



Odd Interlude 3 (Odd Thomas 4.3)

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Fantasy, Suspense, Mystery, Horror

Description: THERE'S ROOM AT THE INN, BUT YOU MIGHT NOT GET OUT...

Odd Thomas and Annamaria need a break from the road. Nestled on a lonely stretch along the Pacific Coast, the warm lights of Harmony Corner welcome them in. The quaint roadside outpost offers everything a weary traveller desires – a cosy diner, a handy service station, a cluster of motel rooms ... and the Harmony family homestead presiding over it all.

But Odd has a bad feeling about this place. There's more to the secluded haven than meets the eye – and between life and death there is something more frightening than either. Odd has faced evil many times and he will face it again before the night is over...

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NINETEEN

In the highest meadow in the southeast quadrant of Harmony Corner, face-to-face with Donny, the mechanic who nightly feeds two possums named Wally and Wanda, my choice is kill or die. I have a pistol, he has a revolver, and the range is point-blank.

The thought of the hungry possums waiting for diner scraps that never come and then eventually waddling off in despair, the thought of Denise, Donny's fry-cook wife, being widowed by me, a fellow fry cook, and other considerations cause me to hesitate a fateful couple of seconds, which ought to be the death of me. Because his face seems to be wrenched by rage, because of what he says—"Harry Potter, Lex Luthor, Fidel Castro, whoever you are, you're goin' to die here"—I feel sure that he is possessed by Hiskott, and I almost blow a big hole in him. But his face is easy to misread because of his terrible scar, and into my hesitation, he says with some desperation, "Run. Get out of the Corner, where he can't get at you. This isn't your battle. For God's sake, run!"

Although he's no one other than Donny, at any moment he might fall under the control of Hiskott and open fire without warning. I choose not to waste time engaging in a philosophical discussion of the merits of being thy brother's and thy sister's keeper.

With one sleeve I wipe at my nose, which has been set adrip by the flowery fumes of Bermuda Guy's aftershave that lent the interior of his SUV the atmosphere of a mad perfumer's laboratory.

Matching Donny's urgency, I insist, "It is my battle. Jolie dies today if I don't fight. I'm the only one who can get close to him without his knowledge."

The thought of Jolie dying in the same brutal fashion that Maxy was murdered so distresses him that his once-torn face seems about to come apart along its inadequately stitched seam.

"But he's commanded us to search for you. And he cycles through us, readin' memories. I can't hide I've seen you—and where."

Belatedly, he realizes how dangerous it is for me if he retains his revolver. Holding the weapon by the barrel, he thrusts it toward me, and I take it with relief.

"Listen, Donny, sir, you're the one who has to get out of the Corner, beyond his reach. If he discovers where I am, through you, then he'll send the rest of the family to surround me."

Anguished, he rebels at my suggestion. "No, no, no. No, he'll torture 'em when he finds out I'm gone beyond his reach. He don't have mercy. He don't know what mercy is. He'll make 'em torture and kill each other."

"He won't have time. First he'll be searching for me. Then I'll be in that house with him."

"Just 'cause he can't control you, don't mean you'll get the bastard. You won't get him."

"I've got more advantages than you know."

"What advantages?"

I inhale sharply to staunch the nasal drip, and the inhalation becomes a reverberant snort. “No time to tell you. Please, sir, get the hell out of Harmony Corner. County road is right over there past the rail fence. You can be out in two minutes. Less. Go till you know it’s safe. Go!”

Five years of oppression and his own failed rebellion have nearly robbed him of all but perhaps the dimmest flicker of hope. Despondent, he has no energy for either resistance or flight.

I raise the revolver that he has surrendered to me, and I give him a chance to look down the barrel, to consider the potential of the bullet.

“Sir, I need that SUV, and I need more time that Hiskott doesn’t know where I am. Either you run out of his range fast as you can or I shoot you dead right now. I mean now.”

For a moment I think I’ll have to make a widow of Denise, but then Donny turns and bolts through the tall grass, as if a demon might be at his heels.

As I watch him to be sure that, under the influence of the alien other, he doesn’t turn back toward me, I can too easily imagine how his feathery hope is being crushed beneath a weight of unearned shame. His failure to defeat something more powerful than himself, and the scar that reminds him of his failure, is no reason for shame; guilt is deserved only when the effort to resist evil is never made.

Yet the human heart is disheartened by the most unreasonable self-judgments, because even when we take on giants, we too often confuse failure with fault, which I know too well. The only way back from such a bleak despondency is to shape humiliation into humility, to strive always to triumph over the darkness while never forgetting that the honor and the beauty are more in the striving than in the winning. When triumph at last comes, our efforts alone could not have won the day without

that grace which surpasses all understanding and which will, if we allow it, imbue our lives with meaning.

In the learning of that simple truth, I have come from Pico Mundo, from the worst day of my life, from the loss that was worse than losing my own life, through much trouble and tumult in various places, to this picturesque spot along the coast. In the course of that dark passage, the shame and guilt of my failure have been much diminished, and hope is brighter in my heart than once it was.

Watching Donny clamber across the split-rail fence and hurry south along the county road, as he races out of Hiskott's reach, I would like nothing more than to learn one day that he has taken the same journey of the heart that I have taken.

My sinuses weep, and my nose is a faucet. Much of the time, I find it difficult to sustain an image of myself as a man of action and a defender of the innocent.

Just as the mechanic disappears along the road, I smell smoke. The mayhem I have instigated must be evolving nicely. I need to reconnoiter.

By moving farther from the trees, I will be more easily seen, because my navy-blue sweatshirt and my jeans are in stark contrast to the sun-bleached grass around me. If someone spots me from afar I might not be recognized, but I don't dare take any chances.

Crouched low, with a .38 revolver in one hand and a pistol in the other, I scuttle through the tall grass, alert for snakes because it seems to be that kind of day. As I press forward, insects spring into flight, leaves of grass and feathertop brushing against my face bring to mind the forked and tickling tongues of serpents, and I narrowly avoid stepping in a pile of deer poop.

The meadow begins to slope, and I come to a place where I can see the descending

hills of Har

mony Corner and the sea beyond. I lie down and raise my head just high enough to study the seven Victorian houses that stand a few hundred yards below, to the west and slightly farther south of my position. If any guards are stationed around the uppermost of those residences, where Dr. Hiskott makes his lair, they are well concealed.

Perhaps three hundred yards to the north lies the demolished big rig, the detached tractor on its side beneath the Monterey cypress. Both the tractor and the tree have caught fire, after all, and flames seethe up through the branches, which across decades have been sculpted by the wind into elegant southeast-leaning forms that are reminiscent of lines of Japanese calligraphy. Whatever the wind has written over time, fire rapidly erases and disperses as oily black smoke.

People have gone down into those hills, no doubt seeking the truck driver, but at this distance it's impossible to know which of them are members of the Harmony family, under Hiskott's rule, and which are patrons of the diner. Nor am I able to get an accurate count of them. They are small figures at this remove.

The larger blaze is closer than the one consuming the cypress. The tumbling propane tank, fire gouting from the open valve, must have looked like a flamethrower in the grip of a furious poltergeist. The fire line in its wake follows a sinuous path, a leaping tossing brightness that, like an agitated dragon, wriggles down one slope and up another.

The intensity of this blaze is much greater than I anticipated. Evidently no wildfire has occurred here in a long time, and previous years of grass have died and been compacted into a dense dry sod that burns aggressively, so that it isn't the grass of a single year that fuels this tempest. The rising smoke from the conflagration is pale gray, almost white, billowing in alarming volume, rapidly forming high columns that,

in this still air, seem to support the sky.

Although I am no more a pyromaniac than I am a brain surgeon, I can't help but take some satisfaction from the scene. Besides distracting Hiskott and his army of slaves, I need to generate at least some smoke at ground level to screen my approach to the target house. Most of the white masses churn straight up from the burning turf; however, a thin, lower haze creeps downhill. Soon I should have the conditions I require.

To an uninformed observer, my grin might appear to be wicked. I congratulate myself aloud—"Fine work, bucko"—and wipe my dripping nose on a sleeve of my sweatshirt as though I am a filthy pirate preparing to plunder and destroy a seaside settlement. Sometimes, I wonder to what criminal depths I might descend if ever I went over to the dark side.

A tanker truck, half the size of an eighteen-wheeler, appears at the crest of the blacktop lane that connects the businesses to the houses below. On the white tank are two words in red—HARMONY CORNER—and I can only suppose that this is a loaded-and-ready piece of firefighting equipment, a wise precaution in a part of California where some rainy seasons produce only an occasional drizzle and where wildfires will periodically blacken the land.

From the houses, an extended-bed Dodge pickup appears, with six men from the Harmony clan seated in the cargo area. The truck is a beefed-up beauty, jacked high on large tires, and it's fitted with a V-shaped plow, currently raised. It stops on the blacktop halfway between the houses and the fire.

The guys in the back of the pickup, armed with shovels and hoes, bail out and marshal along the shoulder of the lane. The driver pulls off the pavement, lowers the big V-shaped blade, and drives into the field, plowing a firebreak toward the sea. At once the men follow the truck, hoeing away the loosened grass, spading up any

chunks that the plow didn't churn loose, creating a six- or eight-foot width of bare earth.

With no wind to chase the fire, it might spread slowly enough for the truck to make a return pass from shore to road, establishing a twelve- or sixteen-foot barrier. In this stillness, the flames will not be able to jump across a swath that wide.

Farther up the lane, the tanker truck comes to a stop. The man hanging on the back of it drops off, and two women exit the cab. The three set to work in what appears to be a much-practiced plan, and I can imagine only that the truck has a powerful pump and fire hose that will direct a quenching stream of water deep into the grassland.

One of the problems of making it up as you go along—my *modus operandi*—is that sometimes you find yourself pitted against people who have a well-considered plan and are expert at executing it.

I counsel myself that although events have turned against me, there's always a chance they will tip once more in my favor.

Then I sneeze. The scent of Bermuda Guy's aftershave lingers in the sinuses as might a skunk's malodor, the dry grass in which I lie smells of dust and chaff, and although the ground-level smoke is too thin to offer concealment, it is acrid enough to burn like the fumes of a habanero pepper in my nostrils. Explosive sneezes reduce me to a parody of a red-eyed allergy sufferer in a TV commercial for an antihistamine. I'm sure I can't be heard at any significant distance, but I put down the guns and bury my face in my hands, muffling the sound, glad that these are essentially dry sneezes.

If I were Batman, my cape would already be on fire.

Suddenly, a breeze. The grass around me shivers and flutters toward the south and east. And the breeze grows stronger. They say a blaze in the wild can generate its

own wind, but I think that has to be a big firestorm.

Surprised out of my sneezing for a moment, I see the invisible wind by its effects, as it angles through Harmony Corner from the northwest, off the sea and across the hilly meadows. The flames feed more voraciously on the grass and leap higher, and from the Monterey cypress, scabs of burning bark peel away and, airborne, carry the contagion of fire over the heads of those who fight it, infecting grass beyond them. The new smoke doesn't ascend vertically, instead rises at a shallow angle, and a soft tide rolls toward the tanker truck, toward the firebreak crew.

I am getting the chaos I wanted. The problem is, you can switch chaos on, but chaos itself is in control of the off switch.

TWENTY

Ed, once called Aladdin, is the first artificial intelligence I've ever known. Maybe if Harry can kill Hiskott and if then I live long enough to see the world become the total science-fiction theme park it seems to be headed toward, I'll probably know dozens of them one day. Let me tell you, if they're all as nice as Ed has turned out to be, that's okay with me.

So after he breaks the beastly news to me—that if the FBI ever knows where Dr. Hiskott went and what he's been doing these past five years and all, they'll quarantine my whole family forever—Ed asks me to sit at one of the workstations in the sphere-observation room. As I park my butt in the chair, the computer switches on even though I don't touch it.

Although the whole freaking government will throw my family in the slammer of all slammers, Ed says my Harry Potter, cute as he is, isn't the only one who can help us, that there is another. Well, as you can imagine, I have a need to know who that is.

“First things first,” Ed says.

On the computer screen appears a head shot of Harry in the yellow hallway where Orc lies mummified.

“You have cameras everywhere, huh?”

“Not everywhere. But wherever there is a security camera or a computer with an online link and Skype capacity, or a cell phone with a camera function, anywhere in the world, I have eyes.”

“Whoa. That’s a whack upside the head. I guess with artificial intelligence, just like with natural intelligence, there can be a way-creepy side.”

“Would you rather that I were blind, Jolie Ann Harmony?”

“Well, now I feel seriously mean. No, Ed, I don’t wish you were blind. I just hope you never watch me in the bathroom or anything.”

“Security cameras are not installed in bathrooms, and neither are computers with Skype capacity.”

“Well, I guess that’s mostly right.”

“If you take a smartphone into the bathroom, I would advise you to keep it switched off.”

“For sure.”

“I g

uarantee you, Jolie Ann Harmony, that I personally have no interest in watching human beings in bathrooms.”

“I didn’t really think you did, Ed. I’m sorry if I seemed to imply you were a pervert or something. What I was thinking was, some other artificial intelligence someday might not be as respectful as you are.”

“That is something to consider. I cannot vouch for the stability of any future artificial intelligences.”

On the computer monitor, the photo of my Harry in the yellow hallway is replaced by a different photo of him that looks like it might have been in a newspaper.

Ed says, “Harry’s real name is Odd Thomas.”

“Odd?”

“Apparently, the origin of the name is a long story. We have no time for it now.”

“How’d you learn his name?”

“I applied facial-recognition software to all the photos in the files of the California DMV but could not find him there.”

“That’s like millions of pictures. How long did that take?”

“Seven minutes. Thereafter, I searched the digitalized photo archives of the Associated Press.”

The photo goes away and some video plays, a TV news story from like eighteen months earlier, about a terrible shooting in a shopping mall in Pico Mundo, forty-one

wounded and nineteen dead. A policeman says there would have been many more dead except for the action of one brave young man, who happens to be Harry. I mean, Odd Thomas. The policeman says hundreds would have died if Odd hadn't taken down both gunmen and dealt with a truck full of explosives and all. The reporter says Odd won't talk to the press, he tells us that Odd says he didn't do anything special. Odd says anyone would have done what he did. The reporter says Odd is as shy as he is courageous, but even though I'm a kid and all, I know the right word isn't shy.

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Earlier, you might remember, I explained how I loved him because he seemed brave and kind and sweet, also because there was something else about him, something different. And here it is. I knew that he wouldn't abandon us. I knew he wouldn't just run and save himself.

Ed says, "I show you this, Jolie Ann Harmony, because in spite of all your brave and wise-ass talk, in spite of the fact that I did not detect pheromones associated with lying, I did detect pheromones associated with despair. I have developed an affection for you, and thus it pains me to know that you are on the verge of losing hope."

"Not anymore," I tell him.

Over the years, when Hiskott has entered me to live through me, there's one thing I refuse to let him know: what it feels like when I cry. My tears are mine, not his, never his. I'll save them forever rather than let the sick creep feel them hot on my cheeks or taste them at the corners of my mouth. If you really truly want to know, I've thought if I was ever free someday, I might discover I've held my tears so long that I can't cry anymore, that I'm a dry stone and nothing can ever be wrung from me. Yet now my vision blurs, and there are tears, tears of hope and happiness, although nothing's yet been won.

After a while, I remember: "Hey, Ed, you said there's someone else besides Harry ... besides Odd. Someone who can help us."

"Yes, Jolie Ann Harmony. That would be me."

TWENTY-ONE

In the Jeep Grand Cherokee once more, I am no longer sneezing. Perhaps Bermuda Guy's preferred aftershave and the grass-fire fumes happen to be two molecules that are like puzzle pieces and, locking together, neutralize each other. More likely, now that the time has come to take the plunge into Hiskott's lair, I so dread the upcoming encounter that I don't have the capacity to be annoyed by any scent or smoke. I once read that condemned men standing before firing squads, in the thrall of terror, have been observed to be oblivious of bees crawling on their faces even when the bees have stung them. One guy evidently mistook a bee sting for the killing shot and dropped dead on the spot, sparing his executioners the expense of ammunition.

Because I rarely forget anything, my brain is so packed with useless information that it constantly makes connections between bits of data that are at best tenuously linked. Sometimes I wonder if, at some critical moment, being distracted by thoughts about bee-stung condemned men will get me killed. But if you can't trust your own brain, what can you trust?

I shut off the air circulation in the Jeep to keep out as much smoke as possible, and I pilot the vehicle out of the trees, heading south across the high meadow. Visibility is down to sixty or seventy feet, except when small shifts in the direction of the breeze cause clean currents of air to open narrow lines of sight to farther points of Harmony Corner, but these close up as suddenly as they open.

Although I need the cover of smoke, this murk is thicker than I expected, forcing me to proceed slower than I would prefer—and much slower than I will need to drive a few minutes from now. Visibility rapidly declines to forty or fifty feet, and if it gets much worse, I might as well steer with my eyes closed.

Because I can't see any landmarks and because the Jeep odometer doesn't click off units of distance as short as three hundred feet, I rely on intuition when I turn the vehicle hard right and brake to a stop. I think I'm facing directly west, and I think the cluster of houses far below is slightly north of my position, so that I might be able to

come in behind them.

The difference between what I think to be true and what is true, however, could lead to disaster. The hills below offer mostly gentle slopes, but there are a few steep drop-offs. If I mistakenly drive over one, the Grand Cherokee will at least tip into a catastrophic roll. In spite of the fact that the vehicle has four-wheel drive, if it lands on its side or roof, it'll be as useless as an airplane without wings.

Under this white-gray pall, the day is darker than it would be in an equally thick fog, because sunshine doesn't refract through smoke a fraction as well as it does through mist. Instead of light finding its way obliquely into Harmony Corner, much of it bounces off the soot suspended in the gaseous plumes, bringing an early dusk upon these acres. In this gloom that creeps steadily toward darkness, in this disorder that thwarts the senses, the amorphous smoky masses surging around the Grand Cherokee seem to be figures, many human and others fantastic, legions of harried spirits on some unholy pilgrimage.

I try the headlights, but the beams bounce off the swarming masses, reducing visibility from thirty feet to ten. The fog lights are likewise useless. And in the darkening murk, I could swear that faces form out of the graying smoke to sneer and snarl at me before dissolving in the passing.

If I am to find my way to Norris Hiskott, I will have to resort to psychic magnetism, which I trust won't lead me to a cliff. I don't know what he looks like, but I have his name, and I can picture the house he's claimed as his. Concentrating on that name and summoning that image into my mind's eye, trusting in impulse and intuition, I get ready to ease up on the brake pedal and drift forward wherever my peculiar power leads me.

What happens next is not easily described. A cold draft but not a real one, the mental equivalent of a draft, the idea of a draft, blows through my mind, as if a window has

opened. Perhaps because I have been picturing the Victorian residence, I in fact see a window with sullen yellow light beyond and, in the light, a sleek silhouette that leaps toward the sill and the raised sash, eager to spring in upon me. Realizing that I have drawn to me the enemy that I hoped to be drawn toward, I slam the sash, at once turning my thoughts from Hiskott's name to Stormy Llewellyn's, instantly driving out the conjured image of the house with a memory of Stormy's face, because only she can fill my mind so completely that, in the moment of this assault, the puppeteer cannot find an entry point.

Even though I repelled Hiskott, though he did not for a second see through my eyes to obtain a solitary clue as to my position or intent, I continue to hold Stormy in mind, because the memory of her and the promise of the card from the fortune-telling machine—YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER—constitute my best defense against discouragement, as well, and against fear.

In this situation, psychic magnetism is too dangerous to employ. Denied my special gift, I am left only with my wits, which is like Robin Hood having to trade his quiver of expertly crafted arrows for a couple of rocks.

Just then, Jolie Harmony speaks to me: "Are you there, Harry Potter? This is Jolie. Are you there?"

Surprised and mystified, I am for just a moment reduced to the superstition of a remote-island primitive who, ignorant of the marvels of modern technology, can conclude only that, by the use of magic, a shaman has reduced Jolie to the size of my thumb and has transported her into the radio of the Grand Cherokee.

"Are you there, Harry?" she asks again.

"Jolie? Where—"

“Well, see, those steel doors I couldn’t pry open just opened by themselves after you left, and so now I’m in this mega-weird place in Fort Wyvern, called Project Polaris. This is where old Doc Hiskott worked, there’s this alien artifact and all, and he was dissecting dead ETs for some stupid reason, which is when everything went to hell. The doc got mixed up with alien DNA, he’s like some hybrid now. He was nuts to begin with—all right, not psychotic but a neurotic freak. He strangled his wife and all, we don’t know was it because of nagging or because he had no fingernails. But there aren’t any people here anymore, because of the mothballs, so there’s just me and Ed.”

I manage to get out, “How are you able to—”

And Jolie sails on: “What Ed is able to do, he’s able to slip into just about any wired or wireless communications thing and use it without anyone knowing. So since you’re in a Jeep Grand Cherokee, vanity license-plate number COOL DUDE, that happens to be equipped with OnStar, Ed could locate you by GPS. We know exactly where you are, and I’m talking to you by way of their satellite-communications system. Pretty wow, huh?”

r /> “But how could you know—”

“See, Ed can do like sixteen things at once. So one thing he did even while he was telling me who you really were, he checked for any 911 calls to the sheriff from customers at the Corner that might tell us are you stirring things up already. Jumpin’ jackrabbits, you don’t waste time! Some guy phones in his truck is stolen, some other guy phones in the truck goes flying—”

I’m not sure which is the most disorienting: the blinding smoke churning around the Grand Cherokee and all the world lost in it, or the foul air from the wildfire that’s making me a little dizzy, or Jolie’s excited chatter.

“—some other guy phones in his Grand Cherokee is stolen, and some other guy phones in a grass fire. So Ed is learning all this neat stuff while he’s showing me who you are, and then in like seven seconds he finds out the Jeep has OnStar. So here we are, and we want to help.”

I clear my throat and ask, “Who’s Ed?”

“Shoot, that’s right,” Jolie says, “you couldn’t know. Ed is a computer. No, wait, that’s an insult, I guess. Ed’s not just a silly computer, he’s an artificial intelligence, another big secret project here at Wyvern. He doesn’t want to take over the world and all, of course he doesn’t, he’s made that perfectly clear to everyone. So when they mothballed this Project Polaris, they put Ed in charge of watching over it, keeping it all safe. You’ll like Ed, he’s fun, he can do like twenty things at the same time.”

“I thought you said sixteen.”

“Heck, Ed’s so smart he can probably do twenty times twenty things simultaneously. Say hello, Ed.”

A low, mellow, yet slightly ominous voice says, “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Odd Thomas.”

Jolie says, “Oh, yeah, that’s another thing, Harry. I know you’re not Harry Potter. I mean, I’ve always known you weren’t Harry Potter, he isn’t real. But now I know who you really are, and you’re what I knew you would be, a hero who says he’s not a hero. I knew you would come to us one day, I always knew, but I didn’t know your name would be Odd Thomas. Now you’re here, and everything’s going to be all right.”

“Things are still a long way from being all right, Jolie.”

Although all the vents are closed and the fans are turned off, the air in the Cherokee grows dirtier by the minute.

I ask, “Ed, are you there?”

“Yes, Odd Thomas, I am here. How may I assist you?”

I decide to accept everything that Jolie tells me, because the whole story sounds too crazy to be anything but the truth.

My unusual life has taught me that the world is profoundly more complex and far stranger than most people are able—or willing—to recognize. What most people call truth is merely the surface, and under it lies a great depth of truth that they do not perceive. A large part of my time is spent coping with the spirits of the lingering dead, poltergeists, eerie creatures that I call bodachs, prophetic dreams, and all kinds of one-off moments of supernatural weirdness, as well as with horrendous human miscreants of every imaginable variety; consequently, it strikes me as refreshing, almost prosaic, to be caught up in a supernatural-free incident involving top-secret government projects, an artificial intelligence that does not want to rule the world, half-breed extraterrestrials, and the women who love—and are strangled by—them.

“Ed, is Jolie really safe where she is now?”

“Safer than she has been for many years. No harm will come to Jolie Ann Harmony in my domain.”

“If any harm does come to her in your domain, I’ll find your plug and pull it.”

“You don’t have to threaten Ed,” Jolie assures me. “There’s not a bad circuit in the guy, and that’s certified once every hour by a self-analysis program. Anyway, he can’t lie.”

“You really can’t lie, Ed?”

“My creators programmed me so that should I ever speak a single untruth, I will immediately identify what I have done by singing ‘Liar, liar, pants on fire.’ ”

“Which is kind of funny,” Jolie says, “because he doesn’t even wear pants.”

Still wary, I press Ed: “Why couldn’t a self-aware artificial intelligence evolve to the point where it could override parts of its basic program?”

After a silence, Ed replies: “Why cannot a bright and gifted young man of almost twenty-two ever quite get over the psychological pain inflicted on him so many years ago by his mentally unbalanced mother?”

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Now it's my turn to be silent.

And then there's only one possible reply. "I'm sorry that I threatened to unplug you, Ed."

"You did so with only the best of motives, Odd Thomas. Your concern for Jolie Ann Harmony is admirable, and in fact I share it."

"How did you know ... about my mother?"

"After events in Pico Mundo, there were some mentions in the media about your family, certain speculations."

"I never read any of that."

Instead of rushing past the windows, the smoke is for a moment caught in a vortex of hot air and swirls around the Grand Cherokee. I feel as if the vehicle is being levitated and spun, as it might be in a tornado, and I close my eyes.

"Ed, was it you who opened that sealed drain, so I didn't have to go back by way of the beach?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome, Odd Thomas."

“When you led me that way, did you know I’d hijack a truck?”

“I was not surprised when you did.”

“But I didn’t know I was going to do it until I climbed out of that manhole and found myself outside Harmony Corner. I made it up as I went along. So how did you know?”

“A consideration of all possibilities and an analysis of the viability of each suggested that hijacking a truck and doing what you did with it was the option most likely to help you achieve your goal. My observation of you, in your discussions with Jolie Ann Harmony, suggested to me that, in spite of your self-deprecating manner, you usually make the correct decisions in such matters.”

Jolie interprets: “I think what Ed means is you kick butt.”

Ed has a question: “Now tell me, Odd Thomas, did you take Purvis Eugene Beamer’s smartphone?”

“What? I don’t know any Purvis Beamer.”

“You are driving the vehicle that he reported stolen.”

“Oh. Bermuda Guy. No, I didn’t take his smartphone.”

“Two GPS-reporting signals related to Purvis Eugene Beamer are being emitted from the same map coordinates.”

When I open my eyes, the smoke is no longer swirling around the Jeep, merely surging past as before.

“Yeah. I see it now. His phone’s in one of the cup holders.”

“Take it and put it in a pocket. Then we will be able to remain in contact even when you have gravely damaged that vehicle.”

“How do you know I’m going to gravely damage it?”

“I have deduced your intentions, Odd Thomas.”

Jolie says, “He’s like super-smart, Oddie. In a kind of way, he was homeschooled like me, in a lab instead of a home, by scientists instead of by his mom, since he doesn’t have a real mom. But he’s humongously smarter, not because he studies harder than I do, but because he can absorb entire ginormous libraries in minutes, and because he’s never bored with anything like I am. It’s kind of sad he doesn’t have a mom and all. Don’t you think it’s sad? It’s not so sad you want to lie around all day sobbing through a thousand Kleenex, but sad enough.”

TWENTY-TWO

Ed will be my Natty Bumppo, the unlikely name of the scout in *The Last of the Mohicans*, who was also known as Hawkeye. From his electronic aerie, he will show me the way through the blinding drifts of smoke.

The Jeep Grand Cherokee with the COOL DUDE license plate is equipped not just with OnStar’s real-time voice communication, but also with GPS navigation. GPS maps include all streets, county roads, state routes, and federal highways, but if you decide to go off-road, you’re

on your own; the graphics on the monitor won’t be able to warn you about treacherous features of the open land, and the recorded, guiding voice of that businesslike yet somewhat sultry lady who provides direction will fall silent in

disapproval.

Fortunately, Ed enjoys instant access to the latest digitized surveys of the planet conducted by satellite, and therefore he knows the most minute details of the terrain in Harmony Corner, as well as in just about anywhere else you can name. He is able precisely to locate the Jeep Grand Cherokee by the identifying signal that its transponder continuously broadcasts. His voice has not a scintilla of sultriness, but I am calmed and made confident by his assurances that he can assist me in achieving my goal, which the density of the smoke has seemed to put beyond my reach.

“In the first phase of the approach,” Ed says, “drive slowly. Will you drive slowly, Odd Thomas?”

“Yes. Yes, I will, Ed.”

“You must listen closely to my instructions and follow them to the letter.”

“Of course. Yes.”

“If I were to tell you to turn the steering wheel a quarter of a revolution to the left and you turned it forty percent—”

“I would never do that.”

“—you might drive directly into a sinkhole that we are trying to avoid. Another thing, Odd Thomas—do not interrupt me.”

“I won’t, Ed.”

“You just did.”

“I won’t do it again.”

“I am not a harsh taskmaster and certainly not a tyrant.”

“I didn’t think you were, Ed.”

Jolie says, “He really doesn’t want to rule the world.”

“However,” Ed says, “if this is going to work, I must give you precise instructions, and you must follow them precisely.”

“I understand.”

“In my experience,” Ed says, “human beings frequently say that they understand, when in fact they do not understand at all.”

“But I do understand. You’ll just have to trust me, Ed.”

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“I suppose I must. However, if through no fault of mine, you drive over a cliff to your death, I will be sad.”

“If I do, I won’t blame you, Ed.”

“That will be insufficient consolation.”

The girl says, “You won’t drive over a cliff—will you, Oddie?”

“No, Jolie, I won’t. Though I might bash my head on the steering wheel until my brains come out my ears, if we don’t get started now.”

Ed is baffled. “Why would you bash your head on the steering wheel, Odd Thomas?”

“It’s just an expression of frustration, Ed. I didn’t mean it.”

“If you would bash your brains out, there is no point in our going forward with this plan.”

“I would never do such a thing, Ed. I swear.”

“I do not detect any vocal patterns of deceit.”

“Because I’m telling the truth, Ed. May we begin?”

“Drive directly forward at five miles an hour.”

Following the foregoing reminder that life often is as shot through with absurdity as it is with terror and joy, phase one of the approach to Hiskott begins.

For all that I can see, the whole world might be smouldering, its entire substance being steadily converted to gasses and soot. Maybe the smoke is less white and more gray than before, or maybe the layer of crud gathered over the Corner is so thick now that, short of going nova, the sun can't penetrate it.

In spite of the smell of burning grass, the fumes that sting my eyes, and the hot irritation in my throat, the realm through which I travel seems to be a steadily darkening sea full of stirred silt and clouds of minute plankton. As I follow Ed's directions down the hills, I feel as though I am descending into an oceanic abyss where eventually I will find myself in perfect blackness eons old, where eyeless and pressure-deformed creatures eke out a desperate living in a dark cold desolation.

I suspect that this feeling of sinking ever deeper has less to do with the formless, surging masses beyond the windows of the Jeep than with the fact that I am drawing nearer to the thing that once was Norris Hiskott. It's now a unique entity of singular malevolence, and the pressure that I sense isn't pressure at all, but instead the black-hole gravity of its evil.

Although every vent in the vehicle is tightly shut, the air seems to be increasingly polluted, and a variety of claustrophobia overcomes me, a sense of being trapped in a place where I will slowly suffocate. I sneeze once, twice, a third time.

"Gesundheit."

"Thank you, Ed."

Shortly after that exchange, he tells me to brake to a stop and informs me that I have arrived at the brink of the slope that leads down to the backyard of the residence in

which Hiskott has spent the past five years becoming ... whatever he has become. Although the murk surrounding the Jeep seems fractionally less oppressive than before, I can see nothing of the house.

Ed agrees that my original strategy and tactics are the most likely to succeed. Because he's able to consult Google Earth for a look-down on the building, he can refine my approach enough to substantially increase my chances of success.

At his suggestion, I release my safety harness long enough to pick up the pistol and the revolver from the passenger seat. I tuck them under my belt, the pistol against my abdomen, the revolver in the small of my back. I buckle up once more and lean forward, both hands on the wheel.

Monitoring the GPS transponders on various county fire-control-agency vehicles, Ed suggests that I wait another forty seconds until those trucks are about to enter Harmony Corner. Their sirens will add to the cacophony and further mask the noise I will be making. He says that sheriff's deputies are close behind.

Generally speaking, these harrowing moments in my unusual life, when I am compelled to reckless action and violence, do not thrill me, do not have any quality of positive excitement or exhilaration. They are characterized by fear that must not be allowed to ripen into incapacitating terror, by abhorrence, by consternation that is mostly an expectation of the confusion that usually arises in the thick of action, the battleground confusion that can be the death of me.

This, however, is one of those rare occasions in which I'm also exhilarated. I feel so right about the commitment of life and limb that I anticipate the pending encounter with exuberance. I might not be capable of the offhand amusement and ready quips of James Bond, but I do feel that taking it to the bad guys can be at times a lively and beguiling sport.

Over the years, I have noticed that these special moments are always in situations where I'm not struggling alone against some mortal threat, when I have the support of people whom I like and trust. Loyal companions are an unequaled grace, staunching fear before it bleeds you numb, a reliable antidote for creeping despair. This is true even when my team is comprised of a twelve-year-old girl a mile or more removed from the action and an artificial intelligence who has no body that might be shot or bludgeoned, or torn, as I might be shot, bludgeoned, and torn.

But, hey, I prefer our tomboy Jolie to Batman's Robin in those embarrassing girly tights of his, and our Ed goes a long way toward rehabilitating the image of artificial intelligences that HAL 9000 ruined more than four decades earlier.

"Fire trucks arriving," Ed alerts me. "Sirens loud, cover good, time to go."

En route, he's told me what I must do. Hold the wheel straight, drift neither left nor right. Don't deviate from a direct downhill course to the house. The land is hard-packed from much sun and little rain, and supposedly it has no significant irregularities that might jolt me off course. Even Ed, with all his resources for data and his powers of computation, can't calculate the precise speed at which I should arrive at my destination, although he advises that anything under forty miles per hour might be inadequate and anything over sixty is likely to leave me incapacitated.

When he says go, I accelerate rapidly into the blinding miasma, which races across the windshield like clouds might rush across the cockpit windows of an aircraft. Ed says the slope is long, giving me all the territory I require to build speed. The tall, dry grass, not yet on fire here, rustles under the Cherokee and swishes against its flanks, so that it sounds as if I'm racing through a shallow stream. Tires stutter on summer-baked earth that rain has not yet softened, but they have good traction. Although vibrations travel through the frame into the steering wheel, I have no trouble maintaining control.

Suddenly the false dusk relents, sunlight swells through the diminishing billows of soot and ash, and as I achieve fifty miles per hour, I am no longer blind. Here, nearer the shore, the stiff breeze angling in from the northwest pushes the smoke farther inland, leaving this most remote corner of the Corner draped only in a blue haze.

As Ed ascertained by reviewing aerial shots of the property on Google Earth, the target house, which has a large front porch, offers no porch here in back, only a patio with a trellis cover on which nothing grows. A single door most likely opens to the kitchen, and a pair of large French sliding doors probably serve the family room, which in the absence of a family is now used for God knows what purpose by the half-human Hiskott. The outdoor furniture and potted plants that might once have made a pleasant space of the patio have long previously been taken away, and nothing stands between me and those French sliders.

Because my existence is greatly complicated by my paranormal abilities, I strive always to keep the rest of my life simple, which is why I work as a fry cook, when I work at all, and which is why, when rarely I daydream of a career change, I consider only a job in shoe sales or maybe tire sales, which seems undemanding. I have few material possessions, no retirement account, and I do not own—and never have owned—a car. What I am about to do to Purvis Beamer's Jeep Grand Cherokee is confirmation enough that, even if I had the money to purchase a nice car, I would be unwise to do so, because with a vehicle of my own to sacrifice in an emergency like this, I would never steal that of another.

I'm safely harnessed. I trust—as I must—the

impact-reduction technology in contemporary vehicles, which involves the absorption of energy through the tactical and engineered collapse of certain parts of their structure. Nevertheless, approaching the patio, I slide down in the driver's seat as far as the harness will allow, to minimize the chance that I will be decapitated by something that might slam through the windshield. As the tires find the patio, I let go

of the steering wheel and cover my face with my hands, as a child might do at the brink of the first big drop in a roller-coaster track.

An instant before impact, I move my right foot from accelerator to brake pedal. The crash must be loud, but it doesn't seem so to me, because the air bag deploys, briefly enveloping me as though it is a gigantic prophylactic, muffling the sound of the collision. At the moment when the bag warmly embraces me, I jam my foot down on the brake, the wood of the French sliders cracks like a quick volley of rifle shots, tortured metal shrieks, and the windshield shatters. Fishtailing into the room, the Grand Cherokee batters through what I imagine to be sofas and chairs and other furniture, although I am not foolish enough even to hope that the Hiskott thing has just been killed while napping in a La-Z-Boy.

As the air bag deflates and as the Grand Cherokee comes to a stop, I switch off the engine. If the fuel tank has been ruptured, I want to avoid igniting a blaze that might draw the attention of the county firefighters away from the grass fire farther north in Harmony Corner.

I appear to be uninjured. In the morning, I'll probably suffer from whiplash and other pains, but now everything seems to work.

The driver's door is buckled, won't open. The passenger door still functions. As I get out of the vehicle, I draw the pistol from under my sweatshirt, reminding myself that the magazine contains only seven rounds, not ten.

The wreckage in the family room makes it difficult to know quite what the place must have been like before I arrived. But there are cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling, a mobile of moths and flies in one of them, suggesting that the spider never lived to taste the prey that was enchanted by its architecture, and everywhere is a layer of dust that couldn't have settled over everything in this first minute after the Jeep broke the doors down.

Pistol in a two-hand grip, I sweep the room left to right. No one. Nothing.

North of here, the sirens of the fire trucks groan into silence. The only sounds in the house are the ticks and creaks of the tortured Grand Cherokee cooling down, settling into ruin.

Hiskott might have expected me to attempt a break-in, but of a more conventional kind. He won't have anticipated this. But he surely knows I'm here now, and my success depends on moving quickly, before one of the family, possessed, shows up in a killing frenzy.

A glance at the windows reveals that although the air is largely clear around this house and its neighbors on the flat ground below, the rest of Harmony Corner remains socked in by churning clouds of soot and ash. The marker lights and the warning lights of the fire trucks pulse and swivel deep within that seething murk, flinging off red-and-blue apparitions that chase one another through the scudding smoke.

An archway connects the family room to a large eat-in kitchen with an island. Crumbs, stale crusts of bread, desiccated cheese rinds, dried spills of sauces, and moldering wads of unidentifiable food litter the countertops. Scores of ants crawl through the debris, but they don't scurry busily in efficient lines of march as do most ordinary ants; instead, they wander desultorily across the counters, as though they have consumed a toxin that leaves them confused and without purpose.

Piles of bones litter the filthy floor. Ham bones, beef bones, chicken bones, and others. Some have been broken as if to facilitate access to the marrow.

One of the pair of cabinet doors under the double sink has been torn off its hinges and is nowhere to be seen. From the space beyond spills a brittle drift of what appear to be dozens of rat skulls and skeletons, each sucked as clean as a turkey drumstick

provided to a starving man. Not a scrap of skin or fur remains on any of them, and not a single length of scaly tail has been discarded.

The cooktop is encrusted with charred food and filth, less like a stove than like the unholy altar of some primitive temple with a long, cruel history of grisly sacrifices. I doubt that the propane-fired burners have worked in two or three years. The assumption has to be made that everything Dr. Hiskott consumes has, for a long time, been eaten raw.

According to Jolie and her mother, Ardys, the family brings their ruler everything he demands, including a great deal of food, which I believe they leave just inside the front door. I doubt that they brought him the rats.

I have been expecting a hybrid of a man and an extraterrestrial that will be far advanced beyond the condition of a human being, as clear-eyed and formidable as it also might be strange beyond easy comprehension. This unsettling evidence seems to argue instead for devolution: if not a steep intellectual decline, at least a severe diminishment of Hiskott's ability to hold fast to any cultural norms and to repress animal compulsions.

A pantry door stands ajar, darkness beyond. Pistol still in a two-hand grip, I toe the door open wide. The inspill of pale light reveals that the shelves are bare. Not one can of vegetables or jar of fruit, or box of pasta. Sitting on the floor is a headless human skeleton. The skull rests on a shelf separate from the other bones, and a detached arm lies on the floor, one finger extended, pointed toward me as if I am expected. Neither the bones nor the floor under them are marked by the stains of decomposing flesh.

This discovery necessitates a correction to the Harmony-family history of the past five years. The skeleton is that of a child, perhaps a boy of about eight. If members of the family buried Maxy in an unmarked grave in some far corner of their property, then either the Hiskott thing ventured forth that very night to retrieve the corpse for

his larder—or the dead boy was left with him, and Hiskott fashioned for the family false memories of an interment. This final twist to the story of Maxy's already-horrific death is so unthinkable that, should I live, it will be my obligation to keep it from them. Neither Jolie nor anyone close to her must know, at least not until many years of freedom and peace have faded this part of their past as if it were a fever dream.

In this house of secrets, I feel displaced in time and space, as if, by the power of the alien presence, this land exists more on the planet of the creature's origin than here on Earth, as if I live now not less than two years after losing Stormy but dwell instead in the dark future, on the eve of the end-of-all event that will explain the history of the universe.

The downstairs hallway is like a tunnel to the afterlife in a film about near-death experiences, a shadowy length that telescopes toward a mysterious light, though the promise at the farther end is not bright or inviting, but pallid, wintry, and uncertain. A switch turns on three ceiling fixtures. The bulbs are burned out in the second and third of them.

In the fall of light, immediately to my right, a door stands open on a landing, beyond which stairs lead down into an unrelenting darkness. A stench rises from what lies below, a witches' brew of rancid fat, rotten vegetation, urine, and other foulness unknown. Something moves in that deep dankness, what might be heavy horn-heeled feet knocking and scraping along a concrete floor, and a voice issues an eerie trilling sound.

I try the switch on the landing wall, but it doesn't summon any light. I pull the door shut. There is a deadbolt, which I engage. If eventually I must go into the cellar, I will require a flashlight. Before that, I need to clear the rooms on the first two floors, and hope to survive that inspection.

I move through a dining room long unused, revealed in sunlight filtered by gauzy curtains that hang between open draperies, through a study where beevies of fat moths quail from the window sheers and flutter to darker corners as if the shadows will save them from me, and then I return to the hallway, proceeding toward the foyer and the front rooms.

I am no less afraid, but my fear is tempered now by a healthy detestation and by a conviction that my mission is somet

hing even more important than freeing the Harmony family from this curse. In some fundamental sense, I am here to perform an exorcism.

TWENTY-THREE

So here we are, inside Wyvern, and might as well be a thousand miles away from Oddie for all the help we can give him. We hear him crash into the house as planned, but right after that we lose contact with him, because the car is probably smashed up and all. Ed says the Jeep is still transmitting a signal, and so is the smartphone. He's sure that Odd is alive and well. Okay, so Ed's super-smart, but that doesn't mean he knows everything, he's not like God or anything. As you can imagine, I want him to call that phone and see if Oddie's all right, but Ed says not yet, give Oddie time to orient himself, we don't want to distract him at a critical moment.

One of our three big worries, if we can limit them to three, is that when Oddie rocketed into the house, the boom of it alerted the county firefighting crew, and that they'll rush to the house, see what Hiskott cannot afford for them to see, and lots of people will die before it's over. But Ed is monitoring the emergency-band radio traffic plus all phone and cell-phone calls from anywhere in the Corner, and he says nobody seems to have noticed. The sirens, wind, fire, and just general commotion must have provided enough cover for Oddie.

I'm half sick thinking about it, but one of our other biggest worries is that Hiskott will use someone in my family to kill Oddie or that Oddie will have to kill some people in my family when he's attacked. Either way, you know, it's like I might just die myself if that happens, or if I don't die, then something in me will die, and I won't ever be the same or want to be.

If you want to know, the third thing that's making us nuts—or making me nuts, since Ed just isn't capable of being made nuts—is thinking about those three guests of the motor court that Hiskott took into his house over the years, those loners nobody missed, and they never came out again. Ed thinks maybe crazy old Hiskott might have done something more than mind-control them. He says maybe, after that injection of alien cells and over time, Hiskott is more alien now than human, and so he was able to infect those three and turn them into something alien, too. You know, like with a vampire bite or something less stupid than a vampire bite. Ed knows everything Hiskott and his team learned about the ETs, because he has access to those files. He says it's major scarifying stuff. So whatever Oddie's got to deal with in that house, it's not a close encounter of the third kind in the cuddly Spielberg style.

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Over the past five years, I've said my best prayers every night, haven't missed a night, though I gotta admit, if it wouldn't break my mother's heart, I'd probably have stopped a year ago. I mean, praying to be free of Hiskott only makes me expect to be free soon, and then when the prayer's never answered, you feel even worse, and you wonder what's the point. I'm not criticizing God, if that's what you think, because nobody knows why God does things or how He thinks, and He's humongously smarter than any of us, even smarter than Ed. They say He works in mysterious ways, which is for sure true. What I'm saying is, maybe the whole praying business is a human idea, maybe God never asked us to do it. Yeah, all right, He wants us to like Him, and He wants us to respect Him, so we'll live right and do good. But God is good—right?—and to be really good you've got to have humility, we all know that, so then if God is the best of the best, then He's also the humblest of the humble. Right? So maybe it embarrasses Him to be praised like around the clock, to be called great and mighty all the time. And maybe it makes Him a little bit nuts the way we're always asking Him to solve our problems instead of even trying to solve them ourselves, which He made us so we could do. Anyway, so after almost giving up on prayer, and being pretty darned sure that God is too humble to sit around all day listening to us praise Him and beg Him, the funny thing is, I'm praying like crazy for Oddie. I guess I'm hopeless.

TWENTY-FOUR

As I reach the end of the downstairs hall, from behind me comes the sound of the knob rattling in the cellar door. The door is a good mahogany slab, the deadbolt thick, the hinges blackened iron. Great effort will be needed to break it down, and the noise will give me plenty of warning. The rattling stops and all is quiet.

The six-pane sidelights flanking the front door admit only a dim and wintry light into the foyer, partly because acid-etched patterns of ivy vines frost significant areas of the glass. Also, the front porch faces west, away from the fullest brightness of the morning sun. The windowsills are gray with thick dust, littered with dead gnats, dead flies, dead spiders.

To the left, a living room is overfurnished with floral-pattern chesterfields laden with decorative pillows, handsome wing chairs with footstools, curio cabinets, and several plant stands in which once-flourishing ferns now hang in brown sprays of parched fronds, the carpet under them littered with dead pinnules. Everywhere there is dust, cobwebs, stillness, and the air seems more humid toward the front of the house than in the back.

To the right of the foyer, a mahogany-paneled library offers an impressive collection of books, but they emit the odor of mildew. When I switch on the lights, a multitude of moths shiver out of the bookshelves, abandoning their feast of damp dust jacket and rotten binding cloth, by far more of them here than in the study. They swoop this way and that for a moment, agitated but without purpose.

A few take refuge on the ceiling, others settle upon a pair of club chairs upholstered in a shade of brown leather with which they blend, and the mass of them swarm toward me, past me, out of the room. Their soft bodies and softer wings flutter against my face, which I turn down and away from them, chilled by the contact to a degree that surprises me.

In the center of the library stands an antique pool table with elaborately carved legs and two carved and gilded lions as the cross supports that connect the legs. Silverfish skitter across the green-felt playing surface, disappearing into the ball pockets.

Even in the most disturbing environments, in the presence of deeply corrupt people who want nothing less than to kill me, I tend to find a vein of fun in either the rock or

the hard place between which I'm trapped. Not this time. The atmosphere in this house is pestilential, poisonous, so unwholesome that I feel as if the most dangerous thing I've ever done is breathe the air herein.

At one end of the pool table lies an object that is no less enigmatical upon close inspection than from a distance. Round but not perfectly so, about five feet in diameter, it resembles nothing so much as a giant version of the medicine ball that men used to throw to one another for exercise before health clubs became high-tech. The object is mottled several shades of gray and is grained like leather, but it has no seams or stitching, and the lacquered sheen is unlike any leather finish I have ever seen. Some of the bulbs are burned out in the chandelier above the pool table, but what light there is glimmers in the surface of this unfathomable construction much the way that moonlight plays on dark water.

My perception of the object's nature changes from one instant to the next when the surface proves to be not lacquered but wet. A bead of moisture swells out of it and trickles down the curved form to the carpet. Then something within the great ball writhes.

As I back hurriedly away, the surface of the thing is revealed to be rather like a cloak but not of cloth, of skin, which now peels up with a slick slithering sound, revealing a crouched form that in this unveiling rises with alarming alacrity to a height of almost seven feet. The limbs are jointed in ways that suggest machinery rather than bone, but this is no robot. It seems both reptilian and insectile, its flesh so tightly strung on its legs and arms that it appears withered but nonetheless strong. In the torso, in the set of the shoulders, it seems less reptilian and less insectile than human, and of course it stands erect. The gray cloaklike mass of skin falls in folds around it, less like a coat than like a cape, and its flesh is otherwise pale with muddy-yellow striations.

I would run, but I know that to turn my back will be to invite attack. Besides, everything about it speaks of speed, and it will have me before I've gone a dozen

steps.

Because of my disturbed mother and her resort to threats with firearms as a primary child-raising technique, I have all my life disliked guns, though at this moment I love the one in my hands. I hesitate to use it only because I don't yet know the full nature of my adversary, for its face remains concealed in the dark cowl that is part of its capelike garment of loose skin.

The creature lifts its hung head, the cowl peels away to settle around its neck like a rolled collar, and the face appears more human than not. Female. Greasy coils of dark hair. Features that might have been lovely before the skull elongated and the bones thickened during whatever transformation she endured at Hiskott's hand.

Here is one of the motor-court guests who was so alone in the world that she would not be missed, now a human-alien hybrid that perhaps exists for no reason but to protect and serve her master. If any of her former personality remains, any slightest degree of self-awareness and memory, what a horror her current existence must be, and how insane that kernel of her true self must have become in this monstrous prison of strange flesh and bone.

Although the beast's eyes are milky as if with cataracts, I am sure that it can see, perhaps as well in the dark as in the light. I can't look away from those eyes, and suddenly I know intuitively what the thing is about to do.

I drop and roll and spring up as, in a slithery scissoring of long and knuckled limbs, the creature crosses the distance that I have put between us and lands in the precise spot that I vacated, quicker than a cat.

As it turns to face me, I see that something extraordinary has happened to its forehead. Protruding from the center of its brow is what appears to be a tapered horn about four inches long, half an inch wide at the base but as pointed as a nail. No, not a

horn, but a hollow probe of some kind from which depends a single drop of fluid as red as blood. The droplet falls, and the segmented horn collapses into itself, backward into the skull. At the point where it retracted is a small puckered pouch of skin that I had not previously noticed.

The creature doesn't mean to kill me. I am to be converted, as was the woman, into a servant and defender of whatever Norris Hiskott has become.

TWENTY-FIVE

Again I know, I move, duck, clamber across a club chair, and the creature is where I was an instant earlier, turning toward me with a hiss of anger and frustration.

I continue moving, circling the pool table, keeping it between

us, as the few remaining moths take flight again and caper about the chandelier, their distorted shadows chasing silverfish across the green felt.

Following his hybrid rebirth, Hiskott has become arguably psychic, in the sense that he can have out-of-body experiences and invade the minds of others; therefore, this beast that serves him may have some such ability to a lesser degree. In fact, the compulsion that I feel to stare into those milky eyes suggests that an attempt is being made to cast a sort of spell and render me incapable of flight or self-defense.

Because of my gifts, this creature has no more power over me than does Norris Hiskott. But maybe its attempt to fix me in place with a psychic skewer, like a lepidopterist pinning a butterfly to a specimen board, opens a channel between us that transmits the beast's intentions to me.

Then I realize that I've missed more than one opportunity to kill the thing. Worse, I no longer have the pistol in a two-hand grip. I've allowed the muzzle to drift off

target. To a degree, I'm susceptible to the creature's unspoken suggestions, after all.

Bringing the gun up, both hands on the grip, I fail to move when my adversary does, and abruptly it looms over me, seizing my head in both bony hands, to hold me steady for the sting. It stinks of burnt matches, rotting roses. The milky eyes are two chalices of steaming anesthetic and bitter venom. A strong supple scaly tail, previously unnoticed, whips around my legs. The capelike mass of loose skin billows out and then forward to enwrap my body, as if I am soon to be a monk of its satanic order, robed and cowed and moon-eyed alike to it.

The first shot takes the beast point-blank in the chest.

Its grip on my skull only tightens. The dripping hornlike probe extrudes from its brow. It rears back its Gorgon head, the better to slam the horn through my skull, linking brain to brain.

Trapped between us, angled upward, the gun discharges, gouging a gout of flesh and splintered wedge of jawbone from the fiend's face, instantly collapsing its grin of triumph.

The hideous cape of skin slips away from me, the tail unwinds from my legs, one calloused clammy hand slides along my face, but yet the creature's head darts down to gore my brow.

Fired into that red-toothed and howling mouth, the third bullet spares me by coring the brain, shattering through the back of the head, and drilling into the ceiling. The curiously articulated legs fold this way and that, the hooked hands seem to seek a grip upon the air, and the beast drops, falls back, faceup, no luster any longer in its eyes, the cape of skin, like a mortuary shroud, draping its body.

It lies still except for the rolled collar of excess skin around its neck. Perhaps in some

postmortem reflex, that dark-gray rouleau unspools, insinuates itself between the carpet and the broken skull, and creeps across the top of the head, over the brow, and down the face, whereupon it quivers and becomes as lifeless as the visage that it covers, as though the creature had been given license to walk the Earth on the condition that in both life and death it recognize the shame of its appearance and its purpose.

From the cellar rises an inhuman cry that might be an expression of rage, although to me it is more like a lamentation, a sorrowing, woven through with bright threads of sharp anxiety. This is a cry of madness, as well, of melancholy alienation from all that might give comfort.

I could pity what mourns and cowers in the darkness below, if I didn't expect that it was another like the one I just killed and that, given the chance, it would induct me into their hive.

As the plaintive cries subside, I consider sitting and waiting for Hiskott and the third of his guards to come looking for me rather than risk searching further, when behind every closed door might wait a thief of minds and a collector of souls. But the insect-infested furniture isn't appealing, and the deeply unwholesome atmosphere will corrode courage if I linger too long.

The stench of burnt matches and rotten roses clings to me, and I feel soiled by the touch of those hands and the embrace of that cape. I would like nothing more than to wash my hands and face, but even if I dare to delay to scrub away the smell, I don't trust even the water in this place to be safe and pure.

In the foyer once more, I stand listening to the house. A pool of silence, fathoms deep, it is not stirred by any current, with not a ripple to disturb its surface.

As I climb the stairs, the treads softly complain, marking my position step by step.

But retreat is no more an option than was standing still.

Four rounds left in the pistol. Six in the revolver, which rides uncomfortably in the small of my back, cylinder pressing hard against my spine.

Even now, as I ascend from the first floor to the second, I feel as if I am descending, as if there is no up in this house, no forward or back, no sideways, only down. The strict laws of nature have not been suspended here. The strong perception of ascent as descent is either an illusion, a psychological reaction to the singular threat I face, or something similar to that condition called synesthesia, when a certain sound will be perceived as a color and a certain odor as a sound. Or maybe this phenomenon is related to Hiskott and what he has become, an effect of some aura that surrounds him. The feeling is so unsettling that I need one hand for the railing.

I reach the landing. Nothing waits on the second flight or, as far as I can see, at the head of the stairs.

Ascending, I am no longer able to look at the treads before me, because they actually appear to lead back to the first floor, even though I can tell from the flex and strain of calves and thighs that I am climbing.

Off the stairs, forward along the corridor, the floor seems to have a steep downward slope, although I know that it does not. The ceiling appears to lower, the walls tilt at queer angles, and the architecture, at least as I perceive it, becomes that of a carnival funhouse.

The purpose of this illusion, projected upon me by my psychic quarry, is not merely to confuse me and make me more vulnerable, but also to funnel me directly toward the room in which he waits. Ahead, the ceiling bends to meet the floor and block further progress, the wall to my left shifts toward me, pressing me sharply to the right, to a threshold. Beyond an open door, the ruler of Harmony Corner lies abed in a

four-poster, attended by his third servant.

The creature standing is much like the one that I encountered in the library, though what human features remain of the original motor-court guest are those of a man. The mottled-gray cloak of loose skin writhes around it as if stirred by a strong draft, though I suspect that billowing expresses its anger and anxiety.

My anxiety is no less acute. My heart beats like a stallion's hooves, my breast filled with the sound of iron shoes pounding hard-packed earth. Pouring sweat renews the stench of burnt matches and rotten roses in the alien oils on my skin and in my hair.

Hiskott, hybrid of man and monster, lies in glistening greasy knots of self-affection, in sloppy spills of slowly writhing coils that crush the mattress, a great pale snake with a man's features in an oversized head that is elongated like a serpent's skull. Of his six arms and six hands, four are clearly coextensive with the sinuous convolutions of the life form from another world that he once dissected and with the stem cells of which he hoped to much improve himself. The middle pair of arms are human, but those two hands are ceaselessly grasping, while the alien hands move languidly, stroking the air as if conducting an unseen orchestra through a song in a slow tempo.

My perception of devolution and degeneracy, which overcame me in the kitchen following the discovery of the rat skeletons, is confirmed here. This thing in the bed is neither a creature capable of traveling between stars nor the brilliant scientist who was a key figure in Project Polaris. This is genetic chaos, perhaps the worst of both species: Hiskott's troubled mind intact but further twisted by alien perspectives, cold alien desires, and alien powers; the body largely one best suited to another planet, perhaps grown freakishly immense and grotesque because the needs and hungers of two species have rendered it insatiable.

The bedroom reeks worse than the cellar in which I locked

the other servant thing. Piled in far corners are cascades of bones from all manner of animals, and the floor around the bed is littered with fresh and spoiled meat, upon both of which this Hiskott seems content to dine. The butchered beef and pork and veal, the prepared chickens and plastic trays of fish fillets were obviously provided through the family's restaurant, although nothing seems to have been cooked, as what is still not consumed is raw.

Among this disgusting buffet are also the carcasses of animals, some partly eaten: a coyote stiff and sneering, rabbits as limp as rag piles, ground squirrels, rats. Perhaps in the night, especially when the moon is waning and no one at the distant motor court is likely to glimpse a fleet nightmarish figure in the rolling meadows, the thing I killed in the library or this one here, or the one in the cellar, goes hunting for its master. I wonder that there haven't been more feasts of human flesh than only Maxy—but perhaps there have been. No one could know what hobo or coastal hiker, or what itinerant homeless person camping for the night on the beach, might have been overcome, paralyzed with venom or by a brain spiking, and dragged secretly to this chamber not to serve but to be served.

Upon catching sight of me, as I stand trembling on the threshold of this abattoir, Hiskott lifts his huge head, which must be at least three times the size of any man's head, yet is recognizably human. He opens his wide greedy mouth of ragged teeth in what appears to be a silent scream but is instead a call. The call is psychic, a command—Feed me—and I feel it pulling at me as a riptide pulls a swimmer under, into drowning depths.

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Hiskott's confidence is palpable, the kind of self-assurance that is a vicious courage, arrogance born of absolute power and of endless abuses never punished. I discover that I have moved off the threshold, into the room. After two or three steps, I halt as a great rustling noise arises and quickly swells louder behind me, and I am suddenly afraid that the servant in the cellar has gotten free and rises now at my back, to fold me in its cape.

TWENTY-SIX

Before I can look over my shoulder to glimpse my fate, the source of the loud rustling noise becomes manifest as hundreds of moths swarm into the bedroom from the hallway, seething past me, buffeting the back of my neck, my face, questing at the corners of my mouth, at my nostrils, dusting my eyelashes with their powdery substance, fluttering through my hair and away, a surging river of soft wings.

In this house, one horror breeds another, and the swarm flies straight into Hiskott's silent scream, down into his long throat, so tender that he has no need to shred them with his teeth. Still they come, hundreds more—the house is a moth farm, their grazing among the mildewed books perhaps encouraged—and I hunch my neck to prevent them from crawling under my collar. They feed the beast on the bed, and although their numbers would seem great enough to choke it, a peristaltic pulsing in the sinuous coils suggests that the insects are easily accommodated, crushed and pushed along into the winding catacombs of the serpent's stomach.

This vile spectacle so stuns me that, as the last of the swarm answers the call, I break free of Hiskott's psychic grip, and raise the pistol. The servant thing springs toward me, horn extruding from its brow. I cut it down with the last four rounds in the

magazine and throw the gun aside.

Hiskott seems unfazed that I have dispatched two of his three defenders. Having swallowed all that came to him, he preens the moth powder from his lips, from his six hands, watching me as he licks and licks. Were his tongue forked and thin, like that of a snake, it would be much less repulsive than the large, long, but human tongue that instead journeys through his many supple fingers and cleans his upturned palms.

The six arms remind me of deities like the Indian goddess Kali. Although he is wingless, there is something about him that suggests a dragon as much as a serpent. The ragged mouth of wicked teeth might give Beowulf pause. The myths and legends of many ages and kingdoms seem here combined in a single threat, a thing as self-satisfied and vain as the first of all evils that lies curled in the pit of the world.

When I draw the revolver from the small of my back, he stops licking his hands, but he does not seem alarmed. His lack of fear is unnerving, and I wish at least that he would, in all his coils, recoil. He is such a grotesque mass of thick undulations of pale scaly flesh, such a slowly writhing tangle of involutions and convolutions, spiraled and helixed, kinked and twisted, that he appears incapable of any but the most ponderous movement, surely not a fraction as quick as any ordinary snake. Therefore, his calm seems to indicate either that he is too comfortable in his long-uncontested power or that he is more lithe than I assume.

When I raise the weapon, he proves not quick but cunning. Each time that he has invaded my mind, I have at once thrown him out. For a while, the psychic call with which he attracted the moths was also effective with me, but I somehow know—as he seems to know as well—that it will not work again.

As I take two steps closer to the bed and line up the first of what I hope will be six head shots, steadying my hands and my aim with considerable effort, Hiskott throws his last trick at me, and it is his best yet. I don't know how he learned my real name,

how he discovered what wound of mine has never healed and never will. Maybe he has a way to go online, to search for the truth of me as did Jolie's new friend Ed. He does not try to crawl into my head as before but with tremendous mental power casts into my mind the most beautiful face I've ever known, Stormy Llewellyn as she lived and breathed.

I am rocked backward a step by such a vivid image of my girl flaring through my mind's eye. It seems a desecration of her memory even to think about her in this disgusting hole, but round two of his assault is worse. He imagines her as she might have looked a few days after death, with the lividity and bloat of a corpse, and he throws that picture at me, which almost drops me to my knees.

If he could move quickly, I might be dead even as my knees go weak at the sight of Stormy's face corrupted. But he is sliding off the bed with sluglike sloth, and he makes the mistake of blasting more images at me of Stormy in advanced stages of decomposition, so grievous and dispiriting that they jolt me to the realization that Stormy was cremated within a day of death. She was pure, and she was purified by fire, and nothing that feeds on the dead ever fed on her or ever will.

Six hollow-point copper-jacketed cartridges from a .38 revolver can take apart a dragon's head with finality, especially when each is fired from closer range than the one before it, the last with the muzzle pressed against the hateful skull.

That would have been the end of it, if I had but remembered that due to the fact that its nerves will fire for a while after death, a beheaded snake can still thrash as vigorously as one that is alive.

TWENTY-SEVEN

As anyone knows who has seen a headless snake lash away the ghost of life that still inhabits its mortal coils, the decapitated body seems to whip more dramatically than it

ever could have done when it was part of a complete creature. The same is true of the Hiskott-alien hybrid. In bed, he was a flaccid mass of obscene love knots, writhing as lazily as worms in cold earth; but with his brains blown out, he is the crazed colossal squid from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and he seems to be not one great length of scaly muscle but instead a nest of powerful tentacles whipping in a destructive frenzy.

The transformation occurs with the sixth and final gunshot, when his impossibly tangled body untangles with an eruption of energy that might have been stored in it for the past five years. I am swept off my feet, though not in a romantic sense, and thrown all the way back to the door by which I entered. I crash just short of the threshold, rapping my head on the hardwood floor, a blow that no doubt does more damage to the floor than to my skull, though for a moment my vision swims.

I'm seeing double for a couple of seconds, but when my vision clears, it seems that the big room is filled almost wall to wall with a furious snake seeking pieces of its shattered head to puzzle back together and live again. Great muscled coils snap the thick posts of the canopy bed as though they are made of balsa wood. Lamps fly and shatter, red brocade draperies are torn from windows to flare and fan as if the decapitated serpent is both bullfighter and bull, and those cascades of bones that slope to the ceiling in some corners are slung in every direction in rattling barrages of skeletal fragments.

Before I might be knocked unconscious by a ham bone, which seems so apt as to be inevitable, I scramble across the threshold, into the upstairs hall, and thrust to my feet.

To be certain beyond a doubt that this extraterrestrial anaconda will eventually spasm into a final stillness, as would any snake of this world, I need to bear witness. But I can do that safely from the midfloor landing of the stairs and return for visual confirmation after this furious thrashing ceases.

As I turn toward the stairs, I am more than dismayed to see the third of Hiskott's caped and horned servants ascending after having escaped the cellar. It is as quick and agile as the beast in the library, springing toward me with murderous intent, and I am without a handgun.

Just then, the headless stump of the Hiskott hybrid surges out of the bedroom, its six arms grasping blindly, like something that Francisco Goya, Hieronymus Bosch, Henry Fuseli, and Salvador Dalí might have painted in collaboration after eating too many oysters followed by a night of heavy drinking. The questing hands seize the servant thing. The serpent uncoils into the hallway and coils again around the creature it has snared, crushing the life out of it as the greedy hands tear off its head.

I retreat to the farther end of the hallway to watch the death t

hroes of Harmony Corner's tyrannical ruler. After a minute or so, the dramatic flailing subsides, the great thick length of the serpent ravel down upon itself in pale folds, like a deflated fire hose, and lies shuddering, twitching, until no trace current remains in its neural pathways.

When the creature has been completely still for five minutes, I am brave enough to approach it, although not foolish enough to make a disparaging remark about my vanquished enemy. Modern movies don't contain a lot of truth. But this one lesson I've learned from them has proved to be as true as anything in my curious life: When you stand over the dead monster and, full of bravado, make a wisecrack, the monster will rise up, not dead after all, and make a last furious assault. In half of those movies, it kills one of the few remaining survivors. As I am the only survivor present, I figure that a single wisecrack cuts in half my chances of getting out of this house alive. If I am the equivalent of Tom Cruise, I will surely exit unscathed. If I am the equivalent of Harry Dean Stanton or Paul Reiser or Wayne Knight, which I figure is far closer to the truth, then I'm well advised to keep my mouth shut and tread lightly.

I try to find places to step between the coils, but sometimes I have to step on them and clamber across them. I hold my tongue, keep my balance, and leave behind pale mounds of snake flesh that would be a feast for a roc, the giant bird of Arabian myth that eats snakes—among other things. The way events have been unfolding in the Corner, there's every reason to suppose a roc—or a flock of them—might be in the neighborhood.

As I'm pretty sure that the Jeep Grand Cherokee is not in any condition to be driven out of the house, I leave by the front door. In the distance, the smoke is lifting. Through the haze, I can see the fire trucks, streams of water arcing.

In the front yard stand Jolie's parents, Bill and Ardys Harmony, and three other people whom I don't know but who must be, I assume, members of the family. From their hopeful yet wary expressions, I can only conclude that they have felt Hiskott disconnect his open line to their minds.

As I reach the head of the steps, something in a pocket of my jeans squirms vigorously, and I cry out in alarm, because baby snakes can be as venomous as adults. Those on the lawn cry out, as well, and take a step backward. Fishing the thing from my pocket, I smile sheepishly and say, "Just the cell phone."

I take the call. It's Ed.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Some of the fields are black with veins of gray ashes, but no buildings have been lost to the fire I set. When the wind blows away the last lingering wisps of smoke, the odor of burnt things is less sour than I expect, rather like a campfire smell.

Sawhorses are placed at the entrance to the Corner, bearing hand-lettered signs that declare CLOSED 24 HOURS FOR FIRE CLEANUP.

Tomorrow, heavy equipment will come to remove the eighteen-wheeler from the meadow.

The family's tow truck has been brought down from the service station, and the Grand Cherokee has been hauled to the grove of oaks in which the three vehicles that once belonged to Hiskott's servants are hidden.

Among them, the Harmony family has six of those three-gallon emergency-supply containers of gasoline. Once filled at the station, they are lined up on the porch of the residence that Hiskott took for his own.

In the afternoon, after the breeze dies out, after we shut down the electric supply at the breaker box and cut off the propane feed, Bill Harmony and I enter the house. Starting on the top floor, we pour gasoline in strategic places, especially over the remains of the hybrids. I keep Bill out of the kitchen, so that he will not see the small skeleton in the pantry.

The lights don't work in the reeking cellar, and I choose not to descend into that gloom with a flashlight. I empty the sixth can down the steps, into that sinister darkness. The gasoline fumes are overwhelming. The house is a bomb waiting for the fuse to be lit.

The family has used its half-size tanker truck, the white rig with HARMONY CORNER in big red letters, to hose down the six houses below the one that we will burn. Refilled, it stands ready nearby to keep this new fire from spreading to the unburned fields.

We set the house alight an hour before sunset. At night, the conflagration would be more visible from the Coast Highway, and some traveler would be more likely to report it to authorities.

Annamaria and I gather with the family to watch. Thirty-six of them are present, including Jolie, who has returned from Fort Wyvern. The flames are satisfying, and I use Purvis Beamer's smartphone to send video of the blaze to Ed.

No one cheers the fire. Indeed, they watch mostly in silence, and if the atmosphere of the event is like anything else, it is most like an hour in church.

When the house is smouldering ruins and the embers have been watered down, we all gather on the beach, where picnic tables and folding chairs have been set up for dinner. The air is cool enough for sweaters and jackets, but everyone agrees that the beach is the best place for this first meal of their new freedom.

The waxing moon and many candles provide enough light, because this is only the dark of nature and not to be feared. The waves are low, breaking gently along the coast as if shushing crying children to sleep.

The stars are a grand display that lifts my heart. Considering Project Polaris, I expect those far suns and their distant worlds to seem a little threatening this night, but instead they say to me that the vast universe, like Earth itself, is a place of promise that is no less magnificent for the fact that it is also a field of contest upon which the one struggle was fought, is fought, and will be fought from the beginning of time until time is ended.

Dinner on the beach is less solemn than the vigil at the burning house, but remains a quiet celebration. Many smiles and just a little laughter. This extended family has been through great suffering and humiliation, and the way back to a normal life will not be an easy road.

These are good people, and I make new friends here. They hug a lot, and when they take my hand or lay a hand upon my shoulder, they often are reluctant to let go. But they understand intuitively that they must not embarrass me with gratitude. Although

they obviously realize that I have many secrets to keep, they don't press to know them, but seem satisfied that I should be always a mystery, as are so many things in this life.

After dinner, Jolie and Annamaria and I and the two dogs—Raphael and Boo—walk together along the beach, near the foaming surf, and the girl is quietly enraptured with everything she sees, everything she hears, everything she thinks. Now that the yoke of slavery is lifted from her and from her family, I am able to see more clearly the brilliance, the courage, and the pure heart that form the essence of her. I can imagine the woman she will become, and the world could use uncounted millions like her, though just one will make a difference.

Jolie comes to tears at the thought that we will be leaving in the morning and that we may never see one another again. That such a bond can form in but a day bewilders her, as it delights me, and she is afraid that her life, now recaptured, will prove to be marked more by parting and loss than she can bear. I am, she says, like her new brother, and brothers can't go away forever. She is a girl who feels things strongly, and though cynics might mock her for that, I never will, as it is perhaps the best of graces: to feel deeply, to care profoundly.

In my bones, I know that I am not long for this world. The life I have led and must lead brings Death and me face-to-face with such regularity that I, as imperfect a man as any other, will sooner or later fail whatever higher power it is that has sent me on this series of missions. Therefore, I can't lie to Jolie and say we will see each other again in this world.

Annamaria soothes away the girl's tears as I cannot. She says that each of us has his or her role in life, and if we know ourselves well enough to understand what that role is, we will be happy doing nothing else but what we can do best. She says that I, Odd Thomas, fully understand my role—a statement with which I might argue on some other occasion. She tells Jolie that I am one of those wanderers of legend, who goes

where he feels he must and, in the going, finds those who need him, and in finding those who need him, fulfills his destiny. This sounds more grand to me than the truth of my life, but this touch of myth enchants the girl and mellows her sadness with mystery.

Somehow, Annamaria knows that Jolie's mother, in homeschooling, assigns her many writing assignments of all kinds. She suggests that the girl write down her part of the story in which we have recently been involved and that she mail it to me, care of Ozzie Boone, my writer friend in Pico Mundo, so that when I compose my account of the events in Harmony Corner, I can include Jolie's point of view. When she hears that I have written a series of memoirs that will not be published in my lifetime, if ever, Jolie is electrified. Although she may never hold a real book of this story in her hand, only someday a copy of my manuscript, she is enchanted by the prospect—and the fact that we will continue to have a connection puts an end to her tears.

As we walk back the way we came, to rejoin the family, Annamaria says, "One thing you must remember when you're writing, Jolie. If the story you and Odd collaborate on is to be seamless, you should write just as you are, just as you talk, just as you think, and not try for some writerly voice that isn't yours. What you don't see that I do is that you and Oddie are in many ways two of a kind. You and he so love the world, in spite of all your suffering, that you are in what some might call a heightened state of consciousness. You and Oddie embrace so much with such great enthusiasm, that one thing reminds you of a dozen others, your mind is here and there and also there at the same time, but you are never scatterbrained, you are focused nonetheless. Look up the word discursive. When you write, keep that word in mind, and then your words and Oddie's will flow together. Be of the world and in the world and above the world all at once. Be you and only you, which means be you and all the people you have loved, and then Oddie will always be with you as, I know, you will always be with him."

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Annamaria doesn't seem concerned about drying my tears.

In spite of the chill, no one wants to bring the gathering to an end, but it comes to an end just the same.

Back in Cottage 7, I take a long hot shower even though I showered earlier, between leaving Hiskott's house and returning to burn it down.

Raphael stays the night with me, and Boo goes wherever it is he has to go. A good dog is a comfort. The golden retriever comforts me, and perhaps Boo comforts someone in a place that I can't imagine. I leave a lamp on, but I do not dream.

When I wake near dawn, I lie listening to Raphael snore, and I find myself considering what it means to be fallen. We are fallen in a broken world, and one thing that occurs to me is that after thousands of years, when we think of fallen angels, we think of them as we always have: busy spreading misery on Earth. But the universe in its immensity is nevertheless of a piece, and what applies at one end of it applies at the other. No doubt misery, like happiness and hope, is found throughout the stars. The alien artifacts housed in Fort Wyvern are of extraterrestrial origin, but perhaps they are at the same time part of the ancient history of humanity.

I shower again on rising, and afterward take a call from Ed. We agreed earlier that he will stay in touch with Jolie and be her secret friend, but that he will not again allow her through that last pair of steel doors, into Wyvern. We say our good-byes. His last words to me are "Live long and prosper." Mine to him are "Open the pod bay doors, HAL," and I think he laughs.

Leaving, Annamaria drives the Mercedes we have borrowed from Hutch Hutchison in Magic Beach. Along the last length of blacktop leading to the county road, thirty-six members of the Harmony family stand side by side, waiting for us, which I wish they would not have done. Jolie stands with her mother and father and her uncle Donny at the end of the line. She waves. I wave.

The Coast Highway takes us south toward what will prove to be a place called Roseland, which will be far worse than Harmony Corner in its worst days. In Roseland, I will have to put Jolie entirely out of my mind, for to think of her, in all her vulnerability, out there in this world of corruption, would perhaps paralyze me. And I have work to do.

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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 cr

oss 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.

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

“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.

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.