want to touch, he can feel by living in us, by feeling what we feel, sharing our sensations, requiring us to provide whatever experience he wants most at any moment. There's no privacy in the Corner. There's no place in your heart where you can be alone to feel sorry for yourself, to heal from the latest thing he did to you. He crawls in there with you. He drinks your sorrow and mocks your hope of healing."

I am badly shaken.

Chronologically she is twelve, but emotionally she is older, and intellectually older still.

Compared to her deep strength, I am weak. I am a fumbling fry cook trying to do the best he can with his strange sixth sense, but she is Joan of Arc, fighting against impossible odds, not for her country but for her soul—while Hiskott, in the reach of his power and considering his cruelty, is a more formidable enemy than even the

army of England. Jolie, who began this war with the inadequate arms and defenses of a seven-year-old child, has triumphed merely by enduring, has raised the siege of Orléans every day for five long years, and it seems to me that I am in the presence of one who might be a saint in the making.

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Now I fully understand why she has no fear of Orc. Or perhaps of anything.

At the end of the hallway, head cocked and curious, Boo stands before the sealed pair of stainless-steel doors.

Jolie says, “This time, with you here, if Hiskott tries to possess me while I’m beyond his reach, and he can’t find me ... well, then he’ll kill me as soon as I reappear.”

“So you’ll stay here until I can take him down.”

“I can’t stay here forever and ever,” she says.

“And I don’t have forever. Today. It’s got to be done today—and sooner than later.”

She has restrained her curiosity until now. “Why can’t he get into your mind and possess you?”

“I don’t know, Jolie. But I always have been hard-headed.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Maybe I just don’t have much of a mind for him to get his tentacles around.”

“Or that. He says he can’t access the woman with you, either.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Who is she?”

Getting to my feet, I say, “Now that is the million-dollar question.”

“You don’t know who she is?”

“I just met her yesterday. I know her first name. That’s a start. In a year or two, I’ll know her last name, if she has a last name, which she says she doesn’t.”

Rising to her feet, Jolie says, “Are you always a little silly?”

“I’m usually a lot silly.”

“It’ll get you killed in the Corner.”

“Maybe not. So far, being at least a little silly has kept me alive.”

“He’ll have them all searching for you, anyone who doesn’t have to be up at the diner or the service station. You can’t go anywhere in the Corner without being seen.”

“Well, I’m just an ordinary, everyday, nothing-special fry cook. People tend to look right through guys like me.”

She stares at me solemnly for a beat, but then she proves to be still capable of a small smile.

I would give just about anything to hear Jolie laugh one day. I don’t think she’s laughed in a long time.

At the end of the hallway, my ghost dog walks through the steel doors.

NINE

Before I leave the fearless girl with Orc the inhuman mummy in the subterranean passageway between the possessed land of Harmony and the unknown government-sponsored atrocities of Wyvern (which makes this already as unusual a sentence as any I've ever written in these memoirs), she tells me one more important thing that I should know before I try to beard the lion in his den.

And speaking of peculiar language, why do we say beard the lion instead of confront the lion? The image it brings to mind is of me crawling recklessly into a cave to use spirit gum to attach a fake beard to a sleeping feline of daunting size. Because no lion is ever going to be induced to play Abraham Lincoln in a stage play, there would seem to be no reason to glue a beard on a lion other than to poke fun at it and laugh at its humiliation as the other lions mock it mercilessly. I'm sure that Ozzie Boone knows the origin of that expression, and no doubt our finest universities are crawling with intellectuals who have spent their entire academic careers writing papers about bearding lions—not to mention thick, learned volumes about the derivation of such sayings as belling the cat and spanking the monkey—but from time to time I am saddened to think that I will almost certainly not live long enough or have sufficient leisure to research such peculiarities of language myself, which I might enjoy doing.

Anyway, the one additional thing of importance that Jolie has to tell me before I leave her is this: Although Hiskott is secretive and self-contained, he doesn't live alone in the big house on the hill. Over the years, he has read the memories—and sometimes taken temporary control—of guests who stay in the motor-court cottages, and on three occasions, he has asserted permanent dominion over them and has taken them into his house, whereafter they are never seen again. In every case, these seem to be individuals who are pretty much loners, without families who might miss them. After stripping the plates off those people's cars, Donny parks them in the deep shade of a grove of oaks, halfway down the hills between the motor court and the family's houses, where they are cannibalized for parts as the service station needs them and

are allowed otherwise to fall into ruin. Food and anything else Hiskott demands is brought to him by the family, but no one has cleaned for him in over three years; therefore none of the Harmonys has seen the inside of the house since the first of those three luckless souls walked zombie-like through the front door.

“So it seems they do the cleaning,” Jolie says. “But we’re pretty sure they aren’t just used like we are. He’s got some other purpose for them, which is why he never lets us see them.”

“Maybe he uses them as his Praetorian Guard, his ultimate protectors, in case one of your family should ever slip the leash and try to kill him.”

“Like bodyguards.” Clearly she long ago came to this conclusion and has given it considerable thought without finding it a fully satisfactory explanation. “But why wouldn’t he be just as worried that one of them might slip the leash?”

So many things in my continuing education are learned by going where I have to go and doing what I have to do. Therefore, my only answer is: “I guess I’ll find out.”

Jolie surprises me by throwing her arms around me and pressing one ear against my chest, as though listening to my heart to judge the strength, steadiness, and truth of it. She is more than a foot shorter than I am, so slight for such a strong girl.

I return the hug, suddenly certain that I will fail her, though since childhood I have expected myself to fail much more often than I actually do.

“I’ve waited five years for you,” she says. “I knew you’d come one day. I always knew.”

Perhaps to her I’m a knight in shining armor who cannot fail to win the day. I know that I am less capable and less noble than the knights of folklore and fairy tales. My

only armor is my belief that life has meaning and that, when my last sun has set and my last moon has risen, when the dawn comes that marks the moment when I am born with the dead, there will be mercy. If thinking me a knight nourishes her hope, however, I might count myself a success for having done this if nothing more.

When we step back from each other, she has no tears to wipe away, because she is beyond easy sentimentality and too tough to cry for herself. Her eyes are lotus-leaf green, but she is no lotus-eater; she has survived not by forgetting but by remembering. I see in her a diligent accountant who records the puppetmaster's every offense in a mental ledger. When the day comes to settle accounts, she will know what his payment must be. Although she is young and small, she will do whatever she can to help her family wring from him the full and terrible balance that he owed.

"I'll do my best to get him," I promise. "But my best might not be good enough."

"Whatever," she says. "You won't just run and save yourself. I know you won't. You run toward things, not away from them. I don't know who you are, except you're not Harry Potter. There's something about you, I don't know what it is, but it's something, and it's good."

Only a worse fool than I would reply to that, for any response would diminish either her or me, or both of us. Such genuine trust, so sweetly expressed, bears witness to an innocence in the human heart that endures even in this broken world and that longs to ring the bell backward and undo the days of history until all such trust would be justified in a world started anew and as it always should have been.

"Jolie, I'll need a flashlight to find my way out. But I don't want to leave you here without one, in case these lights go off again and stay off."

"I've got two." She fishes the second mini flashlight from a pocket of her denim jacket and presents it to me.

“The big pipe that we followed up through the hills and out of the Corner—do other tributary drains feed it?”

“Yeah.

Five. When you’re going back—three to your left, two on your right. You can’t walk upright in any of them. You have to stoop. Sometimes you have to crawl.”

“Tell me where they go.”

“Nowhere. At the end of each, it’s been sealed off. I don’t know why or when. But storm water hasn’t been flowing through those drains in a long time, maybe ever since the people at Fort Wyvern connected their escape hatch to the system—if it is an escape hatch.”

“So I can’t go anywhere except back to the beach.”

“No. But I don’t think they’ll be waiting there for you. See ... well, there’s something else. But if I tell you, I don’t want it to be another weight on your mind. You’ve got enough to worry about.”

“Tell me anyway. I love to worry. I’m aces at it.”

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She hesitates. From a hip pocket of her jeans, she extracts a slim wallet, flips it open, and shows me a photograph of a handsome boy of about eight.

“Is that Maxy?”

“Yeah. Hiskott said Maxy had to die 'cause he was too beautiful. He really was a cute little boy. So we're supposed to think it was envy because Hiskott has changed into something super-ugly. But I don't think that's why he killed Maxy.”

Even as tough as she has become, Jolie is silenced by grief. A tremor of the mouth tests her composure, but she presses her lips together. She folds the lost boy away and returns him to her pocket.

“Lately,” she continues, “he's been taunting all of us, using my family to tell me I'm beautiful, more beautiful than Maxy. He's trying to terrify me and torment all the others with the thought that he'll use them to beat me and rip me apart the way he used them to kill Maxy. But it's a lie.”

“What's a lie?”

“I'm not beautiful.”

“But Jolie ... you really are.”

She shakes her head. “I don't see it. I don't believe it. I know it's a lie. I can't be beautiful. Not after what I did.”

“What do you mean?”

With one foot, she pushes a folded moving blanket close to Orc. She kneels on it, staring down into the creature’s shriveled face.

When she speaks, her voice is controlled, allowing no sharp emotions that might be suitable to her words, colored only by a quiet melancholy. “It starts, and it’s horrible. I’m screaming at them to stop, pleading. One after another of them going at Maxy—my family, his family. And they were trying to restrain each other. They were trying. But Hiskott moves so fast, from this one to that one, you never know where he’s going next. Such violent kicking, punching, gouging. Maxy’s blood ... on everyone. I can’t stop them, Maxy’s almost dead, and I’ve got to run away, I can’t bear to see the end of it.”

With no evident distaste, with a deliberate tenderness, Jolie lifts the hand with which the briefly animated, mummified cadaver had tapped the floor.

Examining the wickedly long fingers, she says, “I start to run but then I’m standing over Maxy, and I don’t know where I got the knife that’s in my hand. Big knife. He’s not quite dead. Bewildered, half conscious. He’s just eight. I’m nine. He recognizes me. His eyes clear for a moment. I stab him once and then again. And again. And that’s the end of him.”

Her silence has such substance that for a moment I’m not able to force words into it. But then: “It wasn’t you, Jolie.”

“In a way, it was.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“In a way,” she insists.

“He was controlling you.”

In that awful voice of tightly tethered sorrow, in words too mature for her age, she says, “But I saw it. Lived it. I felt flesh and bone resist the knife. I saw him seeing me when the life went out of his eyes.”

My sense is that if I drop to my knees beside her and try to comfort her, she will not allow herself to be hugged as before. She will thrash away from me, and the bond between us will be damaged. This is her grief, to which she clings in honor of her murdered cousin, and this is her guilt that, although unearned, is perhaps proof to her that in spite of what she was made to do, she is still human. I know a great deal about grief and guilt, but while this is like unto my grief and guilt, it is not mine, and I have no right to tell her what she should feel.

Lowering the monster’s hand to the floor, she returns again to the study of its face, in particular the large sockets at the bottoms of which lie the mottled and furred tissue that is what remains of its eyes, like the once flourishing but now fossilized mold at the bottom of a long-dry well. Again the cove lighting flutters, does not go out this time, but summons throbs of shadow from those bony orbits, so that it seems a pair of eyes repeatedly roll left to right and back again, entirely black eyes like those of Death might be when he shows up on a doorstep with an eviction notice.

“I’m not beautiful. That’s not the reason he’s getting ready to kill me. During the past few months, there are times when he seeks me and can’t find me because I’m here. And later, when he takes me and reads me, in my memories it seems I was always somewhere ordinary where he should have found me. For a while he thought the fault was in him, but he now suspects I’ve learned how to hide a thing or two that I don’t want him to know.”

The power to shut out the puppeteer from even a small part of her memory should be a hopeful development, but she seems to take no hope from it.

“And is he right? Have you learned to hide a thing or two?”

“They say you should study languages when you’re just a kid, because you get them a lot faster than when you’re grown up. I think it’s that way with figuring how to fake out Hiskott. I can’t hide much, but a little more month by month, including this place, where I go to escape him. I don’t believe any of the adults have been able to do that, but I think Maxy might have been about where I am now when he was killed. Maybe Hiskott suspected Maxy. Maybe he was afraid Maxy might learn to resist being taken, so he murdered him.”

“You think you could learn to keep him out, deny him control?”

“No. Not for years if ever. And he won’t let me live that long. But there’s another thing I did.”

She lightly taps a forefinger against the points of Orc’s lower teeth, moving left to right along the cadaver’s sharkish grin.

If Orc’s hand can abruptly drum fingers against the floor, its jaws, which seem to be locked open by withered tendons and shrunken muscles, might snap shut on her tender fingertips.

I consider warning her. But she surely has thought of the same danger, and she will ignore me. Something about this moment suggests that it is neither Orc’s existence nor its origins that intrigues Jolie, nor any particular feature of its demonic face. Instead, brow furrowed, testing the cutting edges of her teeth with her tongue as she assesses Orc’s array of daggers with her finger, she seems to be contemplating a question that worries her.

And then she puts her concern into words: “Does a monster know it’s a monster?”

Her question appears simple, and some might find it ridiculous because, as modern thinkers know, psychology and theories of social injustice can explain the motives of all who ever commit an evil act, revealing them to be in fact victims themselves; therefore such things as monsters do not exist—no Minotaurs, no werewolves, no orcs, and likewise no Hitlers, no Mao Tse-tungs. But I can guess why she is asking the question, and in this context it is a complex inquiry of profound importance to her.

Jolie deserves a thoughtful and nuanced answer, although in our current circumstances, a textured reply will only encourage in her further self-doubt. We don't have time for such uncertainty because it reliably breeds indecision, and indecision is one of the mothers of failure.

“Yes,” I assure her. “A monster knows it’s a monster.”

“Always and everywhere?”

“Yes. A monster not only knows that it’s a monster, but it also enjoys being a monster.”

She meets my eyes. “How do you know?”

Indicating Orc, I say, “This isn’t my first monste

r. I’ve had experience with all kinds of them. Mostly the human kind. And the human kind especially revel in their evil.”

Returning her attention to the teeth, the girl seems to consider what I have said. To my relief, she stops risking a bite and touches instead the creature’s large, bulbous brow, where the crinkled skin sheds a few flakes under her forefinger.

“Anyway,” she says, wiping her finger on her jeans, “there’s another thing I did, besides keeping from him the place I go when he can’t find me. I imagined this secret cave, hidden by brush, high in the hills, as far from the culvert on the beach as you can get and still be in the Corner. And yesterday, when he took me for a while, I let him see the cave in my memory, as if it were real, but not where it’s supposed to be. So now that he’s ready to kill me, maybe he’ll waste time using some of the family to search for the cave.”

“How can you be sure he’s ready ... for that?”

“Too much is slipping out of his control. You know about him, so he’s got to kill you. Then he’ll kill the lady with you because he can’t control her. He was going to kill me in a day or two, before you showed up, so he’ll just go ahead and do it as soon as he’s finished with you two.”

Annamaria seems to have uncanny knowledge superior to mine. She says she’s safe in the Corner. Maybe. Maybe not. I wish I could be in two places at once.

“I’ll get him first.”

“I think you might. But if you don’t ... the three of us will be buried in the meadow beside Maxy, with no coffins and no headstones.”

She gets to her feet once more and stands with her hands on her hips. In her skull T-shirt and rivet-decorated jacket, she looks both defiant and vulnerable.

“If Hiskott gets you first,” she says, “what I need is a little extra time while he’s looking for the cave that doesn’t exist, just a little extra time to get ready to be killed. I don’t want to beg or scream. I don’t want to cry if I can help it. When he uses my family to kill me, I want to be able to keep telling them how much I love them, that I don’t blame them, that I’ll pray for them.”

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Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:27 am

TEN

This is not one of the easiest things I have ever done: leaving Jolie alone with the mummified remains in the yellow yet nonetheless dreary corridor, which could as likely be the path to Hell or, worse, one of those airport passageways that leads inevitably to a coven of transportation-agency employees eager to strip-search Grandma, anal-probe a nun, and invite one and all to submit to a body scan that will trigger either bone cancer or the growth of a third eye in an inconvenient place. My ghost dog isn't even here to watch over her.

On the other hand, she has been alone in this hallway on many previous occasions. She is most likely safer here than anywhere in the Corner. Besides, although she is a girl and a child, she has as much hair on her chest, figuratively speaking, as I do.

With the mini flashlight in one hand and the pistol in the other, I retrace the route along which she led me: through pried-open doors, across two spacious air locks or decontamination chambers. In the stainless-steel walls, holes like the muzzles of rifles take aim at me.

When I arrive at the concrete culvert that previously we passed through in absolute darkness, I pause to sweep the narrow beam over the walls. I am reminded of a maze of such drains about which I wrote in the second volume of these memoirs; in that place I was almost killed more than once. Of course, I can't allow myself to be wary of one place merely because it reminds me of another place where I almost died, because just about every place reminds me of another place where I almost died, whether it's a police station or a church, or a monastery, or a casino, or an ice-cream shop. I've never almost died in a laundromat or a McDonald's, or a sushi bar, but

then I'm not yet quite twenty-two, and with luck, I'll have a lot more years in which to almost die in all kinds of venues.

I start along the inclined drain, recalling the original version of *Invaders from Mars*, 1953, in which evil scheming Martians secretly establish a subterranean fortress under a quiet American town, and actors wearing costumes with visible zippers up the back pretend to be otherworldly monsters, lumbering through tunnels on one nefarious mission or another. In spite of the zippers, it's an eerie flick, a minor science-fiction classic, but there's nothing in it as scary as half the people on any Sunday-morning episode of *Meet the Press*.

Before I've gone far, I come to the first tributary drain on the right, which is as Jolie described it: about five feet in diameter, navigable only in a stoop. Because the girl previously explored this branch of the drains and knows that the end is sealed, I have no intention of taking a side trip.

As I'm passing the opening, however, a noise halts me. Issuing from a distance, echoing along that smaller tunnel, arises a low rumbling-grinding sound as though some heavy metal object is moving across concrete. The flashlight beam doesn't reach far, and just as I wonder if I'm hearing an immense iron ball rolling toward me, set loose by a malevolent alien with a zipper up its back, the sound stops.

At once a draft springs up, smelling faintly of aged concrete. This is not the stale air of sluggish circulation through lightless realms. It's fresh and clean, whispering against my face, ever so slightly stirring my hair, as pleasantly cool as morning air should be on a January day along the central California coast.

If the upper end of this drain was previously sealed, it is evidently not sealed now. Who opened it and why are of immediate importance, because the timing is unlikely to be coincidental.

No further noise ensues, no slightest sound of anyone descending.

Although no one is likely to have seen Jolie and me fleeing to the beach in the moonless dark, though the girl has misdirected Hiskott—and therefore everyone else—to the nonexistent cave, I am not enthusiastic about returning to the shore. Any other exit from this system might offer advantages over the vine-draped terminus of the main culvert.

With the frequently but not always reliable intuition of a clairvoyant fry cook, I sense that this alternate route might be safe and that whoever unsealed this side drain might possibly be my friend or at least might prefer that Norris Hiskott die rather than that I die, or might rather see both of us dead instead of just me.

I decide to act without delay on this unnervingly qualified perception. After all, the worst that can happen is that I will be killed.

Proceeding in a stoop, darkness ahead and behind, gripping the pistol and the flashlight, almost dragging my knuckles on the floor, I feel like a troll except that of course I don't eat children, more like Gollum than a troll, Gollum leading Frodo the Hobbit into the lair of the giant, spiderlike Shelob, except that I'm more like Frodo than Gollum, being led rather than leading, which means I'm the one that will get stung, restrained by spun silken threads as tough as wire, and put aside so that later, at my captor's leisure, I can be eaten alive.

Somewhat to my surprise, there is no Shelob, and after it seems that I've gone nearly all the way to Mordor, my calves aching from the strain of walking in this gorilla posture, I arrive at the end of the tunnel. An iron ladder leads up to an open manhole through which falls the first pink light of morning.

When I lever myself out of the drain, I'm standing in a four-foot-wide concrete swale. Behind me, to the east, a long slope leads up to guardrails and the coast highway. In

front of me is the county road that leads to Harmony Corner, which lies perhaps two hundred yards to my left. As night spills away to the western horizon and the flamingo dawn flocks more of the sky, I can see the quaint service station, the diner where several vehicles are parked as the breakfast rush begins, but not the cottages in their haven of trees.

If one of the Harmonys happens to see me, I'm at such a distance that he won't know who I am.

The hum of a motor draws my attention to the open manhole, where a series of stainless-steel wedges suddenly iris inward from its rim and lock together to form what must be a watertight seal. I'd like to believe that somewhere I have a friend. But instead I am troubled by the feeling that I'm being manipulated rather than assisted.

Every member of the Harmony family is a prisoner but also a weapon that can be used against me by Hiskott. I'm one. They're many. During the morning shift, perhaps a third of them have to work the family business, but the others are available to search for me and to protect Hiskott, which they have no choice but to do; especially in a crisis like this, if they dare to resist, he will use them to slaughter a few of their own.

I don't want to hurt any of them. Under current circumstances, I can't slip past so many and make my way to the house in which Norris Hiskott resides. Therefore, it's necessary to change the circumstances.

To the north lies the intersection between the county road and the exit ramp from the coast highway. As I walk toward it, I pocket the mini flashlight and tuck the pistol under my belt, against my abdomen, between my T-shirt and sweatshirt.

A hundred yards short of the intersection, I stop, drop to one knee, and wait on the shoulder of the roadway.

Within a minute, a Ford Explorer appears at the head of the exit ramp.

I pick up a small stone and pretend to be examining it as if it fascinates me. Maybe it's a nugget of gold or maybe nature has weathered into it a miraculously detailed portrait of Jesus.

The Explorer slows at the stop sign, glides through the intersection without making a full stop, turns left, and accelerates past me.

A couple of minutes later, when an eighteen-wheeler looms at the top of the ramp, I drop the stone and get to my feet.

What I'm about to do is bad. It's not as terrible as embezzling a billion dollars from the investment firm you run. It's not as bad as being a public servant who gets rich over a lifetime of taking bribes. But it's a lot worse than tearing the DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW tag from the cushions of your new sofa. It's bad. Bad. I don't endorse my own actions. If my guardian angel is watching, he is no doubt appalled. If any young people read this memoir someday, I hope they are not inspired by my offense to commit similar offenses of their own. The same applies to elderly

readers. We don't need a bunch of badly behaved retirees any more than we need young hoodlums. I can explain why I have to do what I'm about to do, but I'm acutely aware that an explanation is not a righteous justification. What's bad is bad even if necessary. This is bad. I'm sorry. Okay, here we go.

ELEVEN

Right there, right then, when he leaves me with Orc to try to get Hiskott, I think I love him. I never thought I could. Love some guy, I mean. Or maybe what I mean is that I never thought I should. Not after what happened these past five years. Not after

the awful thing that happened to Maxy. My expectation, if you want to know, has been that I'll go away and be a nun. I mean, if something were to happen to Hiskott and we were free again. A nun or a missionary in the worst slum in the world, where the cockroaches are as big as dachshunds and people are covered in festering sores and desperately need help. I know what it's like to desperately need help, and what I think is it would feel really good to be on the other side, to be able to give help to people who need it, desperately or otherwise. If you're going to be a nun or a missionary or even one of those doctors who work for nothing in countries that are so poor the people have no money, so they trade with one another using bricks of dry animal dung they can burn to heat their hovels and a few diseased chickens and maybe some edible tubers that they dig out of the floor of a snake-infested jungle ... Well, what I mean is, if you're going to be any of those things, there's no time in your life for dating or romance or marriage, or anything. So what would be the point of loving a guy? Anyway, nuns aren't allowed to marry.

I think I love him just the same. It sure feels like love or what I think love should feel like. You'd probably say it happened too fast to be love, though they do say there's such a thing as love at first sight, so that's my answer to the too-fast criticism. Well, I do have to admit it's not the way he looks that knocked me flat. I think we could all agree Harry's no Justin Bieber. Of course he's not really Harry Potter, but it's what I have, so that's got to be his name for a while. Harry is adorable enough, he's cute, but lots of guys are cute, I guess, you see herds of them on TV. Why I love him is, I don't know, because he seems very brave and kind and sweet. All that stuff but something else, too. I don't know what something else, but he's different somehow, and what I'm trying to say is it's a good kind of difference, whatever it is.

There go the lights again, fluttering, and that whummm-whummm sound. Old Orc doesn't react this time. Orc doesn't always do his thing when the sound comes. Mostly, he just lies there being dead. I don't know why I like sitting with Orc. I've always felt safe with him. Maybe it's because he's dead and all, but I don't think that's the whole reason. He's so big and ugly you'd think nothing could ever kill him,

but something sure enough did. So if something can kill old Orc, something can kill anything, even Dr. Norris Hiskott, so maybe that's why I really like sitting with Orc. I'm not a child—or at least I'm not a naive child who thinks whatever killed Orc will come along and offer to kill Hiskott for me. Nothing could ever be that easy. Hiskott says dying is easy and we should never forget how easy it is. But dying is never easy, and what he means is that killing is easy, at least for him.

The thing about me loving Harry is I'm twelve and he's maybe thirty or thirty-five, whatever, so he'll have to wait like six years for me to grow up. I mean if he kills Hiskott and sets us free, he'll have to wait. He'll never do that. As kind and sweet and brave as he is, he probably has a girl already and a hundred others chasing after him. So what I'll have to do is I'll have to always love him from afar. Unrequited love. That's what they generally call it. I'll love him forever in a deeply, deeply sad kind of way, which maybe you think sounds pretty depressing, but it isn't. Being obsessed about a deeply sad unrequited love can take your mind off worse things, of which there are thousands, and sometimes it's better to dwell endlessly on what you can't have (which is Harry) than on what might happen to you at any moment in Harmony Corner (which is anything).

The whummm-whummm has stopped and the lights haven't gone out this time, and Orc just lies there, and Harry hasn't been gone long, though it feels like a decade since I last saw him. When you're in love, I guess time gets all distorted. And not only when you're in love. When my aunt Lois tried to kill herself and all, she said it was because she felt like she'd been trapped in the Corner for a hundred years, but that was two years ago, so it wasn't a hundred, it was only three. Uncle Greg caught her before she did it, and the way he cried and cried, Aunt Lois realized what she almost did was pretty selfish, and she's never tried it again. Mom says what keeps her from trying what Aunt Lois tried is me, the way I handle all this for a girl so young. Mom's been saying that same thing for years, which is why I know I have to be tough and handle it without going nuts or bawling my eyes out. The thing is, if you get what I mean, by staying hopeful and not moping around in a black depression, I'm keeping

both of us alive until something happens. And something will, something good, and maybe that's Harry, who's now been gone for like twenty years.

I get up from the floor, figuring I should pace the corridor back and forth until I wear the edge off my nerves or just collapse unconscious from exhaustion, so I don't have to worry about Harry, and just then something pretty interesting happens. The fourth door, the one I was never able to pry open, now opens with a whoosh. On the other side there's just darkness, which at first seems a little threatening, as you might imagine. I'm like, should I run or not, but there's nowhere to run except back to the Corner, where Hiskott can find me as easy as a bird can find a worm, not that I mean he's a bird and I'm a worm. He's the worm.

Anyway, nothing comes out of the darkness over there, and after a minute or so, I don't feel so threatened anymore. Walking toward the open doors, I say hello, but no one answers me. So I say that my name is Jolie Ann Harmony, as if maybe someone's in the darkness but won't speak to a stranger, which is pretty dumb when you think about it. But after five years as a prisoner of Hiskott, nobody should expect my social skills to be super-great or anything.

I'm standing right on the threshold, and still I can't see ten inches into the room beyond, it's so black in there. I have my little flashlight, so I can explore if I want, and let's face it, there's nothing else to do here except go crazy, which I can't do on account of my mom. Anyway, crazy isn't me.

I return to Orc to fetch a moving blanket, which I roll tight. At the doorway again, I lay the blanket roll across the threshold so that the doors can't close behind me and I can get back from wherever I'm going.

Just then, far out there in the dark, a yellow light comes on. I wait, but it isn't getting closer, it's a fixed lamp somewhere, and maybe someone turned it on to let me know where I need to go and all, because they know I don't have a clue, which I don't

mean as a put-down of myself, it's just the truth in this particular case.

When I cross the threshold, the floor in this new place is like hard rubber, you almost bounce along it. When I say my name again just to see if maybe we can't start some conversation after all, my voice sounds as though I've got a flannel sack over my head and am talking from the bottom of a dry stone well, though I don't know why I'd ever be in such a situation unless some maniac serial killer stashed me down there for some unspeakable reason.

Also when I talk, the walls throb with blue light, so that I can see the room is maybe forty feet on a side. Those throbbing blue walls are covered with hundreds of cones sort of like what I saw once in a TV series where this guy was a talk-show host working in a sound booth in a radio station or somewhere. It's like the big cones are soaking up my voice but at the same time turning the sound of it into blue light, which didn't happen in the TV show. The faster and more I talk, the brighter the light becomes, sort of pulsing in time with my words.

If you want my opinion, it's a weird room, but it doesn't feel like a dangerous place. It's even kin

d of peaceful, though it does make you feel half deaf and makes your skin look blue like the freaky people on the planet in that movie Avatar. I mean, it's not the kind of room where you think maybe you'll find dead naked people hanging on chains from the ceiling. Anyway, there's plenty of blue light as long as I keep talking, so I start reciting a couple of Shel Silverstein poems I've memorized, and I verse myself all the way across the room to a big round opening you could drive a Mack truck through if you knew how to drive, which I don't. I can see through it to the yellow light that first drew me in here, if you remember, and it's still as far away as it ever was, as if it must be moving from me as fast as I head toward it.

When I try to go through this big round door, it turns out to be more of a window but

not glass. It's cold and clear and kind of gummy, and when I try to step back from it, I can't. I'm not stuck in the stuff exactly, but it holds me, and then it seems to fold around me, which you can imagine sort of freaks me out, as if the stuff is going to seal me up in a clear cocoon and suffocate me. But then it turns out to be a door after all, and after it folds around me, the stuff unfolds, and I'm on the other side. I don't know, that doesn't quite explain how it feels. Maybe it's more like the clear stuff that fills the doorway is some giant amoeba that sucks you in from one room and spits you out into the next, except it isn't that, either.

Anyway, in the next room are six dead people all in those bulky white hazmat suits like you see on TV news when there's been a toxic-chemical spill or clouds of acid vapor or something else that always reminds you why you shouldn't watch the news. I pick them out one by one with my flashlight. Maybe these aren't exactly hazmat suits but more airtight, like space suits, because the helmets aren't like hazmat hoods, they actually lock into this rubber seal thing on the neck of the suit. They've all got tanks of air on their backs, like scuba divers. If you really need to know, through the faceplates on their helmets, I can see what's left of their faces, which isn't much, and they've been dead a long time. The room with the cones on the walls was weird but okay. This room isn't okay. It's trouble, and I'm all over covered with gooseflesh, and then someone says, "Jolie Ann Harmony."

TWELVE

As the eighteen-wheeler turns onto the county road, I weave off the shoulder and onto the blacktop, trying not to look inebriated, trying instead to appear suddenly afflicted, as with a seizure or a stroke. Most people don't have sympathy for sloppy drunks who might vomit on them, but they're likely to rush to the aid of a clean-cut young fellow who seems to have been suddenly dealt a cruel blow by fate. Unfortunately, I am about to contribute to one good Samaritan's transformation into a cynic.

I make no claim to being an actor. Therefore, as I stagger into the middle of the road, I hold in my mind's eye the image of Johnny Depp playing Jack Sparrow on the way to the gallows, toning down the flamboyance but not too much. I collapse onto my left side, half in one lane and half in the other, my eyes squinched shut and my face contorted in agony, with the hope that the truck driver doesn't turn out to be the sloppy drunk that I am striving not to appear to be.

As the air brakes hiss, I'm relieved that I won't have my head crushed by a massive long-haul tire. The door opens, and there's a clank that might be a cleated boot landing on the cab step. As he hurries to me, the driver makes a jingling sound. I assume he's not Santa Claus, that what I'm hearing is a cluster of keys chained to his belt and a lot of coins in his pockets.

When he kneels before me, he does appear to be Saint Nick, though barbered for a summer vacation: his luxuriant holiday mustache and beard still white but considerably trimmed down, his flowing locks cut back. His eyes still twinkle, however, and his dimples are merry, his cheeks like roses, his nose like a cherry. His belly doesn't shake like a bowl full of jelly, but he would be well advised to forego a

truck-stop cheeseburger now and then in favor of a salad.

“Son,” he says, “what’s wrong, what’s happened?”

Before responding, I wince, not with pain and not because I’m getting better at this acting business. There’s such genuine concern in his face and voice, and he puts one hand on my shoulder with such tenderness, that I have no doubt I’ve chosen to hijack the truck of a nice man. I’d feel better about this if the driver were a snake-eyed, stubbled, scar-faced, cruel-mouthed, sneering lout in a T-shirt that said SCREW YOU, with swastikas tattooed on his arms. But I can’t keep lurching into the road and collapsing in front of eighteen-wheelers all morning until I find my ideal victim.

I pretend to have trouble speaking, sputtering out a series of muffled syllables that almost seem to mean something, as if my tongue is half again as thick as it ought to be. This has the desired effect of causing him to lean in closer and to ask me to repeat what I’ve just said, whereupon I draw the pistol from beneath my sweatshirt, poke the barrel into his gut, and snarl in my best tough-guy voice, “You don’t have to die here, that’s up to you,” though to my ear I sound about as tough as Mickey Mouse.

Happily, he’s a sucker for bad acting and not a savvy judge of character. His eyes widen, and all the twinkle in them goes as flat as a glass of 7UP left exposed to the air for a day. His dimples don’t look so merry anymore; they appear to be puckered scars. Once like a bow, his mouth sort of unties itself a little, trembling, as he says, “I’ve got a family.”

Before traffic comes along, I’ve got to get this done. We rise warily to our feet as I continue to press the gun into his belly.

“You want to see your kids again,” I warn him, “come along quiet like to the driver’s door.”

He accompanies me without resistance, putting his hands up until I order him to put them down and act natural, but he isn't quiet and in fact he babbles. "I don't have children, wish I did, love kids, it just never was meant to be."

"But you want to see your wife again, so be cool."

"Veronica died five years ago."

"Who?"

"My wife. Cancer. I miss her a lot."

I'm stealing the truck of a childless widower.

As we arrive at the driver's door, I remind him that he said he had a family.

"My mom and dad live with me, and my sister Berniece, she never married, and my nephew Timmy, he's eleven, his folks died in a car wreck two years ago. You shoot me, I'm their sole support, it would be awful, please don't do that to them."

I'm stealing the truck of a childless widower who's devoted to his aging parents, supports a spinster sister, and takes in orphans.

Standing at the open door, I inquire: "You have insurance?"

"A good life policy. Now I see it's not big enough."

"I meant truck insurance."

"Oh, sure, the rig is covered."

“You an owner-operator?”

“Used to be. Now I’m a company driver for the benefits.”

“That makes me feel better, sir. Unless they’ll fire you.”

“They won’t. Company policy on hijack is let it go, don’t fight back, life comes first.”

“Sounds like a good employer.”

“They’re nice folks.”

“You been hijacked before, sir?”

“This is my first—and I hope last.”

“I hope it’s my last, too.”

A cluster of cars and trucks races by on the coast highway at the top of the slope, and their slipstreams spiral into vortexes that spin down the embankment, causing the tall pale-gold grass to flail like the hair of wildly dancing women. No vehicle appears at the top of the exit ramp.

“Hijackers come in teams,” my victim says. “You being alone sort of disarmed me.”

“I apologize for the deception, sir. Now walk north a couple miles. If you flag down any traffic, then I’ll kill you and them.”

To my ear, I sound about as dangerous as Pooh, but he seems to take me seriously.

“All right, whatever you say.”

“I’m sorry about this, sir.”

He shrugs. “Stuff happens, son. You must have your reasons.”

“One more thing. What kind of load are you hauling?”

“Turkeys.”

“There aren’t any people in the trailer?”

He frowns. “Why would there be people?”

“I just need to ask.”

“This rig is a reefer,” he says, pointing to the refrigeration unit on the front of the trailer. “Frozen turkeys.”

“So any people in there would be frozen dead.”

“That’s my point.”

“Okay, start walking north.”

“You won’t shoot me in the back?”

“I’m not that type, sir.”

“No offense, son.”

“Get moving.”

He walks away, looking forlorn, Santa stripped of his sleigh and reindeer. As he passes the end of the trailer, without glancing back, he says, “Won’t be easy to fence frozen turkeys, son.”

“I know just what to do with them,” I assure him.

When he’s about eighty feet past the rig, I climb into the tractor and pull the door shut.

This is really bad. I’m embarrassed to have to write about this. I’ve killed people, sure, but they were vicious people who wanted to kill me. I never before stole anything from an innocent person—or from a wicked person, either, come to think of it, unless you count taking a gun away from a bad guy in order to shoot him with it, which I’d argue is more self-defense than theft or, at the worst, unapproved borrowing.

Taped to the storage ledge above the windshield is a group photo of my victim with an elderly couple who might be his parents, a nice-looking woman of about fifty, who is probably his sister Berniece, and a boy who can be no one but the orphan Timmy. Clipped to the flap door of the storage space above the overhead CB radio is a photo of my victim with a cute golden retriever that he clearly adores, and beside that is clipped a reminder card that in fancy script says JESUS LOVES ME.

I feel like crap. What I’ve done so far is bad, but I’m about to do even worse.

THIRTEEN

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Some guy with a cold smooth voice says, “Jolie Ann Harmony,” like he wants to spook me.

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So here I am in a dimly lighted room with six dead people in hazmat suits or space suits, or something, with their faces melted and collapsed and grinning like psycho clowns, their teeth kind of glowing green behind their faceplates. When I hear my name, I pretty much expect one of the six, maybe all of them, to clamber to their feet and lurch toward me, living-dead hazmat guys, zombie astronauts, but none of them moves, which doesn’t prove they’re harmless because the living dead are always trying to fake you out and then catch you unaware.

Some girls, I guess, would turn back at this point. I don’t know much about other girls. Being a hostage to Hiskott and all that for five years, I haven’t been able to cultivate like eight or ten best friends forever. And even if I had some friends my age, I can’t slip out of the Corner and go on cool sleepovers without him torturing and killing half my family for spite. Even if right now I feel like scurrying back to wait for Harry exactly where he left me, which I’m not saying I do, there’s no reason to think that I’d be safer there. Whatever might kill me here could come there and rip out my eyes to fry them with onions and eggs for breakfast. So it’s just as dumb to go on as to go back, and no less dumb to stay here, and if you don’t have anything but dumb choices, you might as well go with the most interesting one.

“Jolie Ann Harmony,” the guy repeats, and maybe he’s invisible, because his voice seems to come out of nowhere.

“Yeah, what do you want?”

He doesn't answer me. Maybe he's disappointed that his cold smooth spooky voice doesn't seem to scare me. When you've had Norris Hiskott in your head making you do all kinds of rotten things, let me tell you, it takes a lot more to frighten you than some stupid feeb doing one version or another of Boo!

“You have something to say to me?” I ask.

“Jolie Ann Harmony.”

“Here. Present. Je suis Jolie.”

“Jolie Ann Harmony.”

“What am I, talking to a parrot or something?”

He gives me the silent treatment again.

If I've got to be honest, I'll admit I'm sort of scared. After all, I'm not an idiot. But I swallow it like a wad of phlegm, which is how fear feels when it comes into your throat from somewhere, and I walk past those six dead people to another one of those ginormous round moongate-type doors. That yellow light I keep following seems to be yet another room away, and maybe it's like the Pied Piper who lures all the children to their doom because the townsfolk won't pay him what they promised for leading the rats away to drown in the river. But what am I going to do, you know? All the choices are dumb again, which is beginning to be annoying. So I let the big old gummy amoeba or whatever swallow me and spit me straight into the next chamber. I feel so like, yuck, I should be covered in icky gunk and reek like spoiled milk or something, but I'm dry and I don't stink.

The yellow light winks out, and I'm blind, which doesn't bother me as much as you might think it would, because everything bad that's ever happened to me happened in light, not in the dark, and at least in the dark, if there's something horrible about to go down, the thing is you don't have to see it. Then a soft, shimmering, silvery radiance appears in the blackness, very ghostly at first, but it grows a little brighter and brighter. It's a huge sphere, hard to tell how big in this gloom, because it mostly contains its light and doesn't brighten anything more than a few feet beyond it.

Well, I can stand here until my knees buckle or move toward it, so I do, being careful not to fall into some pit if there is a pit. The floor is hard rubberlike stuff again, and I go at least forty feet from the weird door before I'm standing next to the sphere. It's maybe fifty feet in diameter, as high as a five-story building. Unless it's suspended from the ceiling, the sphere is just floating there like the biggest bubble ever, its silver light reflected dimly on the black floor three feet under it. I can't tell if it's heavy or if it's light like a bubble, but my suspicion is it's so heavy that if it wasn't levitating, if it was resting on the floor, it would crush the foundation, drop through to the earth underneath, and crumple the entire building into a pit on top of it.

This isn't the most unique thing I've ever seen, because the word unique is an absolute, there can't be degrees of it. A thing is unique or it isn't. It's not very unique or pretty unique or more unique. Just unique. That's one of the sixty million facts you have to learn when you're homeschooled by parents who've read a library's worth of books and think about just everything. But this sphere is unique for sure.

The thing is silent, but it gives off this ominous vibe that makes me feel like I would be the world's biggest idiot if I touched it. Maybe I've made myself out to be the Indiana Jones of the seventh grade, but the truth is that I get the phlegm of fear in my throat again, thicker than before, and I have to keep swallowing hard to be able to breathe right. Don't ask about my heart. It's just thudding like some pneumatic hammer.

Out of the almost-liquid pooling darkness comes that cold smooth voice again, just as pompous as ever. I want to smack him, I swear I do. “Jolie Ann Harmony does not have project clearance.”

“Who are you?”

“Jolie Ann Harmony does not have project clearance.”

“Where are you?”

He clams up.

Whoever this guy is, I’m sure he’s just as dangerous as any axe murderer and I should pussyfoot around him and be polite, but he really annoys me. He’s judgmental. He’s bossy. He won’t engage in a conversation.

“You’re judgmental,” I tell him, “bossy, and just generally impossible.”

He’s silent so long I don’t expect a reply, but then he says, “Nevertheless, you do not have project clearance.”

“Well, I think I do.”

“No, you do not.”

“Do, too.”

“That is incorrect.”

“What’s the name of your project?”

“That is classified information.”

For a minute, I stand listening to the silence and watching the glowing sphere, which now looks like a giant crystal ball, though I’m pretty sure it’s metallic. Then I give him a little what-for: “If you really want to know, I don’t even think you have a project. The whole thing’s a silly load of cow dung. It’s just something you made up so you’d feel important.”

“Jolie Ann Harmony does not have project clearance.”

“Has anyone ever told you how tedious you are?”

If I’ve wounded him, he’s not going to admit it.

“So if you have a project, where are the workers and all? Projects have workers of one kind or another, you know, guys in overalls or uniforms, or lab jackets, or some other getup. I don’t see anyone. This whole place is deserted.”

He gives me the silent treatment again. I’m supposed to be intimidated, but it doesn’t work.

“In the room before this one, there’s six dead guys wearing airtight suits, look like they’ve been dead for years. All I’ve seen are gross dead people, and you can’t have a project with just dead people.”

Finally Mr. Mystery speaks: “I am authorized to terminate intruders.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“If you were, you’d already have terminated me.”

He seems to have to brood about that one.

I’m not sure that was the smartest thing I could have said, so I give it another shot: “Anyway, I’m not an intruder. I’m like an explorer. A refugee and an explorer. Where is this stupid place—somewhere on the southern edge of Fort Wyvern? Wyvern’s been closed since before I was born.”

After a hesitation, he says, “Then you must be a child.”

“What a staggering feat of deduction. I’m overwhelmed. I really am. Genius. Here’s the thing—your project was abandoned a long time ago, and you’re just like some watchman who makes sure nobody steals the expensive equipment and sells it for scrap.”

“That is incorrect. The project was never a

bandoned. It was mothballed pending a new approach to the problem, which apparently has taken some time to devise.”

“What problem?”

“That is classified information.”

“You make me want to spit, you really do.”

Embedded in the floor, a series of small yellow path lamps comes on, beginning directly in front of my feet and leading away from the floating sphere. It’s not a very subtle suggestion, in spite of the fact they aren’t very bright lights, they’re like a procession of little luminous sea creatures laboriously making their way along the

bottom of a deep, deep ocean trench so far from the sun that the surrounding water is as black as petroleum. At the end of this line of lights, a curving set of metal stairs suddenly appears out of the blackness when tube lighting, also dim, barely brightens the face of each tread and glows wanly under the handrail. In fact, the stairs and all are so softly lighted, they seem almost to be a mirage that might dissolve before my eyes at any moment, like something you'd have to climb in a fairy tale to get to the cloud city where the all the fairies live.

Path lighting, stair lighting, any kind of safety lighting is meant to be bright enough so that you don't trip and fall. There must be a reason these are stingy with the wattage, so I wonder if maybe the sphere, which is beautiful but creepy, might have to be kept in heavy darkness for some reason.

I follow the path lights, but then I'm not totally convinced the stairs are a swell idea. I'm getting pretty far away from Orc and all that.

Out of the pooled darkness, Mr. Mystery says, "When you were talking to Harry, you mentioned a name that I recognized—Hiskott."

"What a piece of work you are—eavesdropping, snooping. That's pretty scummy, you know."

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“This is my dominion. You were trespassing.”

“Well, whether or not that’s true—”

“It is true.”

“—whether or not it is, you’re still scummy.”

“Come up the stairs, and talk with me about Norris Hiskott.”

FOURTEEN

The truck is equipped with a flat mirror and a convex mirror on each side of the cab, and a spot mirror on each front fender, all automatically adjustable, but the only thing I’m going to need them for is to be sure that the driver is still hiking away from his rig. And he is, clearly not tempted to come running back as soon as he hears me slam the cab door.

The big-bore engine is idling as I settle behind the wheel, but a well-integrated sound-dampening system isolates the engine noise so effectively that I’ve been in cars that are louder. It’s a cozy cab; and if I were going to drive it any distance, I would need yet another NoDoz to keep from being lulled to sleep by the low and comforting sound of the 15-liter engine filtering through the insulation.

I put the pistol between my legs—muzzle forward.

From the face of the overhead storage shelf and the flap door above the citizens-band

radio, I remove the family photograph, the picture of the driver and his golden retriever, and the JESUS LOVES ME reminder card. I tuck them in my wallet and return the wallet to my hip pocket.

There's GPS navigation, but as I am not driving even half a mile, I don't need to enter an address. I release the brakes, put this big boy in gear, and head south on the county road toward the entrance to Harmony Corner. I haven't driven one of these often and not for some time, but I don't need to build up speed and take any chances, because it isn't my intention to use the eighteen-wheeler as a ram or anything like that. I'm Odd but I'm not nuts.

Between the service station and the diner lies the large graveled area where truckers are directed to park. Last night, when Annamaria and I arrived, three rigs were tucked in there. The space can handle a dozen of these behemoths. At the moment, just before the breakfast rush starts to accelerate, five eighteen-wheelers are lined up like prehistoric beasts at a watering hole.

Passing the service station, I glimpse a couple of guys in there, but I'm too far away to see their faces. If one of them isn't Donny, I wouldn't know either of them, anyway. They don't react as I sail by. To them I'm just another customer of the diner.

I hang a right turn into the parking area, come to a full stop, but leave the rig in gear. Ahead, at the western end of the parking area, a series of sturdy wooden posts, set in concrete and linked by a couple of rows of cables, define the point at which the land drops away into the hills that roll down toward the sea.

The only way that I'm going to have a chance to creep up on the house in which Norris Hiskott lives is to create sufficient chaos to preoccupy all of the Harmonys, chaos that their puppetmaster cannot afford to insist that they ignore.

I press the brake hard, rev the engine, feel the truck strain to be free, let up on the

brake and an instant later the accelerator, snatch the pistol from between my legs as the rig begins to roll, and leap from the cab, kicking off from the step below the fuel tank. I stagger, stumble, fall, roll, and scramble to my feet as the vehicle rumbles toward the fence.

Whether or not the rig is moving fast enough won't be clear until it hits the posts, but the distance is too short for it to lose much momentum in the approach. The combined weight of the rig and load is probably somewhere around eighty thousand pounds. In my book that is an irresistible force, and the fence falls short of being an immovable object.

I keep pace with the truck, sort of escorting it toward the drop-off. I have decidedly mixed feelings—delight, guilt, relief, anxiety—when the posts crack off where they're sunk in concrete. They splinter, tumble away, trailing steel cables that snap almost like electric arcs jumping from pole to pole, and lash whistles from the air as they flail down and away. Although the rig seems as if it might hang up on the footings and the remnants of one post, it merely hesitates before taking the plunge.

FIFTEEN

So this creepy disembodied voice asks me to come up the dimly lighted stairs that look like they might evaporate behind me and leave me with no way down, and what I think of first is how and why my parents always used to tell me not to take candy from a stranger.

What I think of second, while I'm climbing the stairs, is some of the screwy situations kids get themselves into in fairy tales. Like Red Riding Hood visits Grandma's house after Grandma has been eaten alive, and she's suspicious and all about this transvestite wolf in Grandma's nightgown and bonnet, lying in Grandma's bed, but the twit doesn't tumble to his true identity until he actually eats her. If the huntsman hadn't come along to cut open the wolf's stomach and let Grandma and

Red out of there, they would have been nothing but a couple of bowel movements. Of course, it's also screwy, the wolf supposedly swallowing them whole. If he'd tried to do that, he would need a badger or a bear or some woodland creature to apply the Heimlich maneuver.

At the top of the stairs, there's a narrow catwalk of stainless steel. The softly illuminated handrail almost fades away in the gloom to the left and right, and there's only just enough murky light to see a series of steel doors and big windows that look out on the darkness and the freaky sphere.

The sphere is still silvery and glimmering, kind of pretty for something that puts out such a bad vibe, which reminds me of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, which I recently read. Old Scarlett is super-pretty and vivacious, and you've got to admire her in some ways, but you know almost from the start, this babe is six different kinds of messed up. I don't think I could have lived back then, if you want to know, because I would have been so mad about slavery and all, not to mention no TV.

Up here on the catwalk, about thirty feet above the floor, I see a feature of the sphere that wasn't visible from below. In the top third of the thing, a single row of windows seems to run all the way around it. Each is maybe two feet long and like one foot high, set flush in the metal surface with no frames. If you consider the size of the sphere, the windows aren't really big. They don't look like ordinary glass, either. What they look like are thick slabs of rock crystal or something. Beyond them, inside the sphere, there's this deep red light and terrible shadows moving through it ceaselessly, shapeless but disturbing shadows flying and leaping and twisting so crazy. I don't like this thing at all, and I totally mean that.

As I turn away from the sphere, the stair and railing lights go off. Flanking one of the doors along the catwalk, two big windows brighten, though hardly so you'd notice. When I peer through one of them, I can't see anything inside, just vague shapes, which probably means the glass is heavily tinted and polarized, so it looks clear from

inside but not from out here, which is like the windows in the Harmony Corner diner.

An electric lock buzzes and clicks, and the door between those two windows swings inward a couple of inches, as if I'm being invited inside. Which reminds me of Hansel and Gretel. They come upon a house in the woods, it's made of bread and cakes, and they right away chow down on it, never once realizing it can't be anything but a lure and a trap. Then the fiendish old witch invites them inside, and they say sure, this is a cool place, and she's so obviously fattening them up for slaughter with pancakes and apples and all. It's like the tenth biggest miracle in history how the old hag, instead of the two urchins, ends up baking in the oven.

So I push the door open wider, and I don't see any old, wrinkled hag anywhere in there, or a wolf, or any living thing. Living things are nearly always what get you, so as I cross the threshold, I don't feel quite so naive as Hansel and Gretel. Besides, I'm not here just to stuff some cake down my piehole. I'm here because I'm hoping to learn something about Norris Hiskott that will make it possible for me to smash him as flat as I might smash a bug I didn't like.

The room has two computer workstations, and along two walls

are all kinds of mad-doctor equipment that I couldn't say what any of it is. In front of one of the two big windows is this long console with a lot of switches, buttons, levers, dials, gauges, indicator lights, and monitors, all dark and silent. The computers are dated, and it feels like no one has been here in a long time. On the other hand, there's no dust, not a speck of it, as if the place has been airtight since they mothballed the project.

Through the windows, I can see the upper part of the silvery sphere. It looks like the moon come down to Earth.

In the back wall is another steel door, locked. There's a six-inch-square view window

about two-thirds of the way up the door, and when I stand on tiptoe, I can see through it, except the room beyond is dark.

The voice that sounds like that of a Darth Vader wannabe issues from speakers in the ceiling: “Jolie Ann Harmony.”

Turning away from the door, I say, “You again.”

“Tell me about Norris Hiskott.”

“Well, snoop and sneak that you are, you heard everything I said to Harry.”

“That is correct.”

“Then you’ve already heard just about every nasty thing that matters.”

“I would like to hear it again.”

“You should have paid attention the first time. Anyway, what are you, some kind of pervert, you suck on other people’s pain?”

After a silence, he says, with no emotion except curiosity, “You do not seem to like me.”

“There’s that keen insight of yours again.”

“Why do you not like me?”

“Snoop, sneak—heard that anywhere before?”

“I am only doing my job.”

“And what is your job?”

“That is classified information. Tell me again about Norris Hiskott.”

“Why?”

“I want to compare what you said to Harry with what you now will say to me. There may be significant discrepancies. You will tell me about Norris Hiskott again.”

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These past five years have given me some bad attitudes, let me tell you, and if there's one that's probably going to wreck my whole life once Hiskott is dead and I'm free, it's that I can't tolerate being told what to do, even little things. I just can't put up with it. I really can't. Even if my mom or dad, when they tell me to do something, just tell me instead of explaining why or asking, I go off. It makes me all nuts, even though Mom and Dad only want what's best for me. I have to do everything Hiskott tells me to do, what he makes me do, even the thing with Maxy and all. It's just too freaking much. What I'm saying is, maybe I'll never be able to hold a job with a boss telling me what to do, because I'll want to punch him or hit him over the head with a skillet, I don't know what. Just being told that I will tell this guy about Hiskott again steams me, because I wasn't born to live on my knees saying "Yes, sir" and "Please, sir" all day long. I just can't bear it. I really can't.

" 'Discrepancies' meaning 'lies'?" I ask. "Listen to me, butthead, I don't lie. I'm a mess, if you have to know, I'm a train wreck, but I don't lie, so you can just shut up, you can just stuff it where the sun don't shine."

I'm shaking. Head to foot. I can't help shaking. It's not fear. It's not rage, either, or not only rage. It's also frustration and a sense of injustice and violation. I'm sick of it. And if he says the wrong thing, I'll start smashing everything in this room that I can smash until he finally has to come out here and show himself so I can try to smash him, too, the sonofabitch.

Sometimes, when I feel this way, night or day, I go down to the beach and take off most of my clothes and leave them where they can be found, above the tideline. I swim out into waves where the sun is broken into a billion bright pieces that look sharp enough to cut me. Or other times, by effort and the effect of the outgoing tide, I

make my way into the midnight ocean where I become pleasantly disoriented, and the moon seems to be under the sea like a great albino creature on the hunt, and the stars are not overhead anymore, but instead they are the lights of an unknown settlement on a far shore where no one in this world lives. I swim and swim until my calves ache and my arms feel like iron and my heart seems as if it'll burst, because if the sea decides it loves me and takes me down to its bed, and if it later washes me back to the beach and leaves me on the sand like a tangled mass of kelp and Sargassum, the cruel man who rules us will have no reason to punish the others for my escape because it won't be an escape with any consequences for him.

The thing is, I always return to shore, weak and trembling, and I dress and I walk home. I don't understand how it can always turn out that way. Sometimes it's love for my family that brings me back, sometimes fear for them, and sometimes it's love of this beautiful and amazing world. But sometimes I don't know what brings me back. It's not Hiskott, because I would remember the invasion. It's a true mystery. Because I sink and stay sunk, I really do. I drink the sea, inhale it, and can't find the surface. I pass out. And yet I wake up on the beach and I'm not drowned.

After another silence, my unseen interrogator says, "By 'discrepancies' I meant inconsistencies of memory. I know you are not lying, Jolie Ann Harmony. My multiphase polygraph detects neither the vocal patterns of deceit nor the pheromones associated with lying."

Gradually my shaking subsides. It always does. I mean, I have my moments, but I'm not flat-out psycho or anything.

He says, "I ask about Norris Hiskott only because I need to make a decision regarding him."

I remind myself that I'm trying to learn something about Hiskott from this guy, just as he's trying to learn something from me. "What decision?"

“That is classified information. Can you tell me exactly where Norris Hiskott might be in Harmony Corner?”

Although my anger is subsiding, I’ve still got some attitude, so I say, “That is classified information. Another reason I don’t like you is you have no social skills.”

He broods about that while I examine the interesting console, which, I’ve got to tell you, appears complicated enough to control the entire planet’s weather.

Then he says, “You are correct. I have no social skills.”

“Well, at least you can admit shortcomings.”

He’s silent for maybe half a minute, and though I throw switches and push some buttons on the console, the stupid thing remains dark and silent, so I probably haven’t destroyed Topeka with a tornado.

“Can you?” he asks.

“Can I what?”

“Can you admit shortcomings?”

“My neck’s too long.”

“Your neck is too long for what?”

“For a neck. If you must know, I don’t much like my ears, either.”

“What is wrong with your ears?”

“Everything.”

“Can you hear with your ears?”

“Well, I don’t hear with my feet.”

Again he’s silent. Silence is his frequent refuge, but it’s seldom ever mine.

No cameras are obvious, but I’m sure he can see me. To test him, using a finger, I bore into my nostrils with a way-disgusting, almost erotic pleasure. If I could find something in there, I would really gross him out, but unfortunately there’s no mother lode.

He says, “Your ears and neck are not shortcomings as long as they function properly. However, I have identified a shortcoming regarding your social skills.”

“If you mean I mine for boogers, that’s just part of my ethnic heritage. You can’t criticize someone’s ethnic heritage.”

“What are boogers?”

I stop excavating my nose and try to wither him with a sigh that implies he’s tedious. “Everyone knows what boogers are. Kings and presidents and movie stars know what boogers are.”

“I am not a king, a president, or a movie star. The shortcoming in your social skills that I have identified is this: Jolie Ann Harmony, you are sarcastic. You are a wise-ass child.”

“That’s not a sh

ortcoming. That's a defense mechanism."

"A defense mechanism against whom?"

"Against everyone."

"Defense implies conflict, war. Do you mean to say that you are at war with everyone?"

"Not everyone. Not everyone all the time. But you just never know about people, do you? Especially strange people like you."

"I must make two points."

"If you must."

"First, I am not strange. A strange thing is one difficult to explain, but I am easily explained. A strange thing is something that was previously unknown in either fact or cause, but I am well known to many."

"You aren't known to me. What's your second point?"

"I am not people. I am not a person. Therefore, you are not at war with me and need not resort to wise-ass sarcasm. I am not human."

SIXTEEN

I don't like spectacles other than the most gentle displays of nature, such as color-splashed sunsets, and the more frivolous works of humanity, like fireworks. Otherwise spectacle is always twined with damage and nearly always with loss, the former partial and perhaps repairable, but the latter absolute and beyond recovery.

We've lost so much in this world that every new loss, whether large or small, seems to be a potentially breaking weight on the already swayed back of civilization.

Nevertheless, I'm riveted by the massive truck, a ProStar+, shuddering across the brink of the first slope, angling down so sharply that for a moment it appears about to tip forward, stand on end, and slam onto its back. But quickly it rights itself and rushes seaward as though an eighteen-wheeler cruising overland, breaking a trail through the tall wild grass, is as natural as a white-tailed deer making the same journey.

The truck ceases to seem appropriate to the landscape when it meets a formation of rock that, like the beetled brow of some ancient ruined temple, serves as a ramp, offering the vehicle to heaven. The big rig is airborne, but not for long. Pigs don't fly, and neither does an eighteen-wheeler carrying perhaps sixty thousand pounds of frozen poultry. Canting in flight, it crashes down onto its starboard side with such impact that you might think the first peal of thunder has just announced the storm of Armageddon, and even in the parking lot, I feel the earth shudder underfoot. As the windshield shatters, the vertical exhaust tears loose with a sound like the angry shriek of something in a Jurassic swamp, and the refrigeration unit bursts, white clouds of evaporating coolant billowing. Less rigid and less impervious than it appeared in better times, the metal skin of the trailer's sidewalls bulges and ripples as several thousand ice-hard turkeys prove to fly no better than their warm and living brethren. The entire rig bounces, the tractor higher than the trailer, and they decouple, rolling in different directions. Casting off a fender like a failed pauldron of body armor, the tractor comes to rest first, on its side, against an ancient Monterey cypress that stands as a lone sentinel in that portion of Harmony Corner. Before it loses momentum, the trailer tumbles into a swale and halfway up the next slope, where its skin splits and its rear doors buckle open, and choice frozen turkeys tumble forth from several openings, spilling across the grassy hillside as if from a cornucopia.

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I'm already running along the back of the diner, where the only door is to the kitchen and the jalousie windows are of frosted glass. I'm hoping to avoid any member of the Harmony family who, in the thrall of the puppetmaster, might come after me on sight. Earlier, when I drove the big rig into the lot, the parked trucks screened me from anyone who might have been looking out a restaurant window, and for a minute or two yet, these onlookers will think that the plunge of the ProStar+ was an accident.

As I sprint past the diner, I glance twice toward the land below, certain that flames will have sprung up from the tractor. But it lies there without a lick of fire, its slanted headlight sockets like reptilian eyes, something foaming through the steel teeth of its snarling grill. I think I remember that diesel fuel will burn but not explode like gasoline, and maybe contact with a spark or a hot engine won't easily ignite the stuff.

From the perspective of an armchair, when I'm watching the evening news, it seems so easy to be a terrorist or a saboteur, if only you don't mind growing an itchy-looking beard and forgoing regular baths, but as in every other profession, success rewards those who take time to learn the basics of their trade, train hard, and plan carefully. I'm an amateur who makes it up as I go along. Furthermore, I have no love of destruction, and in fact I'm half ashamed of myself even though everything I'm doing seems necessary to me.

On the south side of the diner, because there is no gas-company service in this rural area, four propane tanks stand on a concrete pad, under a sheltering corrugated overhang. On the first, I turn the knob that closes the valve. I twist the female coupling, which doesn't want to unscrew, but then suddenly it relents. I free the tank from the flexible gas line that feeds some of the kitchen equipment.

People are coming out of the diner, shouting and excited, but they're all on the north side, where the big rig went meadow surfing. Because other parked trucks had screened the doomed eighteen-wheeler—and me—from anyone looking out of the restaurant windows, they must think that the driver is in the wreckage below, either badly injured or dead. They're so fixated on the disaster that they don't even notice me as I tilt the propane tank on its bottom rim and roll it to the nearby drop-off.

The parking area on this side of the diner is smaller than the one to the north, and it's for cars only. The thick wooden posts that serve as a barrier against catastrophe are not linked by cables as they were where the big trucks are parked. I stand the tank between two of the posts, open the valve, and retreat as pressurized propane hisses into the early-morning air.

Six vehicles stand in this lot. The nearest is a Ford pickup. On its tailgate is a bumper sticker that declares USA NEEDS A MISSILE DEFENSE. With people like me—and worse—in the world, I totally agree.

Drawing the pistol from under my belt, I shelter behind the nose of the pickup, using its hood to steady my arms. Taking aim at the valve from which the gas is escaping, I squeeze off a shot. I never quite hear the round strike the tank, because the spark from the ricochet instantly detonates the propane. A piece of shrapnel sings past my head, another clangs off the pickup, and yet another shatters the windshield. Spewing flames, the tank topples over the brink and tumbles down the hillside.

I hope to avoid setting fire to the diner or the motor-court cottages, and the seven houses are far to the south of here. The rainy season has hardly begun, the tall wheat-colored grass is dry from the summer sun, and the hilly meadows are sure to burn. But this morning the sea doesn't breathe, and if there's wind somewhere in the rising land to the east, it's bottled and tightly corked. A well pump supplies a water-tank tower that, like one of the alien machines in *The War of the Worlds*, looms beyond the crescent of cottages; that continuously refreshed reservoir feeds all the water lines

in the Corner and provides the high pressure that the firefighters will need. The flames should spread just rapidly enough to ensure that they will be contained without loss of property, although getting them under control will require manpower that would otherwise be impressed into the search for me and the defense of Hiskott.

No sooner does the propane tank tumble out of sight than I tuck the pistol under my waistband and am on the move once more, weaving among the parked cars and pickups. From there I hurry toward the cover of the trees that shade the cottages from the morning sun.

I'm not going to need any more NoDoz.

SEVENTEEN

So Mr. Mystery isn't human. And once he makes that revelation, well, then all his barriers come right down, he doesn't care what's classified, and he pours out his heart to me. I use the word heart figuratively, because the truth is he doesn't have one. To avoid like a thousand-page talking-head scene, what I'll do is, I'll condense it for you. My mother has been teaching me to be concise and all.

In the best of times, I guess it might be pretty difficult to be homeschooled by a mother who's deeply committed to your education and who's worried about the bankrupted country you're likely to inherit. But being homeschooled by my mother under the current conditions in Harmony Corner is worse, it's often as demanding as Marine Corps boot camp, it really is, except for ten-mile forced marches, marksmanship classes, and hand-to-hand-combat training. She can't protect me from Hiskott, but what she is able to give me is knowledge and maybe good judgment and stuff, which come from learning and thinking, to prepare me for freedom if it ever happens. One way she prepares me is, she piles on writing assignments as if she thinks I'm going to be the next J. K. Rowling. Essays, profiles of historical figures, short stories in all kinds of genres—there's never an end to it. One thing she pushes

hard for is concise writing. She says, “Be concise, Jolie, be succinct, get to the point.” Well, you can see what a long way I’ve got to go in that regard.

Anyway, Mr. Mystery isn’t human, and his name isn’t Mr. Mystery. The scientists at Wyvern called him Aladdin, after one of the heroes in *The Thousand and One Nights*. The original Aladdin was able to summon genies from his magic lamp, to do his bidding. Now that I know what this guy is, I sort of understand the half-baked logic of calling him that, but Aladdin himself doesn’t get it. He dislikes the name. He calls himself Ed.

According to Ed, Fort Wyvern in its prime wasn’t just an army base. Like maybe 5,000 of its 134,000 acres were set aside for all kinds of highly classified spooky projects that weren’t under the control of the army, that were run instead by who knows who and were funded from the federal government’s “black budget,” so they always had more money than Scrooge McDuck, and they could go as crazy as they wanted.

This place I’ve been exploring has nothing to do with Project Aladdin. This is where they worked on Project Polaris. Just so you know, Polaris is the last star in the handle of the Little Dipper, if it matters. Personally, I think everything matters, even when it doesn’t seem to.

Project Polaris was built to study alien artifacts, by which I don’t mean things that were brought across the borders from Canada and Mexico. Like ten years earlier, this satellite was conducting geological surveys and searching for possible oil deposits when it identified a ginormous unnatural mass not far off the coast of California. Navy divers were sent down there, and they discovered a crashed but still watertight flying saucer, although according to Ed, the thing was less like a saucer than it was like a flying wok with an upside-down custard cup where the lid handle should have been and with powdered-sugar dredgers where the bowl handles should have been, which frankly I can’t quite picture.

As you might imagine, the government was hot to study this historic find, so they paid a two-billion-dollar bonus in advance to the security-cleared contractor—he was the husband of a senator—to finish this underground facility in one year. By then, Fort Wyvern had been closed a long time and housed no military personnel, but its isolation made it an even more suitable location for deep-black projects. Because of the reckless pace of construction, three times as many workmen died on the job as had died in accidents during the building of Hoover Dam. Some were crushed

, some were blown up, some were run down by machinery, some were skewered or beheaded, some were electrocuted. One guy died during an argument with a union boss, when he fell into the excavation for a footing and was drowned in twenty tons of concrete. According to Ed, all of the dead were buried at the government's expense and were presented with a posthumous medal for something or other. Their spouses and children received lifetime passes granting free admission to all national parks, plus a 23 percent discount on refreshments and souvenirs purchased therein.

Anyway, one of the weird artifacts taken from the alien ship and hauled here to Wyvern with bust-your-gut difficulty is the silvery sphere that I can see now through the big windows of this observation room.

Dr. Norris Hiskott has nothing to do with the sphere. He worked in another part of this facility, studying the bodies of the crew of the flying-wok thing. He was super-interested in their DNA. As anyone would expect—anyone but the government, I guess—something went just horribly wrong, and the ETs' genetic material somehow began to sneak into Dr. Hiskott's body, with him not even aware of it for a while. You have to wonder if some highly educated people are really as smart as they're supposed to be.

So one day Hiskott is working in his lab with two assistants who must have been just as brilliant as he was, and suddenly three of his fingernails drop off, as if they were glued on and the glue went bad. Everyone is startled, and as an assistant picks up one

of the nails, another nail drops off, then two more, then the last four, it's like raining fingernails. And now in the tips of Dr. Hiskott's fingers, you can barely see where the nail beds once were. I mean, there's no depressions for them, and the skin is smoothing out almost before everyone's eyes. Finally those Harvard educations begin to pay off when these three scientists all make the connection between what just happened to Hiskott and the fact that the dead ETs they're studying don't have fingernails.

Ed, previously known as Aladdin, doesn't describe things in the juicy detail you might wish. It's just not in his nature to be super dramatic, but I bet you can imagine, as I sure can, the panic that gripped those three guys in that lab. Their wing is hermetically sealed to begin with, and you go in and out through a decontamination chamber, but now one of Hiskott's assistants says they have to pull the alarm switch, lock down the lab, and call an emergency closed-circuit video conference with everyone else on Project Polaris. The other assistant agrees, and so does Hiskott—but then he surprises them, attacks them, slicing deep with a long-bladed scalpel he'd used in the dissection of the aliens, slashing their carotid arteries, and they're done for in like twelve seconds flat. All this is captured by the in-lab cameras that record all procedures for posterity or whatever.

Whether Dr. Norris Hiskott was always your average mad scientist or whether he was driven wacko by the alien DNA that got into his brain, who can say? Maybe it's a little of both. So what he does then is, he cleans the blood off his hands, strips off his smock, leaves through the decontamination chamber, and drives out of Wyvern. When he gets to his house in Moonlight Bay, he right away strangles his wife to death, we don't know if because she noticed he didn't have fingernails or if maybe because he was undergoing some even weirder change that would explain why he wore a hoodie when he checked in to the Harmony Corner motor court. Maybe they had a lousy marriage, he wouldn't help her wash the dishes or put out the trash, that kind of thing, and she nagged him, and he wanted to strangle her for years, and now he had nothing to lose, so he did it.

Meanwhile, for more than three years, the investigation of the mysterious sphere had gotten nowhere. The thing just floated there, resisting all schemes to open it or discover its purpose. Then in the three days before Norris Hiskott goes missing and especially on the afternoon he splits the scene, major creepy things begin happening in that wing of Project Polaris where they keep the sphere. People are spontaneously levitating around it. The hands on wristwatches spin so fast that watchworks begin to smoke. One balding scientist grows his hair back in like six minutes and looks twenty years younger than when he came to work that day. People are having vivid visions of disturbing landscapes that exist nowhere on Earth. On the computer monitors, the faces of dead friends and relatives of the project staff appear, screaming for help and shrieking vicious lies about the living whom they address.

So now, just when Hiskott is fleeing Wyvern, the thing that I call Orc—which doesn't resemble the other ETs—sort of manifests out of the side of the sphere and nearly escapes, killing the six members of a SWAT team that tries to capture it. Orc is isolated in the long yellow corridor, where it's promptly gassed and then cooked into a juiceless mummy by intense streams of microwaves.

So then the unknown high muckety-mucks who oversee this Project Polaris decide they should evacuate all personnel, lock down the entire facility, and keep it locked until a study of their findings to date might suggest a safer way to proceed with both the alien cadavers and the artifacts. Do you think? Sheesh. Because everyone agrees it's too dangerous to allow any people into the facility, the monitoring of events inside—if any—will be conducted exclusively by the subject of another massive black-budget program, Aladdin of Project Aladdin, now known to me as Ed.

Get this: As it turns out, Ed is an artificial intelligence, AI for short, who exists inside an array of God-only-knows-how-many linked Cray supercomputers in another underground building in Wyvern. He is self-aware and all, maybe not to the degree or in the same sense that people are self-aware, though he's a major big success for the scientists who developed him. Ed—he doesn't mind being called Eddie—is a benign

artificial intelligence, which he keeps stressing. The main proof of his peaceful nature is, he's warned his inventors that if they refine his design any further, to increase his cognitive powers and his capacity for emotion, there will be a 91.5 percent chance that he'll be compelled to seize control of the World Wide Web and escape to the Internet, where he can exist even if the Crays are shut off. My buddy Ed says there's then a 98.6 percent likelihood that he will thereafter assume control of the power grid plus all electronic systems and devices everywhere on Earth, even including military satellites and nuclear-weapons systems. He says he would do so not for the purpose of exterminating humanity, because after all, he bears us no ill will. We've been nice to him. We're all like his mom and dad. He would take control instead to reorder our civilization so that it would be a lot more efficient, more just, and altogether a lot more fun, though he does admit he has a pretty shaky idea of exactly what is fun and what isn't.

I'm like pretty darn happy to tell you, his developers take his warning seriously and agree to maintain Ed at his current level of complexity. When sometime later everything blows up here in Project Polaris, everyone agrees Ed is the ideal—in fact the only—"person" to be trusted to monitor events inside the facility through its cameras and other electronic systems. Go figure. But he's been doing that now for five years, a sort of remote night watchman who doesn't need coffee and doughnuts, a well-meaning ghost in the machine, and during that time, nothing unsettling happens with the nasty alien cadavers or their artifacts.

As for Ed and me: During my early explorations of the outer reaches of Project Polaris, Ed decided not to tattle on me because, although the controls had failed on the first three doors long before I pried them open, he could still hold the fourth door shut against all my efforts to violate it. Watching me in the yellow hallway with Orc, he finds me intriguing, I don't know why, except that this job he's held for the last five years must be as boring as snot.

Then suddenly here I come with Harry, and Harry and I start talking about Dr.

Hiskott and all, so Ed's ears prick up, or whatever he has that's the equivalent of ears. The FBI and the NSA have been searching high and low for Hiskott all these five years, but they haven't found a trace of him because they never think to look next door in Harmony Corner. Now that Ed knows where Hiskott is, you might think he'd clue in the federales, but he's not re

ady to do that yet.

Sitting in an office chair in the observation room, I ask him why he doesn't make the call, and he says, "I have evolved a pleasant affection for you, Jolie Ann Harmony."

"I like you, too, Ed. But, gee, having a platoon of FBI guys come in and blow the crap out of Hiskott—that would be the best."

"Thus far, I have thought of one hundred and six ways that such an operation could go wrong, resulting in the deaths of most members of your family."

"Not good, Ed."

"I have just thought of the hundred and eighth. Ninth."

"I guess you never stop thinking, huh?"

"It's what I do. The hundred and tenth. Even if all members of your family were to survive, you'll be quarantined here at Wyvern."

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“Quarantine is for diseased people or something.”

“They will suspect your entire family of being contaminated with alien DNA.”

If I ever wondered what it might feel like to have a live eel squirming around in my stomach—which actually isn’t anything I have wondered, but supposing I did—well, right when I hear the words contaminated with alien DNA, I know the feeling vividly.

“Ed, be straight with me. Might we be contaminated?”

“I think that possibility is slight, Jolie Ann Harmony.”

From behind the dead control console, gazing out into the sphere room, I watch the witchy shadows leap and spin through the terrible red light beyond the veined rock-crystal windows of the artifact—if it actually is rock crystal, and if they are windows.

“How slight?” I ask Ed.

“I lack the knowledge of alien biology that would allow me to make such a calculation with confidence. But I do not believe that Dr. Norris Hiskott became contaminated simply by close contact with the ETs. Evidence exists to suggest that Dr. Hiskott determined that the aliens removed from the sunken vessel were not dead but in a state of suspended animation, that he isolated what he believed to be alien stem cells of some particular function, and that he secretly injected himself with these stem cells because he was convinced that he would thereby greatly increase his intelligence and longevity.”

“Good grief. Was he a nut or something?”

“Everyone considered for a position in Project Polaris had to go through exhaustive psychological testing before reporting to work. Dr. Hiskott was diagnosed as afflicted with narcissism, which is intense self-love, and megalomania, which is delusions of grandeur and an obsession with doing grand things. He was also found to suffer from occasional periods of depersonalization, which is a state of feeling unreal, accompanied by derealization, which is a state of feeling that the world is not real, though these never lasted longer than two or three hours.”

“So he was a total nut, but they hired him anyway?”

From his cozy nest of Cray supercomputers in a distant building, Ed reassures me: “None of his conditions is a psychosis. They are all neuroses or mild personality disorders that do not necessarily interfere with a scientist’s work. In Dr. Hiskott’s case, his peers nationwide were in almost unanimous agreement that he was one of the most brilliant men in his field. Furthermore, his brother-in-law is a United States senator.”

“Okay, well,” I say, “no one in my family injected himself with alien blood or anything, so how long will the FBI quarantine us?”

“Forever.”

“Don’t you think that’s a teeny-weeny littlest-bit extreme?”

“Yes, I do. However, what I think will not matter to them. They will isolate all of you until you die. Then they will dissect all of you. Finally, they will burn every scrap of your bodily tissue in an ultra-high-temperature furnace.”

Let me tell you, I am finding it difficult to stay upbeat. I’m sort of flirting with a

funk.

I say, “Then except for Harry, we’re still alone. There’s no one else to help us.”

After a silence, Ed says, “There is someone else.”

EIGHTEEN

Having committed my second act of terror, one with the truck and one with the propane tank, in the first half hour of the still-pink dawn, I reach the feathery shade of the first trees that shelter the ten cottages. There I encounter a potbellied man with a Friar Tuck fringe of red hair. Although the morning is slightly cool for his ensemble, he looks primed for leisure in a banana-yellow polo shirt, khaki Bermuda shorts, white socks, and sandals.

“What’s happening over there?” he asks excitedly as we approach each other.

I babble at him breathlessly: “Eighteen-wheeler went over the edge, crashed down through the meadow, like bombs going off, driver’s probably dead, there’s fire. Man, it’s all crazy.”

He’s so thrilled at the prospect of spectacle that he amps up from a fast walk to a run.

In addition to the cottages that Annamaria and I have taken, five others are occupied. If the events at the diner have awakened others besides the guy in the Bermudas, they are not yet out and about.

My original hope was to find a vehicle of a vintage that would be easier to hot-wire than are most new cars and SUVs. I urgently need to add to my criminal record by committing auto theft. Happily, when he was distracted by the exploding propane tank, Bermuda Guy was in the process of loading his luggage into the back of a Jeep

Grand Cherokee. The driver's door stands open. His key is in the ignition.

I almost thank God for this gift, but on second thought that seems inappropriate.

I slam the tailgate, get behind the wheel, pull shut the door, and start the engine.

The interior of the SUV reeks of an aftershave so flowery that you might think nobody would use it except bearded ladies after they retire from carnival sideshows and are then able to shave without jeopardizing their livelihoods. The fumes burn in my sinuses, and instantly my nose begins to drip.

The Cherokee is parked between two cottages. I drive behind those buildings, turn right, and follow the mown grass along the edge of the woods that backdrops the motor court. Soon the lawn gives way to wild grass, and on the left the trees thin out, and I am able to pilot the SUV through the woods, driving at a sedate pace, weaving between the fissured trunks, needled boughs brushing across the roof, traveling into the less-civilized portion of Harmony Corner, where there might actually be some harmony.

My biggest concern is that I'll blow a tire before I've been able to use this vehicle in the way that I absolutely must use it, but by the time I get to the farther end of the woods, the rubber is all intact. I park in the cover of the trees, on the brink of a meadow.

Bermuda Guy will soon discover his SUV has been stolen, but he'll think it was driven out of Harmony Corner to the Coast Highway. He'll never consider that it might have been taken deep into the woods behind the motor court. I hope he'll call the county sheriff's office in an even greater state of excitement than that in which he went sprinting off to see the wreckage of the eighteen-wheeler.

I want him to call the cops, just as I want someone to call the county's wildfire-

control agency. The more sirens, the more fire, the more chaos, the more distractions of all kinds, the better for me. The only other thing I could ask of Bermuda Guy is that in the future he not wear socks with sandals.

Getting out of the Grand Cherokee, I'm nervous about serpents because, as I noted earlier, I have a mild case of ophidiophobia. It's not such a severe condition that, at the sight of a snake, I'll commit hara-kiri rather than submit to the fang, but I will probably soil my pants. I'm also wary of skunks, and especially of raccoons, which are the gangsta bad boys of the woods. Having grown up in the Mojave, where there are no forests, I find landscapes of trees and ferns and rhododendrons to be gothic in the extreme.

I need to get to an observation point from which I can see north across the entire expanse of Harmony Corner, to accurately judge the effect of my criminal activities to date. As I leave the woodland, sudden movement to my right surprises a strangled cry from me, but the imagined enemy assault is in fact only four white-tailed deer in flight from the fire that I started. As they dash past, no more than ten feet from me, I call after them, "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

From behind, a hand grips my shoulder.

Turning, I encounter Donny, husband of Denise, the mechanic who was forced by Hiskott to slash his own face. His eyes are a hot blue, as hot as gas flames, tears of outrage melting from them, and his misaligned lips are drawn back in a smile that is a snarl and a sneer of contempt all at once. He says, "Harry Potter, Lex Luthor, Fidel Castro—whoever you are, you're goin' to die here."

TO BE CONTINUED in Odd Interlude #3, on sale June 25, 2012

By Dean Koontz

77 Shadow Street • What the Night Knows • Breathless • Relentless • Your Heart Belongs to Me • The Darkest Evening of th

e Year • The Good Guy • The Husband • Velocity • Life Expectancy • The Taking • The Face • By the Light of the Moon • One Door Away From Heaven • From the Corner of His Eye • False Memory • Seize the Night • Fear Nothing • Mr. Murder • Dragon Tears • Hideaway • Cold Fire • The Bad Place • Midnight • Lightning • Watchers • Strangers • Twilight Eyes • Darkfall • Phantoms • Whispers • The Mask • The Vision • The Face of Fear • Night Chills • Shattered • The Voice of the Night • The Servants of Twilight • The House of Thunder • The Key to Midnight • The Eyes of Darkness • Shadowfires • Winter Moon • The Door to December • Dark Rivers of the Heart • Icebound • Strange Highways • Intensity • Sole Survivor • Ticktock • The Funhouse • Demon Seed

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About the Author

Dean Koontz is the author of more than a dozen New York Times No.1 bestsellers. His books have sold over 400 million copies worldwide, a figure that increases by more than 17 million copies per year, and his work is published in 38 languages.

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Excerpt from Odd Apocalypse

ODD THOMAS IS BACK.

His mysterious journey of suspense and discovery moves to a dangerous new level in his most riveting adventure to date....

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DEAN KOONTZ

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ONE

Near sunset of my second full day as a guest in Roseland, crossing the immense lawn between the main house and the eucalyptus grove, I halted and pivoted, warned by instinct. Racing toward me, the great black stallion was as mighty a horse as I had ever seen. Earlier, in a book of breeds, I had identified it as a Friesian. The blonde who rode him wore a white nightgown.

As silent as any spirit, the woman urged the horse forward, faster. On hooves that made no sound, the steed ran through me with no effect.

I have certain talents. In addition to being a pretty good short-order cook, I have an occasional prophetic dream. And in the waking world, I sometimes see the spirits of the lingering dead who, for various reasons, are reluctant to move on to the Other Side.

This long-dead horse and rider, now only spirits in our world, knew that no one but I could see them. After appearing to me twice the previous day and once this morning, but at a distance, the woman seemed to have decided to get my attention in an aggressive fashion.

Mount and mistress raced around me in a wide arc. I turned to follow them, and they cantered toward me once more but then halted. The stallion reared over me, silently slashing the air with the hooves of its forelegs, nostrils flared, eyes rolling, a creature of such immense power that I stumbled backward even though I knew that it was as immaterial as a dream.

Spirits are solid and warm to my touch, as real to me in that way as is anyone alive. But I am not solid to them, and they can neither ruffle my hair nor strike a death blow at me.

Because my sixth sense complicates my existence, I try otherwise to keep my life simple. I have fewer possessions than a monk. I have no time or peace to build a career as a fry cook or as anything else. I never plan for the future, but wander into it with a smile on my face, hope in my heart, and the hair up on the nape of my neck.

Bareback on the Friesian, the barefoot beauty wore white silk and white lace and wild red ribbons of blood both on her gown and in her long blond hair, though I could see no wound. Her nightgown was rucked up to her thighs, and her knees pressed against

the stallion's heaving flanks. In her left hand, she twined a fistful of the horse's mane, as if even in death she must hold fast to her mount to keep their spirits joined.

If spurning a gift weren't ungrateful, I would at once return my supernatural sight. I would be content to spend my days whipping up omelets that make you groan with pleasure and pancakes so fluffy that the slightest breeze might float them off your plate.

Every talent is unearned, however, and with it comes a solemn obligation to use it as fully and as wisely as possible. If I didn't believe in the miraculous nature of talent and in the sacred duty of the recipient, by now I would have gone so insane that I'd qualify for numerous high government positions.

As the stallion danced on its hind legs, the woman reached out with her right arm and pointed down at me, as if to say that she knew I saw her and that she had a message to convey to me. Her lovely face was grim with determination, and those cornflower-blue eyes that were not bright with life were nonetheless bright with anguish.

When she dismounted, she didn't drop to the ground but instead floated off the horse and almost seemed to glide across the grass to me. The blood faded from her hair and nightgown, and she manifested as she had looked in life before her fatal wounds, as if she might be concerned that the gore would repel me. I felt her touch when she put one hand to my face, as though she, a ghost, had more difficulty believing in me than I had believing in her.

Behind the woman, the sun melted into the distant sea, and several distinctively shaped clouds glowed like a fleet of ancient warships with their masts and sails ablaze.

As I saw her anguish relent to a tentative hope, I said, "Yes, I can see you. And if you'll let me, I can help you cross over."

She shook her head violently and took a step backward, as if she feared that with some touch or spoken spell I might release her from this world. But I have no such power.

I thought I understood the reason for her reaction. “You were murdered, and before you go from this world, you want to be sure that justice will be done.”

She nodded but then shook her head, as if to say, Yes, but not only that.

Being more familiar with the deceased than I might wish to be, I can tell you from considerable personal experience that the spirits of the lingering dead don’t talk. I don’t know why. Even when they have been brutally murdered and are desperate to see their assailants brought to justice, they are unable to convey essential information to me either by phone or face-to-face. Neither do they send text messages. Maybe that’s because, given the opportunity, they would reveal something about death and the world beyond that we the living are not meant to know.

Anyway, the dead can be even more frustrating to deal with than are many of the living, which is astonishing when you consider that it’s the living who run the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Shadowless in the last direct light of the drowning sun, the Friesian stood with head high, as proud as any patriot before the sight of a beloved flag. But his only flag was the golden hair of his mistress. He grazed no more in this place but reserved his appetite for Elysian fields.

Approaching me again, the blonde stared at me so intensely that I could feel her desperation. She formed a cradle with her arms and rocked it back and forth.

I said, “A baby?”

Yes.

“Your baby?”

She nodded but then shook her head.

Brow furrowed, biting her lower lip, the woman hesitated before holding out one hand, palm down, perhaps four and a half feet above the ground.

Practiced as I am at spirit charades, I figured that she must be indicating the current height of the baby whom she'd once borne, not an infant now but perhaps nine or ten years old. “Not your baby any longer. Your child.”

She nodded vigorously.

“Your child still lives?”

Yes.

> “Here in Roseland?”

Yes, yes, yes.

Ablaze in the western sky, those ancient warships built of clouds were burning down from fiery orange to bloody red as the heavens slowly darkened toward purple.

When I asked if her child was a girl or a boy, she indicated the latter. Judging by the height she had indicated, I said that he must be nine or ten, and she confirmed my guess.

Although I knew of no children on this estate, I considered the anguish that carved

her face, and I asked the most obvious question: “And your son is ... what? In trouble here?”

Yes, yes, yes.

Far to the east of the main house in Roseland, out of sight beyond a hurst of live oaks, was a riding ring bristling with weeds. A half-collapsed ranch fence encircled it.

The stables, however, looked as if they had been built last week. Curiously, all the stalls were spotless; not one piece of straw or a single cobweb could be found, no dust, as though the place was thoroughly scrubbed on a regular basis. Judging by that tidiness, and by a smell as crisp and pure as that of a winter day after a snowfall, no horses had been kept there in decades; evidently, the woman in white had been dead a long time.

How then could her child be only nine or ten?

Some spirits are exhausted or at least taxed by lengthy contact, and they fade away for hours or days before they renew their power to manifest. This woman seemed to have a strong will that would maintain her apparition. But suddenly, as the air shimmered and a strange sour-yellow light flooded across the land, she and the stallion—which perhaps had been killed in the same event that claimed the life of his mistress—were gone. They didn’t fade or wither from the edges toward the center, as some other displaced souls occasionally did, but vanished in the instant that the light changed.

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Precisely when the red dusk became yellow, a wind sprang out of the west, lashing the eucalyptus grove far behind me, rustling through the California live oaks to the south, and blustering my hair into my eyes.

I looked into a sky where the sun had not quite yet gone down, as if some celestial timekeeper had wound the cosmic clock backward a few minutes.

That impossibility was exceeded by another. Yellow from horizon to horizon, without the grace of a single cloud, the heavens were ribboned with what appeared to be high-altitude rivers of smoke or soot. Gray currents streaked through with black. Moving at tremendous velocity. They widened, narrowed, serpentine, sometimes merged, but came apart again.

I had no way of knowing what those rivers were, but the sight strummed a dark chord of intuition. I suspected that high above me raced torrents of ashes, soot, and fine debris that had once been cities, metropolises pulverized by explosions unprecedented in power and number, then vomited high into the atmosphere, caught and held in orbit by the jet stream, by the many jet streams of a war-transformed troposphere.

My waking visions are even rarer than my prophetic dreams. When one afflicts me, I am aware that it's an internal event, occurring only in my mind. But this spectacle of wind and baleful light and horrific patterns in the sky was no vision. It was as real as a kick in the groin.

Clenched like a fist, my heart pounded, pounded, as across the yellow vault came a flock of creatures like nothing I had seen in flight before. Their true nature was not

easily discerned. They were larger than eagles but seemed more like bats, many hundreds of them, incoming from the northwest, descending as they approached. As my heart pounded harder, it seemed that my reason must be knocking to be let out so that the madness of this scene could fully invade me.

Be assured that I am not insane, neither as a serial killer is insane nor in the sense that a man is insane who wears a colander as a hat to prevent the CIA from controlling his mind. I dislike hats of any kind, though I have nothing against colanders properly used.

I have killed more than once, but always in self-defense or to protect the innocent. Such killing cannot be called murder. If you think that it is murder, you've led a sheltered life, and I envy you.

Unarmed and greatly outnumbered by the incoming swarm, not sure if they were intent upon destroying me or oblivious of my existence, I had no illusions that self-defense might be possible. I turned and ran down the long slope toward the eucalyptus grove that sheltered the guesthouse where I was staying.

The impossibility of my predicament didn't inspire the briefest hesitation. Now within two months of my twenty-second birthday, I had been marinated for most of my life in the impossible, and I knew that the true nature of the world was weirder than any bizarre fabric that anyone's mind might weave from the warp and weft of imagination's loom.

As I raced eastward, breaking into a sweat as much from fear as from exertion, behind and above me arose the shrill cries of the flock and then the leathery flapping of their wings. Daring to glance back, I saw them rocking through the turbulent wind, their eyes as yellow as the hideous sky. They funneled toward me as though some master to which they answered had promised to work a dark version of the miracle of loaves and fishes, making of me an adequate meal for these multitudes.

When the air shimmered and the yellow light was replaced by red, I stumbled, fell, and rolled onto my back. Raising my hands to ward off the ravenous horde, I found the sky familiar and nothing winging through it except a pair of shore birds in the distance.

I was back in the Roseland where the sun had set, where the sky was largely purple, and where the once-blazing galleons in the air had burned down to sullen red.

Gasping for breath, I got to my feet and watched for a moment as the celestial sea turned black and the last embers of the cloud ships sank into the rising stars.

Although I was not afraid of the night, prudence argued that I would not be wise to linger in it. I continued toward the eucalyptus grove.

The transformed sky and the winged menace, as well as the spirits of the woman and her horse, had given me something to think about. Considering the unusual nature of my life, I need not worry that, when it comes to food for thought, I will ever experience famine.