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Great Apes and Other Stories

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Thoreau said that, “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” The characters in the following collection of stories might be tempted to rephrase that statement to read, “in wildness is the preservation of the *criminal* world.” These stories feature wild places where the natural world often is not as dangerous as the people who seek refuge in the borderlands between wilderness and civilization.

Many crime stories take place in cities—for good reason. More people usually equates with more crime. However, anywhere that people choose to live, crime is sure to follow—crime against each other, crime against themselves, and even crime against the world they inhabit.

In “Blood and Dirt,” two brothers find themselves dependent on their native landscape for different reasons. One will have to let go, but the other will find him harder to shake loose than a cottonmouth wrapped around a cypress knee. “Wet Season” finds a man hiding in plain sight at the southern fringe of civilization, and doing a fine

job of it until his past comes looking for him. Instead of watching the last reflection of his inner wildness disappear, the protagonist of “Great Apes” decides to internalize his problems. And in “Itch: A Vampire Story,” a group of teenagers who enjoy the dark mythology of the undead learn firsthand of a dark reality in the Everglades.

These characters are often seeking to escape the hectic contemporary world of computers and cell phones, mortgages and nine-to-five jobs. What they discover is that, while unspoiled nature may be hard to find, human nature is even more difficult to escape.

Introduction

For a while after high school, my career ambition was to molest alligators for a living. I attended the University of Florida, where I studied wildlife ecology and discovered, painfully, that Jane Goodall and Steve Irwin did not represent typical wildlife scientists. I also discovered that the unfortunate reality of a career in science included a functional knowledge of the unholy duo of statistics and calculus.

Math proved to be the bane of my existence. I couldn't escape it. What I had imagined—sitting in a meadow watching bears mate or capturing crocodiles from some malarial swamp and then writing about my experience—was only fantasy, and I was lost. My grades slid. I withdrew in the middle of my third year.

I spent several months working at a restaurant on the beach before deciding to give school another try. I enrolled at the University of South Florida, this time as a biology major. Just as my course of studies hadn't changed much, neither had my affection for them. I made Cs my first semester. The second semester, however, something changed—my major.

Thank God for universities requiring the completion of courses entirely unrelated to one's chosen field of study. I enrolled in a section of Literature and the Occult. Literature because I had to, and occult because I had grown up reading Stephen King. It

seemed to be a way to knock out a requirement and enjoy it at the same time—something I had rarely done thus far in my academic life.

I really did enjoy that class. The reading was fun, the discussion was interesting, and the class was small and relaxed. I figured that if all literature classes were like this one, then I had found my place. I became an English major with a concentration on literature.

That didn't last long. The following semester I took expository writing. Only the instructor didn't want expository writing. I distinctly remember him saying all he wanted was *good* writing. I'm afraid he didn't get very much of it, from me or anyone else. He ran the class like a workshop with lots of peer reviewing, and I recall reading a paper that was supposedly an original story, but was actually a thinly veiled summary of the movie *Titanic*. My stories weren't much better, I'm sure. Even so, the professor was quick with words of encouragement—quick enough to make me believe that I had some sort of talent, and quick enough to make me decide to change my concentration to creative writing.

The rest is history, as they say. I finally graduated, much to the relief of my parents and the amazement of my peers. I even went back to school and earned a master's in English education and got a job teaching high school. I guess I couldn't shake the urge to spend time with animals, after all.

It doesn't take long to have your fill of teenagers, though, and I became restless. A few years in and I'd gone several years without writing a single story. I needed motivation, and I needed to insert myself back into an atmosphere where my creativity had previously flourished—USF's creative writing program.

Upon re-entering the program as a graduate student, I found myself surrounded by helpful professors and talented students, all of whom helped me through the past four and a half years on my way to an M.F.A. (It takes a while when you've got a full-time job and papers to avoid grading).

This collection of stories is the result. As I have grown as a writer, I feel that I have also grown as a reader. And while I have read a wide variety of both fiction and nonfiction, I feel that two genres have influenced me more than any other. The first of these genres is what I would call Florida mystery. John D. MacDonald, with his Travis McGee series, began a trend of crime novels set in Florida and in turn influenced writers like Randy Wayne White and Carl Hiaasen. The second genre is southern grit lit. Harry Crews and Larry Brown are two favorites in this category, and of course, like any southern writer, those two owe a debt to William Faulkner.

I think what draws me to these writers is the use of setting. I tend to view fiction as a form of escape, not necessarily *from* anything, but definitely *to* something. For me, that something has been another place, another time, or possibly another culture. I see a book as a place I can go to explore that which may be unfamiliar to me. Writing is a similar experience, although much more difficult and time-consuming.

The setting in all of the above writers' work functions as an extra character. The people who inhabit these books are always working either with or against the place and time of their existence. The setting is static, and there are people who thrive within it, and there are people who struggle against it. In these works, most who struggle against their setting end up losing.

In this collection, I have strived to explore settings that I love—such as Florida, Alaska, and the American West—in such a manner that the characters are forced to interact with them in a way most people never do. While all the stories here take place in regions I am familiar with, or at least have visited, it is only through my imagination that I explore what it might take to survive when encountered with the harsh reality of what surrounds us—the fringes of civilization and the wilderness.

Using settings in this way also allows me to return to what interested me so much when I was younger. I still maintain an interest in wild animals of all sorts, but the ones that really fascinate me are the predators, the top of the food chain. So often in our day-to-day lives, we humans find ourselves at the top, so far above the next rung on the ladder that we don't even consider any other possibility. By changing the setting, however, to something more rural, I feel that the animal nature of what it means to be human really emerges. Some people become predators in the true sense of the word; some become prey, and not just to other humans.

So, it turns out that I really didn't have to give up on my fantasy after all, the one about having going out and writing down what I see the animals doing. The only thing is, while my observations about how people interact among each other and with their particular settings may have some grain of fundamental, elemental truth in them, I get to do something no real scientist could ever get away with. I get to make stuff up.

Wet Season

Wet season again. Nice because you don't have to worry about all them damn fires in the glades burning down your place, but the skeeters will get you. I don't itch much. I guess I might be immune, being born and bred down here. In the last hundred years, the bugs drove off whoever couldn't stand them. Them that were left to have kids here in the islands either didn't mind or were too stubborn to admit they did. I can't say I enjoy donating the blood, even though the bites don't swell up the way the do on them yankee tourists. Still, when they're thick enough that you start inhaling them, catching them in your eyelashes, and you stick around here when you've got the chance to leave, it's awfully hard not to mind and you've got to admit to yourself that you might be one of the stubborn variety.

In the afternoons, clouds puff up over the sawgrass and start looking all dark and angry. Not too long after that it rains like a bitch. Once the rains start, not much to do around here but head over to Carla's place and hope she feels like being open. The bar used to be a gas station way back when. Carla's probably wishing it still was, what with the price of gas now, she'd be taking in money hand over fist, the only station on a fifty-mile section of the Tamiami Trail. As things are, she's the only bar in that same section,

but come the wet season and the bugs, she can't depend on the tourists, and cusses us poor locals for only drinking the cheap stuff.

The place has got a screened-in porch, though, so at least a man can get out of the bugs in the evening and still hear the frogs singing. Sometimes Carla's got a band in there. Sometimes she don't. I prefer she don't. The bands are usually the same group of local kids in different combinations that can only half-play their instruments so that they sound something close to what passes for country music on the radio these days.

Whatever happened to Skynyrd?

Tonight there's no band. No customers, either. Not unless you count that one little tourist family a while back. They never seem to stay too long, anyway. Hubby glances at the nudie pictures on the walls. All them girls wrapped in nothing but rebel flags and pretty soon his old lady is saying stuff like, "Isn't this place quaint?" and "We have to tell so-and-so about this place." All the while she's got her hand on hubby's sleeve, coaxing him gently towards the door. You half-expect her to point you out in your dirty fishing clothes like some sort of museum exhibit. Next thing you know, the old lady has hubby out the door before he's even finished his first beer.

Carla's about to close down, as she's tired of me just sitting here listening to the bull gators bellow from the swamp and the coons raid her trash out back, not to mention me drinking her cheapest beer. That's when the cowboy comes in.

The guy, no local, comes in wearing high-heel snakeskin boots, a Stetson, and a Burt Reynolds mustache. Them boots clomp across the old wooden floor and he sets himself up on the stool right next to mine. All the fucking empty stools in this place and

he can't leave me a little space? Leave something between us? Carla must have heard that old screen door slap shut when the guy came in. She comes out from the back where she's been reading magazines or god-knows-what, sees this guy in his fancy getup, and decides to stay open a while longer, I guess, because she takes his order.

"Whiskey," says Cowboy. He pushes his thumb up under the brim of his hat, tilting it back a little on his head. Carla pours him a shot, and before she can put the bottle away, he drains it and asks for another.

"You drinking to remember, or drinking to forget?" Carla says. Fucking Eagles. She'll play that song on the jukebox forever if a customer don't put a quarter in. She probably thinks she's being cute. Looking for a fancy tip from fancy Cowboy.

Cowboy doesn't say anything. He only smiles, and I can see the green light from the beer sign Carla keeps behind the bar, the old one with the lizards on it, glint off the guy's gold front tooth. He drinks the second shot. Instead of answering Carla, Cowboy turns to me. "Sometimes we'd all like to forget a little, huh, *Compadre*?"

I look him in the eye and don't much like what I see. Dark brown, almost black. Mexican or Cuban or Seminole or some damn mix, and I couldn't read nothing in them eyes. He looked at me straight-on for maybe five seconds. Saying five seconds don't sound like much, but when a stranger's staring right into your face for that long it could make anyone a mite uncomfortable.

"Maybe so," I say, thinking that I wouldn't mind forgetting them eyes before I try to go to sleep tonight. Cowboy looks away, nods, and smoothes out his mustache.

Just about now I decide that I've had enough to drink. I'm thinking about going home, but I'm not so sure about leaving Carla alone in here with this guy. Lucky for me, for all of us, I guess, Cowboy slaps a fifty on the bar, his pinky ring knocking hard on the wood. I notice that the finger with the ring on it is missing its last knuckle. "Time to hit the trail," he says. Makes a show out of yawning and stretching as he gets up, like he's going to water his horse and spread a bedroll on the front porch.

He don't, though. Just clomps on back across the floor and out the front door where he came in. The springs creak, the screen slaps shut and he's gone. I may not show it, but a character like that showing up around here makes me a little jumpy. So when I hear a big engine start up in the parking lot and crushed shells pop under big tires, then see a big Ford pickup follow its high beams out onto 41, well, I let out a little breath of relief.

Carla had gone and poured herself a beer, figuring she wasn't losing any profits after the big-tipping Cowboy hadn't asked for any change from his fifty. Now she pulls a stool up to her own bar. "Join me?"

There was a time when I was younger that I would have said yes without hesitation. Carla's a nice-looking woman. Around forty, she's kept herself up pretty good, which is tough to do around here. Generally, a person makes their living in the islands, they tend to look about ten years older than they really are. The sun and the salt water and the hard work just pulls good years out of them like one of them magicians that keeps pulling hankies all knotted together out of his pocket. Not Carla, though. I guess working in a bar ain't quite the same as working on a fishing boat.

Still, I tell her I've got to get home, get some sleep. She looks a little disappointed, a little angry, can't tell which.

"Your loss," she says.

I suppose it is, and find myself alone in the parking lot.

Late at night, when there's not much traffic on the Trail, a person can really appreciate the isolation of the place. Without much light from town, the stars glow brighter. The air after the storms feels like you could swim through it. The noise from the swamp is deafening. A barred owl cuts through the million frogs with its questions, who-who-who-whoooo? Just me, I think before I slide into the seat of my old truck.

My place isn't too far from Carla's bar. A few miles east on 41, a left and a few more miles down the dirt River Road, and I'm home. It isn't all that strange to pass cars parked along either of these roads, because when they dug the fill for the roadbeds, they left canals on both sides. People pull over to fish for snook or bass or tarpon at all hours, day or night.

So when I pass the big Ford pulled over, I don't think anything of it. Not at first. Only a minute later when its high beams are in my rearview mirror do I think of the Cowboy.

There are no streetlights on 41, so the shine of headlights in my rearview mirror after straining my eyes to focus in the dark is blinding. While I'm struggling to see, my truck drifts to the right, all the way to the side of the pavement where my tires buzz on the warning grooves cut into the concrete. I jerk the wheel back to the left to correct my

drift and slap at the rearview mirror to get rid of the lights, but just like that I miss the turnoff for the road to my house.

I don't know why the Cowboy is following me. I do know that, in order to get home, I'll have to slow down and turn around somewhere. If I don't, I'll end up in Miami in about an hour and I don't know what's more dangerous, that city or the freak that thinks he's some kind of modern-day John Wayne riding my ass. Hell, he's probably from Miami.

If I want to get home, I have no choice. There's a roadside Indian village ahead and I slow and pull into the parking lot to turn around. The Ford shoots past, gunning its engine, taillights fading into the swamp, hopefully taking the Cowboy back to wherever he came from.

I can't help but keep checking my mirror on the way back. Nothing. I turn onto the River road. Nothing. Relieved, I pull into my driveway, shut the truck down and get out. Wouldn't you know it? I hear the unmistakable sound of a big V8 coming up the road behind me. My first instinct is to duck down around the front of my truck and I do. Unfortunately the ticking of my engine cooling down makes it tough to hear where the Ford is, so I lift my head up over the hood to look through the windshield. I can feel the heat of the engine under my chin.

There he is. The Cowboy. Lights off. He drives past at what seems a snail's pace, and I think I can see him tip his hat as he moves on.

It's going to be a long night. I let myself in to my place. Not much of a place, but it's something – an old cracker house on short stilts across the road from Buttonwood

River. A river sounds nice, but this one was straightened when they dug out fill for the road, so it really looks like a big canal full of gators to anyone who don't know. Still, I can get to the bay on a skiff, so I can't complain.

Once inside, the first thing I do is lock the door. Not something that comes naturally in my neck of the woods. In small places like this where everyone knows everyone else, usually there ain't too much of a problem with burglary. The second thing I do is find my guns. I've got a rifle and a shotgun I use for hunting deer and hogs and such, and a .44 just for shooting.

I can't see how I could ever expect myself to fall asleep, so I put a chair up against the wall opposite the front door. Beats me why this Cowboy causing any trouble. As far as I know, I've never seen the guy before in my life. Is he after me for somebody else? Not that I could think of. I ain't saying that I've never done anybody any wrong, but that was a long time ago and things are different now.

I don't know. Must have been the beer from Carla's, but at some point I fall asleep. I know this because of the nightmares. They don't come all the time, but I've had them on and off for the last twenty years. Crazy thing is, I couldn't even say what happens in them. I just wake up, heart racing, covered in sweat, and no idea why. Just a feeling. A bad feeling, like if I'd have stayed asleep any longer I wouldn't have woken up.

So I wake up and my heart's pounding in my chest. There's a dull ache, a fuzziness, in my head and it takes a few seconds for me to focus. When I do, I find

myself looking at a man sitting in a wooden chair leaned back against my front door, a man with a pair of snakeskin boots on his feet, crossed at the ankles. A man with a Stetson pulled down low over his eyes.

With a sudden realization, I reach to my side, expecting my hand to close on a gun. Sometimes I can be a stupid old man. Cowboy, upon closer examination, has the rifle and the shotgun on the floor beside him, and his hand rests on the butt of the .44, which he has tucked into his belt, right next to the dinner plate-sized silver buckle.

“Shit,” I say.

“Morning, Kemosabe,” says the lone fucking ranger, casual like he’s been holding off savages and horse thieves while I slept.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Come on, you’ve got to know.”

“I’m clean, buddy. You’ve got no call to go bothering some old man you don’t know nothing about.”

“No? I don’t know nothing?”

“No.”

Then Cowboy shoots me. He had drawn the .44 out of his belt, aimed, and shot in less time than it takes to think about it. The sound of the gun going off inside the house is deafening. My ears ring. Blood seeps from the burnt edges of a hole between my left index finger and thumb.

I'd like to say that I can't feel my hand, but it hurts like hell. I grab it and squeeze to slow the bleeding, but it don't help the pain one bit. My vision swims a little, but clears up, so I keep squeezing.

Cowboy grabs a blanket I had over an old sofa there in the room, takes out a Bowie knife from God knows where, and cuts a strip from it. He walks over, holds it out to me. "Wrap up your hand, pardner." He smiles.

I don't want to take the blanket strip, but I do. "What the fuck, man?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Cowboy says. "Stand up." He motions with the gun.

I stand, feeling a little woozy from the blood loss, I guess. I clutch my hand, now wrapped up tight, against my belly. There doesn't seem to be a way to hold it that lessens the throbbing.

"Follow me," Cowboy says.

I think for a second about making a grab for one of the guns on the floor as he turns around, but with my hand, there's no way I could handle one quick enough to outdraw him. Besides, he's probably emptied them, and if I try anything I'd just look clumsy and foolish, and it's possible that I'd get myself killed.

I have no choice. I follow Cowboy out the door. The sun isn't fully up and it's a gray, overcast morning. The mosquitoes are still out. I can hear them whine and Cowboy slaps at the back of his neck.

His truck is a Ford F150, black and shiny except for the coating of white limestone dust from the river road on the tires and fenders. He's got it jacked up so I've

got to step on a running rail when he opens the passenger door and tells me to get in. The interior of the truck is tan leather and spotless. Not new, but still fresh-smelling. A real cowboy Cadillac.

“Don’t get your blood on my truck,” he says.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have shot me if you planned on taking me out.”

He seems to give this some consideration, then shrugs. “You’re lucky I’m not hog tying you and hauling you in the bed. Just keep that shit over your lap so you don’t spill on the seat.”

He starts up the engine and pulls onto the road. Not turning right, towards 41 and civilization, but left, towards swamp, some four-wheeler tracks through it, and a couple of dead-end roads.

Cowboy drives with his right hand, and keeps the .44 leveled at me with his left. He appears relaxed. I’m far from it. I think about opening the door, bailing and taking my chances on the run, but I’m not sure how itchy that trigger finger of his is. He certainly don’t want to shoot me inside his nice truck. That means two things. One. He might hesitate to pull the trigger just long enough for me to jump out of the truck. Two. I’m going to be getting out of this truck one way or another, which means that no matter what, I’ll get some kind of chance to break for it.

“Mind if I ask a question?” Cowboy says. As if he needs my permission.

“You just did, so you might as well ask another.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a fisherman. I work on commercial boats most the time. Sometimes I’ll guide a tourist on my own little boat for some extra cash.”

Silence.

“Well?”

“Well, that’s it. That’s all I do, and all I’ve done for a real long time.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was implying that it’s rude not to ask what I do for a living after I express an interest in what you do.”

“Oh.”

“Go ahead. Ask.”

“All right. What do you do?”

“I kill people.”

Surprise, surprise. By this time I had pretty much guessed that he wasn’t an executive chef or a male nurse. Still, I don’t want to insult him, so I raise my eyebrows in mock-shock.

“I know, I know. Who would have thought, eh? I bet people here in this little place don’t even know that people in my line of work exist outside of the movies.”

“Probably not.”

“Probably. An interesting word. It implies that there is a chance some people down here know about the existence of my line of work in the real world. Do you think so?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t? I think it may be the latter.”

“I don’t really catch your drift.”

“I appreciate this game you’re playing. But I think that now is the time to tell the truth. Your name is James Bradley, is it not?”

“It is.”

“Good. So you’re willing to tell the truth about that. What about your job, Mr. Bradley. You say you’re a fisherman. Is that all you’ve ever done?”

“Well, no. I suppose I’ve had lots of jobs at different times in my life.”

“Sure you have. Who hasn’t, right?”

“Right.”

“Do you know the job of yours that I’m interested in?”

I think I know the one. What I don’t know is why it matters now. That was more than twenty years ago, and it hardly makes me any different that anybody else in the glades. At this point, I can’t see how giving up any information would help me in the long run, so I play dumb.

“I can’t think of anything I’ve done that would hold any interest for you. At least not anymore.”

“Not anymore? So you’ve done something interesting in the past, eh?”

“I’ve done about the same as what everyone else around here has done. Run a little grass, a little coke. That was back in the seventies and eighties, though. Things were wild then. Not so much anymore. Things have gone back to the way they used to be, and I can’t say I’m sorry to see it.”

“So you’re saying that there’s nothing left?”

“What do you mean?” Playing dumb again.

“Money. There’s no money left?” Cowboy asks this like there’s no way he’s going to believe my answer, no matter what I tell him.

“Like I said, that was a long time ago.”

I don’t know what I’m hoping for. I guess that he believes me, slows down the truck, and lets me hop out and walk home with his apologies. Not quite.

“I know people in Miami. You may have guessed this. One of the people I know is named Freddy Guerrero. Have you heard of him?”

Of course I had heard of him. When my town got busted in 1983, Guerrero was the guy running the show. He was the one with the connections in Colombia and in the Caribbean who coordinated the air drops and the deliveries. Unfortunately for him, he was also the one who ended up with his voice on tape when he talked to an undercover DEA guy that had worked his way up Guerrero’s ladder.

“I think you have. Guerrero’s heard of you. He says that you were one of his best employees out here in the islands. He says you worked your way back through creeks tighter than a mosquito’s asshole. His words. He says there’s no way the feds would ever catch you with any of his stuff.”

Time to stop the dumb act. I nod slowly.

“Know what else he says? Guerrero says there’s no way some backwoods hick like you could have blown all that money on guns and pickup trucks. Seeing where you live, no offense, I believe him.”

“Don’t you think I’d live in a nicer place if I could afford to? The feds took all that money in ’83.”

“You’re forgetting something, *Compadre*. I know Guerrero. He knows how much he paid you. It’s public record how much the feds seized. There’s a big difference.”

I can’t argue with him. He’s got me dead to rights.

“So, what do you want? The money? Like I said, it’s been a long time. I might not have blown it all, but twenty-some years is a lot of living to do on the money I stashed. I really don’t see how it’s worth your while. I’m sure you could be making more doing whatever it is you do in Miami.”

“We’ll see about that, *hombre*.”

Cowboy pulls off the road onto a little track meant for the ATVs some people like to take hunting. The gate meant to keep people from taking their trucks in there has already had the padlock busted off. The track bends and Cowboy takes us just around the dogleg so we can’t be seen from the road. Here he stops.

Cowboy gets out, and walks around to my side of the truck. He opens the door, and motions for me to get out. He’s got the .44 on me the whole time. With the gun, he points to a spot he wants me to stand on. I move over there, and he puts himself between me and his truck. He has me right where he wants me – in a position that, if he shoots me, won’t mess up his pickup.

“Now where is it?” he says.

My mind races. If I tell him, what's to keep him from shooting me just so I won't follow him?

"I'll have to take you there," I say.

"Why don't you just tell me, save yourself the trouble?"

"I could, but you'd never find it. Probably get lost, snakebit, dehydrated, and end up gator food."

"You could draw a map."

Dumbass. "You have any idea how many mangrove islands are out there? How much they all look alike? How they change every time a hurricane blows through, and how they look different depending on what the tide's doing? Do you even know how to run a boat?"

I can see Cowboy's mind working behind those hard dark eyes.

"You're right, my friend. You will have to take me. Get back in the truck."

Cowboy doesn't say much on the way back to the house. His plan isn't working exactly the way he thought it would. He thought he'd just come here, wave a gun around, and go home with a sack full of cash. He never figured on going into the islands. He can't just follow a treasure map. He needs me to get in and get out, and he doesn't like it.

He pulls his truck up in front of my house again. "Where's your boat?"

"Around back. I got it on a trailer. We can launch into the river across the road."

"River? That looks like a ditch."

"Used to be a river. It will take us out to the bay, and we can get to the money from there. You got a hitch on your truck?"

“Nope. We’ll have to use yours.”

I go to walk around to the driver’s side of my own truck, but Cowboy is quick to stop me. “No way, partner. You’re not driving anywhere. I don’t want to have to chase you.”

I shrug, dig my keys out of my pocket, toss them to him, and get in the passenger’s side. He starts my truck on the third try, grumbling the whole time about it being a piece of shit, and backs it around the side of my house, to where I keep my boat.

The boat is just a flat-bottomed fiberglass skiff, only sixteen feet long. It doesn’t have any fancy extras, just a platform to pole from above the seventy-five horse Evinrude.

Cowboy can’t resist. “Either you spent all that money on hookers, or there’s an awful lot left, because you sure as hell didn’t spend it on your house, your truck, or your boat. I’d have a condo on South Beach with a yacht at the marina if I was you, bud.”

I can see he’s excited. He really believes he’s hit the jackpot. He’s grinning the whole time, pointing the gun at me as I lower the trailer onto the hitch. Once it’s hooked up, we drag the boat across the road to where the bank slopes in at a shallow angle. Cowboy makes a mess out of backing the boat into the water, cutting the wheel too hard left, then too hard right, never expecting the trailer to turn the opposite direction. Eventually, the boat ends up in the water. I can’t talk too much, though. I’ve never dropped a boat in the water driving with one hand and pointing a gun with the other, so I don’t know that I’d do that much better.

The Cowboy has no choice but to let me drive the boat, but he makes sure that I'm covered the entire time. We motor down the river slowly and gators slide off the bank and dip under the surface ahead of us. We get a little too close to a big bull, thirteen feet or so, and he thrashes into the water, going from still as a rock to just a big splash in nothing flat. Cowboy jumps a little, but keeps that .44 aimed at my belly.

We pass under 41 and the river turns back into a river. It winds through sawgrass, cypress trees, and finally mangroves as the water turns brackish. Eventually, we wind through town and Cowboy tucks the gun away and makes an effort to look like a normal tourist. He looks from bank to bank and scans the water ahead. Old buildings sit on stilts at the river's edge. Boats are tied up along a seawall that extends down the bank on the right. There's a causeway that leads to a forty-acre Indian mound about two miles away – the last settlement on this coast. We pass under its bridge and out into the open bay.

The bay has several decent-sized rivers running into it, not to mention the hundreds of cuts, passes and tidal creeks, some named, some not. From the bay, a man could go in any direction, head up a creek, make a few wrong turns and end up in the Gulf or way back in the sawgrass marshes miles inland. The islands are a maze and everything is connected. Problem is, sometimes the creeks are dry at low tide, and sometimes the water gets high enough at high tide that it hides the little entrance in the mangroves that would have let anybody even know it's there.

The tide is rising as I gun the throttle and shoot across the bay towards Sandfly Pass. Once I get there, I make a sharp left around an island and head straight towards what looks like a wall of mangroves. I can hear Cowboy take a sharp breath, like he

thinks we're going to crash. I don't want him thinking that I'm trying anything funny, so I ease off the throttle. As we get closer, a hole appears in the wall, and I point the nose of my skiff towards it. Another hour, and no one could see the little creek flowing out of there. As it is, I have to tell Cowboy to duck down.

"Where the hell we going?" he asks.

"You do want the money, don't you?"

He brushes a spiderweb from his face.

"You don't think I'd bury that kind of money in my back yard, do you? If you'd lived out here all your life, and knew these islands like I do, you'd want to put that money as far out of reach of any greedy son of a bitch as possible. Am I right?"

Cowboy nods. "It better be out here. I won't be able to get back to Miami fast enough when this is done."

I continue down the narrow creek, sometimes having to lean back and pull the skiff along under low-hanging branches. Even though I know the sun has probably risen to directly overhead, it's dark in the little tunnel through the trees. Mosquitoes whine in my ear, and I can see Cowboy slapping at his arms, little smears of blood up and down the sleeves of his western shirt.

We come to a fork. To the right is a lake, an open body of water in the middle of the mangrove forest, where the breeze might be strong enough to keep the bugs off. To the left is another dark narrow channel just like the one we just came through. I take a left. Cowboy moans.

"Don't worry. Almost there."

About a quarter mile in there's a little slope of white shell exposed, leading into the water. I shut the motor down and loop a rope over a nearby branch. "Follow me," I say. I step over the gunwale, and my foot sinks into the ooze on the creek bottom. A few tough steps, though, and the bottom is solid packed shell.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Cowboy says. He tosses me the shovel.

I hear him muttering behind me as he gets out of the boat. Something about his fancy boots. "There any alligators in here?" he calls out.

"Not usually. It's kind of salty for them. Crocodiles, sometimes, though."

Cowboy gets up onto the high ground quickly, and I tell him to follow me. The trail is very faint. Really, not much of a trail at all, just a narrow opening in the mangroves. A ways in, though, just like a lot of these islands, the undergrowth clears up and there's just the tallest trees overhead. It's open and shady. I head to the base of a gumbo limbo and say, "It's here."

"Start digging, then, *hombre*."

I start digging. Not an easy task with my hand throbbing the way it is. Even so, I loosen the soil and start tossing it aside. Cowboy has got nothing to do but watch me and keep his gun pointed. Even so, I can tell he's losing his concentration. He's grinning, excited that he's so close, but he's also annoyed. Mosquitoes and deerflies are chewing him up and it's all he can do to stop from having some sort of slapping convulsion. I keep digging.

"Man, how far down you bury it?"

"Not much more," I say, standing in a hole up to my knees.

Sweat drips down my nose, and I can feel the blood oozing from my hand, making my grip slippery on the shovel's handle. I had meant to dig a deeper hole, but I just can't go on much longer. "Here it is."

Cowboy comes over. As he looks down into the hole, he switches the gun to his left hand to swat at a mosquito. Before he sees that there's nothing in the hole, I bring the shovel around, swinging like Daryl Strawberry. When the blade connects with his head, the handle vibrates, stinging my hand so badly that I have to close my eyes as I jump up and down, howling in pain. When I open them again, the first thing I notice is the Stetson. I'd crushed the brim of a good hat. Cowboy is down for the count. Make that down for good. I climb out of the hole, pick up my .44, and stick it in my belt. Those movies on TV teach you to be ready for the bad guy to come back to life and give you one last scare, and so I am.

Cowboy doesn't have it in him, though, and I drag his body into the too-small hole I'd dug. His feet stick up out of one end and his head the other. No matter. What's left of him will be long gone the next time a person goes exploring on this island. I feel my odds are pretty good. They don't call them the Ten Thousand Islands for nothing.

The Trickster

1

Coyote lopes to the edge of the mesa and sits on his haunches in the shade of a mesquite tree, intending to wait out the dry afternoon heat of the high desert. He looks through yellow almost-human eyes over the moonscape that stretches beneath him – rock, sand, and gravel in shades of brown and red reaching out to the horizon, textured by sage and creosote bushes. To the west a ragged green line of willow and tamarisk follows a dry creek bed, pulling water up from deep underground and pointing the way to the cool purple Sangre de Cristo Mountains that erupt from the desert, sharp as the teeth in his own jaw.

Directly below him snakes a lonely stretch of highway, its emptiness enhanced by a single sand-blasted wooden structure that, from this height, looks like no more than a forgotten pine box that someone neglected to bury. The white light of the high sun glints off two weather-beaten pickup trucks outside the building, and Coyote looks away. Later on, in the chill of the desert night, he would make his way down for an easy dinner from the trash bins outside the back door – much easier than chasing down a jackrabbit. This place of easy meals, this watering hole where he could lick the cool condensation that trickled from beneath the air conditioner, has a name, and that name is etched into a wooden sign that creaks and moans as it swings from its rusty mount over the door. If Coyote could read, he would know that this place is called Dusty's Cantina, and that

inside they have cold beer and tacos, but it's not likely he would care, for Coyote has little use for names.

“Another beer, hon.”

Although mumbled, the words ring out in the empty bar like a gunshot, ricocheting between the empty folding tables, the wooden bar stools, and the reproduction black-and-white frontier-era pictures that hang in cheap frames on the plaster walls. Then nothing but the low mechanical hum of the beer cooler. The man who uttered the words appears to be just another part of the decor—another faded picture, blurry and wrinkled at the edges. He wears a frayed straw cowboy hat that shades his broad, lined face and his eyes set in a permanent squint. His faded jeans are tucked into a pair of once-fancy riding boots. His narrow shoulders are covered by a thin checked shirt with snaps down the front.

Now comes the sound of another pair of boots on the tile floor behind the bar. A girl emerges, carrying a bottle of Coors. She's young and blond. The wind and sun hasn't yet etched her face with creases, which means she's not a local. The man imagines her, sitting in her corner reading a book, as a black widow spider waiting to jab at him with her sharp tongue.

“Ain't you gettin' an early start today?” She stops a few feet up the bar from where the man sits, withholding the bottle for the time being. She smiles.

He knows that she affects the drawl for his benefit, that she's just playing a part, amusing herself playing at cowgirl bartender so she'll have something to tell her friends when she goes back to New York or wherever she's from.

He looks at her from beneath the brim of his hat. That's all right, though, he thinks. She's only worked here a few months. Give her time. Maybe she'll stick around. She ain't bad on the eyes, that's for sure.

He doesn't say anything, but his eyes flash down to the bottle of beer sweating in her hand.

She smiles a little wider. "Dead man walkin'," she says as she slides the beer towards him along the slick wooden bar.

He catches the bottle deftly, a feat that would get more difficult, he knew, as day became night and night morning.

"Put that on your tab, Sam?"

He raises his hand to the brim of his hat in response. Sam expects her to return to her corner, to resume her reading just like she did every other afternoon, but instead she just plants her elbows on the bar as if she's waiting for something. She stares into his face, and he tilts his head down towards his beer, hiding his eyes under his hat, thinking that if he ignores her, she'll go away. After a long minute she's still there, and he lifts his eyes to meet hers. "Help you with somethin'?"

"You know, Sam, you come in here every day. You stay a few hours, drinking beer in the afternoon when everybody who has a job is out working it, and sometimes you stay until closing time. You don't really talk to anyone else who comes in. Over the

past couple of months, I've spent more time alone with you than I have with any man in my life, and I don't know a thing about you besides your name is Sam and you like beer."

Here she stops, brow slightly furrowed, waiting for a response.

"That about covers it." He takes a long pull from the bottle.

"Mystery man, huh? Listen, I sit around here every day reading trashy paperbacks while you sit there drinking. Why don't we help each other out. You tell me a story, I'll get you a beer. On the house."

"Don't know that I got enough stories to make that worth my while."

"Why don't we just start with one." She taps a red fingernail on the bar. "How about you tell me where you're from. You know, family and stuff."

"Can't see as how you'd be interested in that, but since you're payin'."

Coyote stretches after waking from his nap under the mesquite tree. His mouth gapes in a yawn and he reaches forward with his front paws, kneading the crumbled rock with his blunt claws. He arches his back, raising his tail end to the sky first, then gathers his legs beneath him and stands.

The sun has darkened, a burnt orange, and is on the verge of impaling itself on the jagged peaks to the west. The desert is cooling now, and Coyote feels his lean belly imploring him to move, to hunt, to feed. He moves forward, picking his way down the steep slope of the mesa. He stops as odors drift up to him from the cracks and crevices, the small cairns of stone – packrat, ground squirrel, rattlesnake. He investigates, but finds nothing to satisfy his hunger, the dens and burrows abandoned.

At the bottom of the slope, where the ground flattens, Coyote heads toward Dusty's, where he knows he can scavenge some scraps. His body looks as if it floats above his trotting legs as he slips through the scrub near the highway. When he comes to the road he hesitates, sniffing along the shoulder. Here, he smells death, but finds nothing. Coyote bares his teeth and bolts across, tail tucked under his body.

The same two trucks are still parked in front of the building, and Coyote uses them for cover. He knows men often come out of the building, acting strangely off-balance and unpredictable. He has to use caution here. He slinks low around the trucks, but can't help sniffing at a tire, lifting his leg, and marking it with urine. A breeze tickles his nose with the smells of stale tortillas and turning meat. He lifts his snout to the sky, savoring the aroma, then darts around the corner of the building.

Coyote knocks over a trash can, and among the beer cans and napkins, finds plenty of spicy leftovers. As he gorges himself, he hears voices. His ears prick forward and he tilts his head in concentration. The voices don't sound angry, like he hears from the men who chase him away sometimes. These voices speak in little yips and howls of contentment. These voices, he understands well. Coyote throws his head back and sings.

The girl laughs out loud, showing her white teeth, and Sam thinks it's a wonderful sound, like wind chimes or the sound of water over desert stone.

"So you're telling me that your great-great-grandfather was Geronimo – the Apache warrior?" She smiles and shakes her head, a piece of her hair falling in her face. She brushes it away from her eyes, which Sam now sees are a beautiful hazel.

“That’s right. Least that’s what Ma always told me.”

A long howl, rising in pitch and ending in several short high-pitched barks, comes from outside. The girl’s eyes widen and she runs to a window in the back wall. “That sounded so close, like it was right outside! I’ve been wanting to see that little bandit for a while now. He always leaves such a mess for me to clean up. It’s all right, though, you know, because coyotes are, like, so way out west.”

Sam rocks back on his stool, and takes a long drink. “Old man Coyote is out early tonight.”

“Old man Coyote? Is that some kind of Indian thing?” She’s engrossed, now, the old paperback completely forgotten in her usual corner.

“Yep. Coyote’s in all the old stories. At least my favorite ones. He’s always playin’ tricks on people.”

“What happens to him?”

“Well, he usually gets what’s comin’ to him.”

2

In the cool light of the crescent moon Coyote slips away from Dusty’s Cantina and heads toward the dark vegetation of the dry creekbed not far away. Later, from the cover of the willows, he hears a coughing rumble, turns his head towards the sound, and sees one of the trucks from the bar sped away down the road, its back end swinging, tires

spewing gravel. Within seconds the truck's noise is absorbed into the desert night, leaving a pair of nighthawks to swoop through a floating column of dust.

3

Early morning and Coyote still hunts. The food from the trash cans satisfied him for the length of a nap, but Coyote is smart and always prepares for leaner times. He moves now through a jungle of willows growing along the creekbed. He slips in and out among the skinny trunks, and pauses to scratch himself.

Coyote smells water. Always a welcome scent. He trots down the bank of the creekbed to find a seep, a place where water emerges from its hiding place underground to dampen the gravel and create a tiny pool. A few laps of the tongue, and the pool is gone. Coyote sniffs and stares at the spot where it was, but the pool is slow to fill again. Coyote will remember this spot.

Farther down the creekbed Coyote catches another scent, one unfamiliar to him. Even so, he follows his nose. Coyote is nothing if not curious.

Sam wakes in the gritty trailer that he sometimes sleeps in, still wearing yesterday's clothes. A sharp pain works its way up from the back of his neck to the hollow just behind his eyes. It is a familiar pain and one he knows how to cure. He takes a sip from the can of Coors on the floor next to his mattress and swills it around his teeth

and gums like a shot of mouthwash. Already, he feels better. “Hair of the dog,” he mumbles to no one.

A film of dirt coats the window above the sink, and when he looks outside it’s like he’s watching a television screen playing an old western. He half expects to see horses charging up the dirt road, their riders looking for a showdown, and he’s half right.

Sam doesn’t see the horses, but he does see a county sheriff’s department Ford Bronco quickly closing the distance between the bright horizon and his property. He continues to stare passively out the window as the vehicle stops outside. A tall fat man gets out of the Bronco with some difficulty, as if the drive has left him stiff in the knees. He looks to be wedged into his khaki uniform, his soft belly probably hiding his boots from his own view. Sam watches the deputy approach the trailer until he disappears behind the wall. A few seconds later there’s a knock at the door.

Sam opens up, squinting into the late-morning sun. The deputy looks at him through reflective aviator-style sunglasses. A moment passes before either one speaks.

“Morning, officer.”

“Your name Sam Hayes?”

The big cop looms in the doorway, a neutral expression on his face, slack-jawed but tight-lipped. Sam thinks he looks like a robot. Robots don’t fit in westerns.

“Yessir.”

“Mr. Hayes, I think we may have a problem.”

“What can that be?” Sam can’t see the deputy’s eyes behind the reflective lenses, but he knows his eyes are darting around, searching his trailer from where he stands in the doorway. Sam tries to make himself bigger to block his view.

“Mr. Hayes, were you out at Dusty’s Cantina last night?”

“I was. Can’t see how that would be a problem, though. I go there most every day and this is the first time a cop shows up on my doorstep askin’ me about it the next morning.”

“Mr. Hayes, the problem is that a young girl who works there has turned up missing. A witness saw your truck outside the place. No one has seen her since.” The deputy adds emphasis to his remark by resting his hand on the butt of his gun. Sam senses an accusation in the gesture.

“Ain’t it a little soon to assume she’s missing? She’s a grown-up. Maybe she decided to quit and move away.”

“Did she say anything to that effect, Mr. Hayes?”

“Can’t say she did.”

“Well, that’s always a possibility. But, as you probably know, Mr. Hayes, people don’t often just up and disappear around here.” The big deputy extends a meaty hand towards Sam. Sam, who has been trying to maintain eye contact, drops his gaze to the hand and sees that it contains a business card. “Give me a call if you remember anything she might’ve said.”

“I’ll do that.”

The deputy backs down the two stairs at the door of the trailer, walks back to the Bronco, gets in, starts it up, and leaves. Sam stands in the open doorway following the Bronco's progress down the road with his eyes. He takes a deep breath and the dry air stings his nose. Sam can't imagine why a girl like that wouldn't quit and move away. He's too modest to entertain the idea that their two-month history of silent afternoons together would be enough to keep her around.

4

Feeling like the fresh air might do him some good, Sam goes hunting. He takes an old Colt revolver from a drawer in the nightstand, sets his old straw hat on his head, fills a milk jug with fresh water, and he's out the door. Sam hunts only nominally. These excursions are really nothing more than an excuse to be outside carrying a gun. Occasionally he fires at something, but more often than not, he buys his meat from the grocery store.

Today Sam decides he'll go after jackrabbit. He walks east, towards the still-rising sun. The big mesa across the road from Dusty's rises in the distance. Sam picks his way through thickets and around boulders. He sees no jackrabbits, only small rubbery dust-colored lizards that dart underneath rocks as he walks past. He carries the heavy revolver in his right hand, his thumb on the hammer; the water jug hangs from his left index finger. After a while his shoulders ache. He switches hands but it does no good.

At noon, the white sun overhead, Sam finds himself at the creekbed. The leaves of the willows rustle, inviting him into the cool green shade. He makes his way down a wash, careful to watch he doesn't step on a rattlesnake. An iridescent green fly lands on his forehead and he swats it away. As he nears the trees, more flies appear. He enters the shade and his eyes need a second to adjust.

When they do, he sees a bare foot. A bare foot sticking out from under the bushes, and it's moving, jerking, twitching. Something crawls in Sam's brain. A thought. A memory. He steps closer. A leg. Bare. It stops moving. The thing in Sam's head digs its claws in deep, and his skull throbs. Not again, he thinks. He steps closer. His eyes move up the leg, up the body, past a tattered arm, past a torn t-shirt, to the face. Sam feels the tail end of the memory curl around the base of his brain and take hold. The eyes are open, straining upward toward a clean hole in her forehead. A hole made by the Colt in his right hand. Sam drops the gun. Sam doesn't hear the rustling in the willows as Coyote slinks away to watch from a safer spot.

Coyote hasn't finished his meal, and he hopes the man will leave soon, but he's acting strangely. From deep in the shade, Coyote sees him drop to his knees. He's already dropped the ugly thing in his hand that makes all the noise, and Coyote's eyes flick back to the thing every couple of seconds. He doesn't want the man to pick it up again. The man doesn't. Instead, he moves closer to the dead girl, and scoops sand and gravel over her. Coyote believes this is to save her for himself.

He has never seen a man act in such a way. The ugly thing still lay in the middle of the creekbed, forgotten by the man. Coyote knows if he waits and tries to feed again, the man will defend his kill. It's what animals do. But he has never seen a man defend anything without his noisemaker. Coyote creeps forward, low to the ground. The man is making whimpering sounds, covering his face with his hands. Coyote darts from the willows, grabs the noisemaker in his jaws. It feels heavy and slick, but he holds on. The man's voice echoes over Coyote's shoulder—a long howl—but Coyote does not stop. He runs and he knows the man will never catch him. He runs following his own tracks, back towards Dusty's Cantina.

Death Wears a Helmet

Clouds hulk darkly against the heavens. Curtains of rain sweep across the abandoned highway. Gusts of wind dance around lighting bolts. Thunder shakes the air itself. Still, he rides. He has journeyed across time and space, witness to the passing of millions. He has cradled an old woman's head as she breathed her last, welcoming her into endless sleep. He has ravaged armies of men, leaving bodies piled on battlefields, food for ravens and worms.

Now Death arrives. He pulls his Vespa to the side of the road. The rear tire slips against the wet asphalt and Death jolts upright in his seat and thrusts both legs out to catch himself. He looks around. It's been a long time since he's visited the small town. The hour is late and Main Street is deserted. The quaint little shops are closed. The only light is that from McGillicutty's Pub at the end of the street. Even the pub is short on customers tonight, though. The weather is enough to keep people home.

The rain does not bother Death all that much. Cold, wet weather has been his ally through the years. Still, sometimes it makes it tough to ride the scooter. He looks at his reflection in a shop window. Pitiful. His robes are soaked. They cling to his bones. The Vespa looks good, though. It's black with red flames. The flames match Death's helmet. Oh, yes. Death always wears a helmet. It wouldn't be safe not to.

He dismounts the scooter and steps onto the sidewalk, removes the helmet, steps underneath an awning for shelter as he reaches deep into a hidden pocket. Death turns his back to the wind and pulls out a black appointment book he bought at Barnes and Noble. He flips the pages until he finds the one he's looking for. The writing is impossibly small. It's going to be a busy year. Death tries to remember his last vacation. That hadn't worked out so well. Five drownings, three shark attacks, and an accident on a hotel balcony all in just one long weekend in Acapulco. Mrs. Death nagging him the whole time. He just couldn't leave his work at home.

True enough. He can't stop working. What he'd give to be one of those guys who could just sleep in without a second thought, spend the day fishing. Mrs. Death would ask about work that day, he'd say, "I didn't go. I just said fuck it, I need some me-time."

Death sighs and turns his attention back to the little black appointment book. He has to squint in the dim light to see the writing on the page. He remembers the name starts with a J. Johnson? Jones? Just then the wind changes directions and a violent gust catches the hem of his robes, threatening to raise them over his head. Even though no one was watching, how embarrassing would that be? In his effort to avoid just such a moment, Death drops his appointment book. It lands face-down in a puddle like a buttered piece of toast on the kitchen floor.

When Death retrieves the book from the sidewalk, he looks at the pages. Illegible. The ink has smeared and now runs down the pages in little droplets. As he watches, people are managing to do what most have never done before—escape Death.

At first, this sends Death into a small sort of panic. If he had adrenaline, it would be flowing. It would really suck to have come all this way only to leave a job undone. Not to mention the weeks to come.

In his frantic state, he considers retirement. Screw this job. Who needs it? The light from the pub beckons to him. Why not stop in, have a drink, think things over, get his head straight.

He stuffs the appointment book back into its pocket, puts his head down, and walks quickly to the pub. Every few steps Death speeds into a jog, but, feeling too self-aware, slows immediately back into a walk. He imagines the effect, to an observer, would be that of an old woman out for a power walk being repeatedly stung in the ass by a hornet.

When Death steps into the pub, no one notices. The bartender and both of his patrons have their eyes glued to a small television on a shelf above the bar. Some sporting event or another. He had never taken much of an interest in sports. He'd worked a NASCAR event or two, a very occasional boxing match, but he really didn't understand the fuss. Still, sports on the old TV made conversation easier.

Death takes a stool next to a guy with slicked-back hair. He's wearing a tie and an expensive-looking wristwatch. "What's the score, bud?"

No response.

What is it with people? Try to be friendly and end up just getting ignored. The bartender finally sees Death from the corner of his eye, and manages to pour him a beer

without ever looking him in the eye. Death takes a sip. Drinking beer has always made him feel more social. He decides to try again, only louder. “Hey, bud, what’s the score?”

This time, the slick-haired guy turns around. “There is no score, asshole. This is Sportscenter. It’s just the highlights.” He drains the last of what’s in his bottle, and motions to the bartender. “Cash me out, man. I’m done.”

Death can’t say a word. At least he didn’t really have to deal with people at work. Just flip their switches. That’s it. An easy job that paid well. Sure, it involved a lot of travel, but time away from Mrs. Death wasn’t always all that bad.

The bartender comes back and slaps the slick-haired guy’s credit card back on the bar in front of him along with the receipt for him to sign. Death can’t help but peak over—a lousy tipper, too. His eyes scrolled up to the name on the credit card. Mike Johnson. A bell went off in his head. It looked like he would be able to finish the job tonight after all.

He laughs at himself for panicking, for thinking about quitting. Really, he loves this job. Besides, if he quit, who could even imagine a world without Death? What a scary place that would be.

Utah

The sun dipped behind the purple far-away mountains and Utah flipped over rocks on the sagebrush desert floor. Not far away, a pile of charred timber leaned menacingly towards an old Chevy four-by-four. The wood looked as if it had erupted out of the rocky ground.

As the light faded, the clouds above showed fiery against the darkening sky. The wind picked up and sand stung Utah's face. He flipped over one last stone and, finding nothing, decided to give up for the evening. He walked back to the truck thinking it was just a piss-poor effort, but what could he do. He needed a drink.

He'd had a little money saved up when he built the house out here. People to help, too. Now what did he have? Thousands of dollars, sure. A fortune to a guy like him. If he could only find where he left it.

The people were still around. Bunch of damn hippies who gave him the name Utah because he looked like some folk singer he'd never heard of. That was all right, though. About as fucked up as anything else, he figured. He even thought it was funny for a while. A guy from North Carolina living in New Mexico named Utah. Yeah, they were still around. Spread out over about a five-mile radius in solar-powered trailers and off-grid holes in the ground that passed for houses. Nobody came around much anymore,

though. Not since the fire. They had sent their message and now figured he was just some crazy old coot living out of his pickup truck.

In Utah's dream he was hot, sweaty. The sun blazed on his face. His lips were dry, windburned, his skin sand-stung and abraded. He was going to have blisters. A white noise roared in his ears, and in the distance, voices.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring at his own ceiling. He was in bed. It was night, but there was a strange orange light. The sun from his dream had disappeared, but the noise, the voices, and the heat had not.

Smoke stung his nostrils as Utah scrambled from bed, looked over the edge of the loft and saw flames licking up the walls. His front window was shattered, pieces of glass shining like diamonds on his floor in the orange flickering light of the fire. His first thought was of how he could put the fire out, but he saw how quickly it was spreading, and his mind turned towards escape.

The voices outside were celebratory. Loudest of all was a voice he recognized as belonging to Mama Jones, a former high-school guidance counselor. Through the roar of the flames, Utah heard her yell out, "Roast in hell, motherfucker."

Pax. They knew about Pax. The thought came to him slowly. His brain was overstimulated. He couldn't process what was happening fast enough. He leapt through the loft's only window.

The impact of the ground knocked Utah's breath from his chest. His skin tore on the jagged rocks. He felt the crunch of a busted rib, hopefully not puncturing a lung. He

lay there a full minute, laboring to breathe, watching the flames consume his house. He realized that with all the noise, no one had heard him crash through the window.

Voices whooped and hollered from the front of the house. He heard the pop of a gunshot and pressed himself to the ground. Then another, and another, this one different. They weren't shooting at him. They were shooting up his house. Probably drunk or stoned. Maybe both. Utah pulled himself to his feet, limped into the desert night, leaving everything behind.

Utah had never envisioned himself hiding a body. Then again, he had never thought he would kill anyone either, but one leads to the other and here he was, stabbing at the rocky ground with a shovel, digging a grave. The metal of the shovel blade clanged into the gravel, catching a modest handful, and he tossed it aside, on top of the meager pile beside the hole.

Stupid, he thought. Every time they find a body it's always in a shallow grave. After an hour of work, though, shallow was all he had, and he decided it would have to do.

Pax was considered a community elder, even though he was only in his thirties – a good dozen years behind Utah. Pax had an easy way about him, never got too worked up about anything. He was real smart, too. That's why people listened to him, respected him. It was Pax who started the thing about being able to police themselves. He had claimed that anarchy was really just democracy taken seriously. Utah supposed he had read that somewhere in a book.

So then there were rules. Well, one rule. Don't do anything that's going to hurt anyone else. If the rule was broken, everyone got together and decided what to do about it. Usually, it was one warning, and if the offender kept causing problems, then he or she or whoever was kicked out. Usually not too much arguing there. Everyone had guns, including Pax, whose name meant peace in Latin, so a person who wanted to challenge the authority of the community had better be damn sure it was for a reason important enough to lose his life over.

Now Utah had broken the rule, except in a way no one had done before. "Damn it, Pax," he said as he pulled a boot off the foot of the community elder. He tossed the boot in the hole and freshened his grip on Pax's ankles. Pax had never been a big man. Probably didn't weigh over a hundred and fifty pounds, and half of that was hair and beard. Still, dragging him over the rocks was a chore. Utah heard Pax's shirt rip as it caught on a cholla cactus. He made a mental note to make sure that a piece wasn't left behind.

Utah settled the body in the grave, picked up the shovel again, and scooped the sandy soil back into the desert floor. The displaced sand might be a little moist and look different from the rest, he thought, but an hour or two of sunlight should clear up that problem. He tossed the shovel aside. He thought about coyotes. He looked around but didn't see any boulders big enough to stop them from digging up the body when it started to smell. Hell, Utah thought, Pax already smelled. All of them did. It doesn't rain much in the desert and you had to use your water carefully. He tossed some medium-sized rocks on top and hoped that it might be enough.

Utah never had anything against Pax. Certainly nothing big enough to kill the man over. Still, a man can make mistakes, and Utah figured he had made a big one.

The moon was supposed to be full. That's how the mistake was made. Under the light of a full moon, Utah could easily have recognized Pax coming up the trail to his house. With monsoon season in the desert, though, comes late afternoon and evening thunderstorms, or sometimes just black hulking clouds that last well into the night, putting on a lightning show, but refusing to spill a drop. That was how things were when Pax showed up.

Utah sat outside on a folding lawn chair. The woven nylon straps were beginning to rot through, but holding together well enough to keep his ass off the ground. He made a mental note to borrow some duct tape next time he was over at Mama Jones's trailer. The tequila in the bottle by his side was warm. It took a lot of energy to make ice. He wished he had a cold beer, but beer took up more room than its meager alcohol content warranted. So he took a last swig of the cheap warm tequila, and watched the lightning flash in the sky.

The .22 that he had taken out to shoot jackrabbits was on the ground at his side. It was too dark for jackrabbits, though, and the gun was unfired. He picked it up, got out of his lawn chair with a groan, walked the empty bottle of tequila about twenty paces away and placed it atop a rock ledge. He'd sit back down and try to shoot it when it appeared in a flash of lightning.

He turned around to go back to the lawn chair, and that was when he heard something. Something from around front of the house. Most everyone would yell out a hello when they approached a house on the mesa. You don't want to be mistaken for a trespasser or a burgler in a place where everyone, including the hippies, are armed and have vowed not to call the police. There was no hello tonight, but Utah heard footsteps coming towards his house. Fast. He thumbed back the hammer on the rifle, carried it in front of his chest, at the ready.

He called out, "Hello."

No response, just running footsteps and now ragged breath.

"Stop where you are. I've got a gun."

Footsteps getting closer. Grunting. A silhouette, black against the night.

"I said stop!"

Closer. Closer. Headlights far away, over the ridge.

"Shit." Utah pulled the trigger. A sharp crack shattered the silence, and the muzzle flash briefly illuminated Utah's target in an orange light. A scream. High-pitched, but a man's voice. Utah walked closer.

The scream trailed off to a keening whimper. A shape, on the ground, rocking back and forth. As Utah walked, the shape took form. A man, lying on his side, clutching his belly. Gutshot. Pax.

Utah took in a sharp breath. Scanned the desert around him. Down over the ridge, the headlights pointed the other direction. Looking for somebody. He looked

down again. Looking for Pax? It seemed odd, but so did Pax running up on him like that, unannounced. He nudged Pax with a toe. "Pax, you alive?" A moan.

Utah squatted down next to the man.

"You shot me," Pax whispered.

"What the hell you doing, Pax? You know better than to go running up on someone like that."

"Mama Jones." It came out clear, but Utah couldn't make any sense of it.

"Mama Jones what?"

"Mama Jones. Everybody." Pax's breath came quick and ragged, as if he were gargling sand.

Utah reached out, took Pax by the shoulders. "You want help, I can help." He knew from the way Pax was breathing, though, that he couldn't do much to save him.

"Cooking." And Pax lost consciousness.

Utah couldn't make sense of Pax's last words. He sat by him, late into the night, wondering why Pax would run to him, and what any of it had to do with Mama Jones and everybody cooking. He went into his house to get a blanket. He didn't know whether or not Pax would even notice the cold outside, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Back outside, Pax had opened his eyes, regained consciousness. He sweated and shivered and Utah placed the blanket over his body. Tried to make him more comfortable. "You want something to drink? Water?" Pax nodded. Utah went inside and came back with a jar full of water. He brought it to the dying man's lips and Pax

tried to swallow, but ended up coughing it back out. Utah noticed that there was a lot of blood mixed with the water that came out of Pax's mouth.

"In the morning, we'll get you to a hospital or something." Utah didn't really know if this would be the case. The nearest hospital was over a hundred miles away, and he didn't have a phone. His battered Chevy could make it, but didn't have enough gas for a round trip. Pax looked at him, winced from the pain. "Maybe we could use Mama Jones's phone."

As soon as he said it, Pax shook his head violently. "No!" The effort clearly pained him, and he knew that he might die without the help of somebody else, but he was emphatic not to be seen by Mama Jones.

"You in trouble, Pax?" Utah said.

"Took their stash."

"What stash?"

"Meth. They were cooking meth."

Now it made sense. The truck searching, Pax running. Pax knew something. Something that made him a threat. Even if he knew about some kind of operation, though, does that really make him a threat? Hell, half the people living on the mesa, including himself, grew a little of their own pot. He didn't just know something.

"What about it?"

"There was a lot. Cops will come."

"You called the cops?"

"Uh uh." Pax moaned.

“What then?”

“The community. Can’t have cops out here. Will ruin everything. Too much.”

Utah thought it over. “What did you do?”

“Had to take it.”

“You took what? Drugs? Money?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you do with it? Where is it?”

Pax squeezed his eyes shut. Held back. When he opened his eyes, he looked defeated, glanced down toward his coat.

Utah reached out, patted Pax’s body, probably too rough, until he felt the lumps under his clothing. He pulled the blanket aside and reached into Pax’s coat. He withdrew his hand clutching a packet of bills, slick with blood. There was more. A lot more.

Now, Utah thought, there was a decision to be made. One that he didn’t ask for, but one that would alter the course of the rest of his life. Pax was going to die. Of that he was pretty sure. There was no way he could get the elder to a hospital in time. He didn’t own a phone, so there would be no 911 call. Mama Jones had a phone, but it seemed to Utah that Mama wouldn’t be in a real helpful mood this evening. She’d only have one thing on her mind, and it wouldn’t be helping out her old friend.

Utah felt the weight of the roll of bills in his hand. Heavier than any paper money he’d ever had in his pocket. The bills were tightly wound and lashed together with a thick rubber band. A flash of lightning lit the sky and Utah saw that the outer bill had a

fifty printed on its corner. If they were all the same, he guessed that he was holding thousands of wet sticky dollars in his palm.

Pax's breath rattled in and out. His eyes were closed. He was very still. Utah kneeled very close by. The rocky ground dug into his knees, but the pain barely registered. He reached a hand into Pax's jacket, searched the pockets, found another roll of cash and a couple Ziploc bags of yellow-white crystals. Probably enough meth to keep the whole community high for weeks. That wasn't it, though. This stuff wasn't for them, it was for outsiders. There's no way Mama Jones would want a bunch of meth-heads running around her desert at night, howling at the moon, disturbing the drum circle. It would be fine, though, for the tweakers to be having conversations with imaginary devils and scratching themselves raw in town, where they wouldn't bother anybody.

Utah looked down at Pax. Under the dreads and the beard he was really just an idealistic kid. Hell, that was one thing that everyone out here had in common. At one time or another, they were all just like Pax: disillusioned with society, sick of rules and oppression, and convinced that they could do it better on their own. If only people could get away from people, Utah thought, it just might work. Pax was only just finding out that part – that as long as people tried to live together, someone would try to seize power, someone would lie, someone would steal. It was something the rest of them knew, but never talked about, preferring instead to ignore any potential problems and pretend to live in peace.

Satisfied that he had gotten all he could out of the kid, Utah picked up his rifle and put a bullet in Pax's head. Mama Jones and her people might come looking around,

he thought. He had to get rid of the body. Had to get rid of the money, the drugs. The money, he could get rid of temporarily. He dug two small holes into the desert floor, about fifty yards apart, inserting a roll of bills into each and placing a stone on top to mark the spot. The meth he tossed into the latrine. Good riddance.

The only thing left was to get rid of the kid himself. He felt bad about what he had done. Couldn't be helped, he supposed. Still, Pax was a good kid trying to follow his beliefs. Some guys have to learn it the hard way. And sometimes the hard way was so hard you couldn't live through it. Nothing left to do but get the shovel and get to work.

Twilight

It was his wife who left first. Maybe that was his fault. He never should have brought her up here. He'd thought that she could handle it – the isolation, the long dark winters and the short nightless summers, the incessant rain of the coastal forest. No. That wasn't the truth. He hadn't thought of her at all.

She could've at least taken the kid with her. He supposed that he did all right with the kid, though. He'd taught him how to fend for himself. How to catch fish. How to tell which berries to eat and which were poisonous. How to start a fire in the rain. How to avoid the bears. His mother, though, she must've been the one to teach him how to leave. Just seventeen years old and he says he's going down to Seattle to find his mom. He told the kid that he didn't even know if she still lived in Seattle. Didn't matter. He left anyway.

Ever since then he'd felt like he was in what some people called the twilight of their lives. And he was only forty-six years old. That was okay, though. Up here twilight could last a long time. He lived his life by routine. He felt the rhythm of days, seasons, and years pulsing by like muted drumbeats deep in his flesh. Summer mornings he'd build a fire, cook up a stack of pancakes, gather and split wood for the coming winter. Afternoons he spent fishing until the fall rolled around. Then he'd take his gun

into the woods looking for moose. Winter he fought off the urge to hibernate by reading and making himself busy with minor repairs. He felt joy as the daylight returned to the country in the spring and began the cycle all over again.

One day he awoke to realize he'd spent the last ten years of his life alone. He'd only spoken to the occasional bush pilot or shopkeeper on the rare trip into town, and his voice had quieted from disuse. His beard had grown long, and his body hard and gristled. He felt that maybe it was his time to leave, but his feet felt rooted to the landscape. He was no longer himself, free to make these choices. He was like the stone, the tree, the mountain, and the tides – all sewn into the fabric of the land and unable to extricate themselves without tearing it apart.

That evening he walked deep into the woods, conscious of everything in a way he hadn't been since the first day he'd arrived with his expecting bride. He inhaled the spruce-scented mist, stroked the hanging moss, let the ferns paint his pant legs with dew. He walked into the twilight, stopping only to watch the moon rise into the gray sky. He felt an urge to howl, but knew there was no one to hear him.

Blood and Dirt

Mosquitoes pricked Doyle's skin. They whined in his ears. They tickled his eyelids. It had rained that afternoon, and Doyle should have known not to go into the woods after sunset, but he had to get out here, be by himself for awhile. That's what he'd told Sheila. She always let him go when he said that.

The path that Doyle followed was hard to see in the day, almost impossible now in the dim moonlight that filtered through the trees. Even so, Doyle didn't have to pay the path much mind. He'd walked this way so often over the years that sometimes he expected to wake up some night and find that he'd sleepwalked his way to the patch of marijuana that grew at the end of the faint trail.

He walked through the pine flatwoods that radiated from the old family cabin that he and Sheila lived in, over a little clearing that his dad had called the prairie for as long as he could remember, and down into the swamp. He worried some about the cottonmouths that sometimes curled up around the cypress knees, and stomped his feet on this part of the path to warn them away. He kept to the high ground, avoided the black pools that could hide gators and snapping turtles that could take off a toe as easy as a pair of tinsnips.

A rise of ground led to a hammock ringed by a thicket of vine and scrubby oak saplings. Once through the brush, the mature oaks spread out overhead, sheltering the marijuana plants underneath. Here, Doyle sat on a bare patch of ground, listened to the raucous frogsong that surrounded him, thought about what he had come here to do. Way back at the cabin, the dogs were barking, the sound travelling through the woods, over the prairie and down into the swamp, muffled by distance, softened in the humidity, to where Doyle sat under the oaks. He resolved to take action, and whatever reaction that might come from it.

When he got back to the cabin, Doyle could see his brother Ray's pick-up parked outside. That explained the dogs barking, he thought. He could see Sheila through the window talking to Ray's wife, Polly. Sheila looked like she was trying to be polite, but Doyle could see in her body language that she was tense. She held herself stiffly, back too straight to be relaxed, hands clutching a bottle of beer as opposed to gesturing freely as she sometimes did. Nevertheless, a smile played across her face. Always the hostess, Doyle thought.

He took the steps up to the front door and went inside. Ray was sitting on the couch, beer in hand, but it didn't look like it was his first of the night. "How's it goin, brother," he said. His eyes were red and he spoke slowly. Doyle had seen him like this many times over the years, and he knew that the sluggishness could be deceiving. Ray's temper lay coiled inside him like a moccasin that could strike out quickly and with little warning.

“Ray,” Doyle said. “Looks like you done started without me.”

“Don’t be rude, little bro, say hi to Polly.”

“Hi to Polly.” Doyle nodded in her direction. Polly smiled in response. She was a meek woman, Doyle thought. Probably learned to lay low having to live with Ray over the years. Hell, in private she probably was limited to yessir and nosir. This must be a vacation for the woman. Polly was hard to talk to. Not much of a conversationalist. Doyle sometimes joked with Sheila that Polly was conversationally constipated. He got a big kick out of that, but Sheila never laughed. Instead, she would just frown and tell him to stop picking on poor women.

“Where’s Ray Junior?” Doyle asked.

Polly looked to Ray before responding, gave him the chance to say if he wanted to. When he didn’t, Polly said he was staying at her sister’s.

Now Ray spoke. “Wanted to bring the little booger. Polly don’t seem to think he’s old enough yet. I say what the fuck? How old was we when Daddy took us on our first hog hunt? Six? Seven?”

“I think we was a bit older than that, Ray.” Doyle walked to the fridge, pulled out a beer.

“I still say what the fuck. Don’t want to raise a kid soft. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with you, Doyle.” Ray grinned, more like a dog showing his teeth than anything else, waiting for Doyle to take the bait.

Sheila spoke up. “Come on, boys. I can vouch that Doyle’s not soft. Least not till he’s done.”

“That woman of yours got quite a mouth on her,” Ray said.

“Don’t mind that.” Doyle gave Sheila a knowing look. “It’s just how she’s raised.”

In the night Doyle woke to the sound of barking dogs. “Shit.” He put his feet on the floor and walked out to the living room. It was dark, but he could see that Ray wasn’t on the couch where he had passed out a few hours before. He went to the extra bedroom. The door was cracked open so that he could see inside. Polly lay there on the bed alone, covered in mismatched sheets, facing the opposite wall. Doyle could hear her breathing. Slowly, she rolled toward him. Now he could see that she wore no nightclothes. The shadows of her ribs stood out in the pale light. Doyle saw her open her eyes, look right at him. She didn’t say anything. He shut the door.

When Doyle went out front, he was only wearing his boxers. He could see Ray’s silhouette over by the chainlink kennels where the dogs were so stirred up. Before going over to find out what the hell Ray was doing out here in the middle of the night, he pissed from the front steps onto the dirt in front of the cabin.

He skirted the wet spot on the ground and walked over to where Ray was. The pine duff felt damp and springy under his bare feet. He could hear Ray talking to the dogs, saying things in a low voice, but with urgency, almost like he were some kind of coach, trying to fire up his team but not wanting the other side to hear. He was calling them out by name – Dixie and Mylo, the Catahoulas, Otis, the bulldog, and Hammer, the pit bull. “Come on, Dixie, we’re gonna find us a good ole hog. Hear that, Otis? Hear

that, Mylo? Come on, Hammer, were gonna catch us a big motherfucker. A big motherfucker of a boar. Tusks four inches long.”

Doyle stood there and Ray went on like that for some time. Doyle didn’t know what the hell Ray was trying to do. The dogs didn’t need to get excited about going hunting. They needed their rest just like everybody else. In fact, he doubted that what Ray was saying was having any effect on the dogs whatsoever. They were just riled because they didn’t like Ray. They’d hunt for him and all, but mostly just because they liked to hunt. Leave them alone in a room with Ray, and it would be interesting to see who came out the door.

Finally, Ray looked back at Doyle. “Little brother,” he said.

“The hell you tryin to do, Ray? If we had neighbors youda woke em.”

“You sound like Ma. She didn’t know shit, either.”

Ray could always use Ma to get under Doyle’s skin. He didn’t know whether it was purposeful or not, but Ray was full of sharp little jabs and fond of picking at sores where Ma was concerned. Doyle had only known his mother to be loving, but she left when he was six. Ray was ten. He couldn’t argue. Ray had known her better. Thankfully, Ray steered away from the subject.

“That’s the beauty of livin out here, Doyle. Raise holy hell and it ain’t nobody that gives two shits. I sure wouldn’t mind it, Doyle. Not one bit. But, hey. You was always the good boy. What the hell was Daddy supposed to do? It ain’t like he was goin to leave the place to me where I was.”

This was the same conversation they'd had over and over again. The one about Daddy drinking himself to death while Ray was locked up for cutting a guy's neck with a broken bottle. Doyle knew already how it would play out, but he always tried to avoid it anyway.

"Come off it, Ray. You know it ain't like that. Daddy was just tryin to do right by both of us. You got that money he saved up all that time."

"Yeah, but money gets spent little brother. Now look. I'm livin in some fuckin trailer park. Polly don't respect that. I can see it. She's thinkin, Ray, why don't we live in some nice house like a fuckin respectable family? You think that don't hurt? She knows it hurts. That's why she don't never say nothing when I get too mad sometimes. You ain't got them problems, little brother. Land and houses don't get spent. They just get history in em. That's what's respectable. History." Ray looked hard at Doyle. His eyes appeared clear now. Sober.

"Don't be getting all deep on me this late at night, Ray. You know I can't argue with you. You always was the smart one."

"Don't you forget it, little brother." Ray slapped Doyle on the back of the neck. Squeezed a little too hard and gave him a shake. "Don't you forget it."

Next morning Doyle lay awake in bed, just listening. The house was quiet. Birds were singing outside. He could pick out the song of a mockingbird that he knew was sitting in that old longleaf pine right out back. He heard the whistle of a red-shouldered

hawk not far away. He felt Sheila roll over next to him and closed his eyes, hoping to buy a few extra minutes of silence.

“I know you’re awake, so don’t even pretend you can’t hear me.” Sheila leaned up on one elbow, smiled down at Doyle.

He opened one eye. “Now you’re just talkin to spite me. I’ll bet you ain’t even got nothing to say.”

“You should know me better than that, mister.”

“O.K. What is it?”

“It’s Ray. I think he’s getting worse.”

“I didn’t know he was ever any better.”

“You know what I mean, Doyle. Polly barely talks. It’s like she’s scared to death of him. And I heard the dogs last night, too. What was all that about?”

“What can I do? Ray’s family, whether we like him or not. He’s the only family I got left.” Doyle rubbed the sleep from his eyes, stretched and yawned. He meant that he was getting tired of the subject.

“All I’m saying is maybe you should talk to him, Doyle.” Sheila put his hand on her breast, clutched it there like she was trying to send him a message.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get us sorted out.” Doyle moved as if to get up out of bed, but Sheila squeezed his hand tighter to her chest. Maybe he’d just lay there another minute.

When Doyle made it out to the kitchen, Polly was sitting there at the table, knees to her chest, perching on a chair like a bird. Doyle noted that she had her clothes on.

“Polly,” he said.

“Mornin, Doyle.” When Polly talked, it always sounded like someone had turned her volume down. “Made some coffee. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Hell, Polly. *Mi casa es su casa.*” When Polly didn’t respond, Doyle said, “Means my stuff is your stuff. Do as you like round here, don’t have to ask nobody’s permission.”

Polly frowned at this. “You’re a good man, Doyle.” She furrowed her brow, as if it were painful to say this.

“No, just family is all. Don’t go overestimatin. I’m not likely to live up to your thoughts of me.” Doyle poured himself a cup of coffee, took a sip. “You always did like it strong. This is likely to get a person movin in the morning. I’m fixin to whip up some breakfast. What’ll you have?”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Nonsense. How’s eggs and sausage for you? Put some meat on those bones.” Doyle rummaged through the cabinets, fishing out a big skillet. Polly made no more objections, so he got some extra eggs from the fridge. “You should always fry up the meat first, sausage, bacon, whatnot. That’s the way Ma always did it. That way the eggs’ll soak up the grease when you cook em afterwards. Soak up the flavor, too.” He glanced over his shoulder at Polly, saw her looking at him. “Hell. Look at me, just ramblin. You know all this stuff. Just tell me to shut up.”

Ray emerged from the extra bedroom, crossed over to where Polly sat, put a hand on her shoulder without affection. “What are y’all two talkin about?” He looked to Doyle for the answer. “Sounds mighty friendly out here, like y’all was havin some real fine discussion.” He chuckled a little, looked down at Polly.

“You know me, Ray. Always blatherin on about something or other. Your little Polly there’s quiet as a churchmouse, but real friendly. Won’t even tell me to shut up when she knows I oughta.” Doyle put some sausage links on a plate, set the plate on the table. “Eat up, guys. Don’t wait for me.”

Polly got up, took a plate off the counter for Ray, got a fork and knife from the drawer, a napkin. She set his place at the table, loaded his plate with sausage links and returned to her seat. Doyle looked at Ray. “Like you’re king of the castle or somethin.”

“That’s how I raised her.”

After breakfast Doyle went out to the kennels to get the dogs set for the hunt. He felt optimistic about the results. He had seen pigs, and the signs of pigs all over his property. Seemed you just couldn’t get rid of them if you tried. He let the four dogs out of the kennels one by one, buckling thick leather collars on Dixie and Mylo, his bay dogs, and strapping Otis and Hammer into cut vests. They were the catch dogs, the ones that did the gritty work of running in and seizing the wild boar by the ear and holding him until the situation could be reconciled in some way. Most of the time that meant the hog would be tied, taped up, brought back to a pen where its meat could sweeten up a while

before slaughter. Sometimes the hog would be shot where the dogs trapped it. Doyle liked to make sure that part went quickly. Ray sometimes had other ideas.

“Hey, Doyle. Got a surprise for you.” Ray called, coming out the front door of the cabin. He walked to his truck, reached into the bed, and pulled out two six-foot-long spears. Each had a wooden shaft fitted with an eighteen-inch steel spearhead.

Doyle tried not to wince. “What you got there, Ray?” He knew full well what the spears were for. He just thought he’d see what Ray had to say for himself.

“What’s it look like? Boar spears, man. We’re gonna do it the old time way. None of this blastin away with guns, scarin every man and beast within hearin distance. This is the way real men used to do it.” Ray was grinning. He held a spear in each hand, shafts rested in the dirt at his feet, points toward the sky. His eyes ran up and down first one, then the other. He tossed one out toward Doyle, as casually as if it were a broomstick.

Doyle reached out to grab the spear, but his positioning was awkward. The end of the shaft caught on the ground and the point accelerated downward, glancing off Hammer’s cut vest. “Damn, Ray.” The dog scampered a few feet away. Stood glaring at Ray.

“Aw, he’ll be fine. Had his vest on. No big fuckin deal. Pick up the damn spear and let’s get this show on the road.”

“Fuckin spears, Ray?”

“It’s only for your sake it’s not just knives.”

Not too far from Doyle's front steps, he turned Dixie and Mylo loose. They went off, zigzagging their way into the woods, and Doyle and Ray followed, each one with a catch dog on a leash. Ray had Otis, the big bulldog, and Doyle had Hammer. Neither dog liked Ray too much, but Doyle figured Hammer probably liked him a little less after being hit with the spear.

Doyle didn't mind hog hunting. Hell, he had even supposed that he enjoyed it. What he really enjoyed, though, was just being out tramping around in the woods with his dogs. The meat for the table was nice. When he looked at Ray, he saw a whole different story. In the woods, Ray's face constricted into what Doyle thought of as a pine knot. His brows furrowed between his eyes, his mouth held tightly, lips seeming to disappear. With Ray, it was all about the kill.

Crossing the prairie, a big kingsnake slid through the grass in front of Doyle. Each scale reflecting a bead of sunlight. Hammer whined, wanting to lunge at it, but Doyle held him back. He paused to watch the serpent go on its way. As he watched, Ray came up beside him with Otis. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ray take his spear by the shaft and swing it like a hatchet, the head whistling down upon the kingsnake, chopping it neatly in half on the ground. Doyle stood and stared at where the snake writhed in two pieces, dark and gleaming against the yellow grass. He couldn't help but think it had the look of a creature surprised that its normal mode of locomotion had failed it.

Ray laughed a big belly laugh. He bent over, put his hands on his knees. Acting like he'd never seen anything so funny. Doyle just looked at him. Too mad to say

anything, he marched off in the direction of the dogs past the snake, now slowing in its contortions as it bled into the dirt.

“Come on, Doyle.” Ray called from somewhere behind him. “You gotta admit that was goddamned funny.”

Doyle let Hammer drag him into the swamp, happy to get clear of Ray for a while. He could catch up when he caught up. Be just as fine if I didn’t see that fucker for the rest of the day, he thought.

Just then, the bay dogs let loose, their barks resounding through the cypress forest. Hammer pulled harder, knowing what was to come, and Doyle had to jog behind, gripping the dog’s leash in one hand, his spear in the other. He imagined what he looked like running around the woods with a spear. A damned lunatic, that’s what.

Hammer took him on the straightest line to where the other dogs were making all the racket. Doyle busted through palmettos, waded creeks, not thinking much now about gators or turtles, only wanting to catch up to the chase. Finally, he caught sight of some movement through the trees. The two leopard dogs were circling a big boar. The hog was turning, trying to keep both dogs in front of him, grunting and looking for a chance to slash at the dogs with his tusks.

Hammer tugged at the lead, and Doyle had to drop his spear and hold on with both hands. He considered letting Hammer go in by himself, but it would probably be safer to wait until Ray showed up with Otis.

He stood there watching the dogs and the boar, Mylo and Dixie dancing just beyond the reach of the tusks, occasionally darting in to nip at the hog’s hindquarters.

The boar's eyes seemed so small in that massive head, and yet they burned with a primal hatred. Doyle had been charged before, and he had always heard horror stories of hunters getting treed for hours by an angry pig, or worse, slashed up and left to bleed in the woods. His Daddy had always told him that there wasn't nothing meaner than a big old boar, all them male juices running through his body for so many years made him gristly and ornery to the point he couldn't see straight.

Mylo danced a little too close just then, and the hog spun around and slashed wildly, catching the dog on the hindquarters and opening up a gash. The dog yelped a little and blood leaked down his leg. "Dammit, Ray," Doyle said. He looked behind him to see if he could find his brother somewhere.

The sound of the boar's high-pitched squeal, like a woman's scream, brought his attention back to the fray. As if by magic, the hog suddenly had a big white dog hanging from his ear as he thrashed and turned. Otis. What the fuck? Ray must have come in from a different direction. What the hell was he doing just letting Otis go in there alone? Doyle unclipped Hammer's leash and the dog flew in to latch onto the boar's other ear.

He looked around for Ray and found him standing stiffly by the trunk of a huge cypress tree. Ray wasn't watching the dogs, though. He was staring right at Doyle.

"What the fuck, Ray?" he called.

Ray didn't answer back. Instead, he walked forward to where the dogs now had the boar's head pinned to the ground, waiting until he got within a few feet before taking his eyes off Doyle. He shifted his gaze to the boar, the dogs still moiling around, Mylo still too wound up to take notice of the cut on his hip, blood drying and matting in his fur,

and lifted his spear. Brought it down with force behind the pig's shoulder, into its ribcage. The squeals increased in volume. Ray pulled the spear out. Stuck the boar again. Again. Again.

The two bay dogs, now smelling the blood, grew even more riled, danced even closer, yearning to lick the boar's wounds, roll in the blood on the ground. Mylo, in his excitement, bumped the back of Ray's knee, causing it to buckle. In a flash, Ray turned and kicked the dog hard up under its belly, lifting it off the ground. Mylo landed with a thump, tried to drag himself away, but Ray was quicker. He stabbed the dog in the back of its neck and it went limp.

"Goddamn you, Ray." Doyle walked up and looked down at his fallen dog. There was nothing he could do to help Mylo. The dog just lay there, twitching. "Why'd you have to go and do something like that?"

Ray stared back at him and Doyle thought he saw something of the boar's eyes in his own brother's face. "What's a matter, little brother? Sad you lost your pup?"

"That don't answer my question, Ray." Doyle felt his breath fast and shallow in his chest.

"I think we both know what's upset me so. I seen what you did, Doyle." Ray hefted the spear in his hand, took a step towards Doyle.

Doyle sidestepped, keeping the dead boar between him and his brother. "What are you talkin about, Ray? You must be outta your head. I ain't done nothing to upset you."

“Course not, Doyle. You was always the good boy. Wouldn’t do nothing to upset no one. Not even his ex-con scum of a big brother.”

“That’s right, Ray. Come on. We’ll get these dogs back to the house, come back with the four wheeler, pick up the hog. We’ll all be eatin barbecue this evenin.” Doyle wished he hadn’t dropped the spear back there dealing with Hammer.

Ray continued as if he hadn’t heard anything Doyle had said. “No, you would never even think of lookin at your poor brother’s wife.” He continued stalking Doyle around the boar, his face seeming calm, but his eyes on fire.

“Ray, come on. I ain’t sniffin around your wife if that’s what you’re getting at. That was an accident. I was only lookin for you. The dogs was barkin, I didn’t know what was goin on.” Doyle tripped over Otis, the dog still worrying the boar’s ears at his feet. He sprawled on the ground, caught himself, scrambled to get back to his feet and slipped again in the dirt, now slick with blood. In that instant, Ray was over him.

“I saw what you did to our little garden.”

Doyle stared back at him.

“Every one of them plants knocked down and trampled on. Might not mean much to you, brother. Means a hell of a lot to me. I got a kid to worry about. I need the money that stuff brings in. You got everything you need. You didn’t want to be involved, coulda said so. I coulda left you out of it. I guess you’re in it now, though.” Ray spit on the ground next to Doyle’s hand.

“Fuck you, Ray. That stuff is on my land. I don’t want to end up spendin time in prison over a few extra bucks.” Doyle could feel a bead of sweat running down his forehead. Felt the sting of it as it got into his eye, but tried not to blink.

“That’s right. Your land. I done forgot.” Ray reached out one hand as if to help his brother up, but still clutched the spear tightly in the other. “Come on, Doyle. We’re family.”

Doyle didn’t take Ray’s hand. Instead, he pushed himself up off the ground. Ray standing there the whole time with his hand out like a statue, wanting to make sure the gesture didn’t go unnoticed. Doyle was conscious of the dogs whining behind Ray, sniffing at the dead boar, his dead dog. “I guess it’s true what they say, then. You can’t pick your family.”

Ray lunged at him with the spear. Doyle jumped back, but was too slow. He couldn’t believe that this was happening. At least not to him. The spearpoint sunk an inch into his belly. He felt the blood running into the waistband of his pants. When Ray tried again, he grabbed at the spear, got it just behind the point, and didn’t let go.

Ray pushed forward, grunting, his eyes narrowed, and Doyle fell back to the ground. He gasped for breath, but it wouldn’t come. The shaft of Ray’s spear slipped a little in his sweaty hands, the point inching closer to his face.

Ray started screaming. He let go of the spear. Doyle rolled away and looked up to see Hammer gripping Ray by the hamstring, shaking his whole body back and forth, but making no sound. All the sound was coming from Ray, who was swinging his fists back at the dog, but only hitting the Kevlar cut vest, doing no damage.

Doyle found Ray's spear still in his hand. He got to his knees, and then up to his feet, breathless from the fall and lightheaded with adrenaline. He looked at Ray's eyes. They were still furious, burning pinpricks set into his skull. He looked at Hammer, the dog still gripping and shaking, Ray's blood on his muzzle. Dixie and Otis were barking, but keeping their distance.

Doyle stepped forward with the spear and drove it deep into Ray's ribcage. He let go of the shaft, left the spear sticking out of his brother. Ray stopped struggling with Hammer. He fell back, landing on the dog still hanging on his leg. Hammer let go and grabbed him by the shoulder, holding Ray as if he were a pig, pinning him down.

Doyle sat next to his brother. Tugged on the dog's collar to get him to let go. Ray's chest fluttered up and down with his breath. Blood gurgled in the back of his throat. His eyes were wide open, staring up into the cypress trees and the sky above. "Damn it, Ray," Doyle said. He stroked his big brother's hair for a long time after he died, after the dogs had filled their bellies on the carcass of the boar and wandered off to nap, after the sun had traveled its course long enough to drag shadows across Ray's face, and watched as the dirt swallowed the last of the bad blood under the cypresses.

Itch: A Vampire Story

The boy is blindfolded. His hands are bound together with scratchy hemp rope and his wrists are red and angry. His feet are free, but he doesn't kick or run. His mouth isn't gagged, but he doesn't scream. The two other boys in the car, an old beat-up hearse, have turned the stereo up loud, blasting Type O Negative, and the blindfolded boy can feel the bass thumps through the back of his seat.

The two boys up front are dressed in black. They share a preference for silver jewelry designed in bat and dragon motifs. The driver has his hair pulled back in a greasy black ponytail. The boy in the passenger seat finishes the last of his McDonald's French fries and reapplies his black lipstick. Ponytail looks over at him, turns the stereo down a notch.

-- Don't care what you say, man. Stuff makes you look like a fat fucking fairy.

Lipstick flips down the visor, looks at himself in the mirror, bares his teeth.

-- Fuck you. Stuff is the shit. Chicks dig a guy who's not afraid of a little makeup. Makes them think you're secure in your sexuality and shit.

-- Whatever. You're still fat, you Dr. Phil motherfucker.

Lipstick flips the visor back up. He looks over his shoulder at the blindfolded boy in the back seat. The boy is young—fourteen or fifteen. He's skinny and wears black

like the older boys, but he wears no jewelry or makeup or long greasy hair. The boy is just a boy. Blindfolded. Tied-up. In the back of a hearse.

-- Where are we taking the kid?

Ponytail grins

-- I know this awesome fucking place. It's so out in the middle of nowhere.

The blindfolded boy fidgets in the back seat.

-- I hope we get there fucking soon. This rope is scratchy as hell.

Ponytail turns the stereo up and steers the car onto highway 41.

The old hearse rumbles along pretty well once Ponytail gets it up to speed. As the boys shoot west along the highway, the sun sets in front of them. The windshield is lit up with the opaque smear of insectile corpses swept across the glass under the wiper blades.

Backlit, the Spanish moss hangs black from the cypress trees along the road. The canal hat parallels the highway turns blood-red under the reflective overcast. Lipstick counts off the alligators he sees silhouetted on the water, only eyes and nostrils above the surface.

-- Twenty-seven.

Ponytail punches in the cigarette lighter, waits for it to pop out, lights up a filterless Lucky.

-- The fuck are you counting for? There's a lot of fucking gators in the glades. We get it.

Lipstick snorts back a laugh.

-- Just something to pass the time. You know, in some of the legends vampires had to count everything? It's fucking true. So if some peasant tossed out like a shitload of rice in front of a vampire, he could get away while the vampire was busy counting the grains.

-- That's fucked up. Some asshole throws rice in front of me, I'll bite first, count later.

-- Fucking-A right.

Ponytail sucks on his cigarette and Lipstick looks out the window.

-- Twenty-eight.

The blindfolded boy sighs in the back seat. He shifts his weight to one side, then the other.

-- Come on, guys. It feels like I've been back here for hours. I gotta pee.

Ponytail's eyes flick to the rearview.

-- Shit. Can't it wait like a few fucking minutes. We're almost there.

-- Fine.

Ponytail flicks the butt of his cigarette out the window. He hangs his left arm out the door, pounding out the beat from the stereo on the metal. He comes to a crossroad and makes a right. Within a few miles, the road deteriorates into a dirt track filled with potholes and puddles. The old hearse bounces and splashes along, shaking the boys down to their teeth. The boys in the front enjoy the ride, cursing every bump, but smiling just the same. The blindfolded boy groans.

-- Seriously, guys. I'm gonna piss my pants.

Ponytail hits the brakes and the car lurches to a stop.

-- No problem. We're here.

He turns to Lipstick.

-- Get the kid out. I'll grab the stuff from the back.

Lipstick gets out, opens the door for the blindfolded boy, looks around. On one side of the car, a grassy prairie stretches out to a distant line of trees. On the other, cypress and pond apple trees block out the sky, and ferns grow from rotted stumps thrusting up from shallow black water. Ponytail opens up the back of the hearse, grabs a duffle bag containing a flashlight, some rope, a crucifix, and a silver dagger, its hilt molded into the image of a snarling wolf. The blindfolded boy finds the ground with his feet, but stumbles as he gets out.

-- Can I get a little help, guys? Come on.

He dances from one foot to the other. Lipstick and Ponytail look at each other. Ponytail holds up the duffle bag and smiles.

-- Hands are full, man.

Lipstick rolls his eyes.

-- Mother. Fucker. Look, why don't we just let the kid do it himself. I mean, did he really have to be tied up and fucking blindfolded in the first place?

-- Fine.

Lipstick takes a folding knife from his pocket, opens it, and saws through the blindfolded boy's rope.

-- Finally.

The boy takes his blindfold off, unzips his pants.

-- Where the hell are we?

Ponytail leans back up against the car.

-- You finish, I'll fucking show you.

The boy shakes, zips up. Lipstick wipes sweat from his forehead. Even though the sun is down and the light is fading, the humidity holds the heat of the day and it's still over ninety.

-- Lead the way.

Ponytail steps into the grass at the edge of the prairie. The boy follows. Lipstick pauses.

-- What the fuck? I thought we were walking farther down the road or something. How are we gonna find our way back when it gets dark?

-- Don't be such a fucking pussy. My grampa used to take me hunting out here. I know what I'm doing.

-- What about snakes? I heard after some hurricane, fucking pythons got loose out here and now they're *breeding* and shit. Twenty fucking feet long. Eating fucking *alligators*.

-- They'll eat the kid first. You're too fucking fat to be worried about anything eating you.

Ponytail steps back out of the grass, shoves Lipstick forward, slaps at a mosquito on the back of his neck.

-- Let's get going. Sooner we do this, sooner we can get back.

-- All right. If I get bit by some fucking snake or something, though, you're gonna owe me. Bigtime. Don't know why we gotta do this all out in the middle of nowhere. Would have been just as good to do it at my house. I got those skull candles and a blacklight. Would have been just as cool. I got a fucking X-box.

Lipstick and the boy follow Ponytail as he marches through the hip-high grass. Water soaks their pant legs. Any clouds in the sky dissipate. The full moon brightens as it rises. Each of the boys slaps at his own arms, neck, back. They curse, redundant and meaningless as the croaking of the frogs around them.

-- Shit.

-- Dammit.

All except Ponytail, who slaps in silence. He stops.

-- Made it.

Lipstick frowns.

-- Made it fucking where?

-- Take a look around.

-- It's dark. We can't see nothing.

Ponytail opens the duffle. Finds the flashlight. Flicks it on.

-- Here.

The boy takes it, shines it in an arc. The beam swings across the tall grass once, twice, then it stops on something out of place. Something white, reflecting the light of the beam. Limestone, slightly obscured by a green sheen of moss or algae or something.

Ponytail grabs the boy's wrist.

-- Hold it.

He motions for the boy and Lipstick to follow him closer to the bright spot in the grass.

-- Holy shit.

Lipstick kneels down next to it. His finger traces grooves in the stone's surface.

-- There's a name here. Is this a fucking tombstone?

Ponytail claps him on the back.

-- You win the fucking prize. More than that, though. This place is a damn graveyard.

Ponytail takes the light from the boy's hand. He shines it around and they find three more grave markers just like the first keeled over in the long grass. The boy's eyes are wide. Lipstick and Ponytail are smiling. Ponytail takes the boy by the shoulder.

-- Want to get on with it, kid?

The boy just nods.

-- You're not scared, are you?

The boy shakes his head.

Lipstick takes the bag from Ponytail. He pulls out the silver dagger.

-- Didn't hear you.

The boy pulls away from Ponytail.

-- Fuck no.

Ponytail grins wide.

-- Good. Let me have it.

Lipstick hands the dagger over.

-- Come here, kid. Time to drink your fucking blood.

And that's when the darkness, the tombstones, the glades, the moon, these kids, and all this shit gets the best of him. The boy runs. He's there, with them, and then he's not.

Ponytail looks at Lipstick.

-- What the fuck? Kid! Get back here. You're gonna fucking get lost.

Lipstick cocks his head like a dog, listening for the boy.

-- He ain't even going in the right direction. You better go after him. If we lose him we're in a shitload of trouble. My mom ain't gonna let me out of the house for years.

-- Don't think you're just gonna wait here, you fat fuck. Let's go.

They wade deeper into the grass. The boy's noises are all but lost in the swamp. A swish of grass here, a grunt there. Lipstick stumbles, then goes down, falling forward, his hands sinking into the mud in front of him, and he can smell the decades of sulfurous decay.

Ponytail keeps going. Lipstick hears the sound of his voice fading quickly.

-- Come on, kid. What are you gonna do? Don't be scared. We didn't mean anything. Get the fuck back here or I'm gonna fucking kill you.

Lipstick crawls to his knees, wishing they had brought more than one flashlight. The night sounds get louder and quicker around him. He strains his ears to hear any sign

of Ponytail or the boy. Nothing. All he hears is the chorus of frogs and the whine of tiny wings in his ears.

Ponytail is up to his knees in water. He can't see the water, but it sloshes against his knees and he can feel it soaking up his pants toward his crotch. If the other guys were here he wouldn't tell them that he was scared, but it wouldn't matter, because he would be scared just the same. Snakes. Gators. Spiders. Panthers. They could be anywhere. He wades slowly, his shoes slipping deep into the muck with each step. It's almost as if the mud is alive down there, sucking at his legs, trying to hold him in place long enough for something to find and eat him.

-- Fuck!

His exclamation is lost immediately inside the high-pitched thrum of swamp life. Another labored step and he walks into a spiderweb invisibly stretched between two cypress trunks. He screams like a girl. He paws at his face, at his hair, tries to turn and run and slips waist-deep into a sinkhole. His lower half is immobilized, but he thrashes his torso around like larval insect struggling to emerge from its husk.

He doesn't have to stay in one place long before the mosquitoes find him. The thrashing and sweating and heavy breathing have drawn them in from all around. He slaps at them as they land, but he can't keep up. They land on his bare arms, they burrow into his hair, they tickle his ears, they crowd his nostrils. Some of the more aggressive bugs stab at him through his shirt. He opens his mouth to scream, but cuts it short as the mosquitoes follow his breath straight to the back of his throat.

Lipstick feels as if he's been walking all night. He's still sweating. He once saw his family's dog, Sadie, give birth. The placenta clung to the newborn pups until Sadie licked and tore them free. That's what he feels like now, like one of those pups, blind and smothered in a membrane of damp darkness. Even so, the moon sheds some light on things, and he knows that they were walking towards it when they left the car, so he keeps it at his back, figuring that he'll have to hit the road they came in on eventually.

He slaps at his neck as he walks. As long as he keeps moving, he leaves some of the mosquitoes behind. Still, he itches already. If there were more light, he could see the red furrows where he'd scratched his arms raw. After a few minutes, he sees an unnatural shine, a beam of light sweeping across the sky. The flashlight. He trudges on, breathing heavy, determined.

The boy almost screams when he sees Lipstick emerge from the grass, legs coated with mud, face smeared with sweat, blood, and a paste of insect parts.

-- Holy shit!

He's glad not to be alone anymore, and tries a little smile. Still, a quick moment of doubt remains until Lipstick smiles back, even laughs a little.

-- Goddam! You're one fast little fucker. You had me fucking worried.

Seriously. Stupid fucking idea to begin with, like I said. That's all his shit. I mean, I'm serious about this, too, but he's always gotta go all prince of darkness and shit. Fuck.

The boy looks at the ground.

-- Yeah. Fucker. Sorry I ran off. I still want to chill with you guys, you know, join your club and all, but. Fuck. You look like shit.

-- Feel like it, too. Look, I don't give a shit about that stuff. Far as I'm concerned, you're in.

Lipstick looks at the boy's face and arms, can see the mottled shadows of welts in the moonlight.

-- Shit, we've all donated enough blood tonight anyways. Am I right?

The boy scratches at his forehead, looks at the car.

-- Hell, yeah. You got the keys?

Great Apes

Last night, Bongo, the zoo's only chimpanzee, awoke to the sound of an animal screaming. At first, in that nether region between sleeping and wakefulness, he couldn't be sure. He often dreamed of screaming animals. But this time, the sound didn't stop when he pushed himself to a seated position and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

He cocked his head, trying to determine where the sound was coming from, but he couldn't be sure. It sounded as if it were coming from the direction of the hoofed animal enclosures, where they kept the oryx, the antelope, and the water buffalo. Bongo moved slowly to the front of his own enclosure, taking silent steps on the pads of his feet and the knuckles of his hands. He grasped the chain link with his fingers and toes and pulled his body as close as he could get to the outside. He looked into the darkness and saw only the dim outlines of the sidewalk and nearby bushes. No moon to illuminate things tonight. The old-style streetlamps placed along the walkways were out. A few distant stars burned coldly overhead. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the screaming stopped.

Here is a man in a trailer. He is of slight build, middle-aged, and balding. He wears a cheap pair of reading glasses. His name is Karl Jorgensen. Karl has been the

head zookeeper at Safari Park for twelve years. In fact, he is the only zookeeper at Safari Park. Still, when introducing himself, he likes to say, “Karl Jorgensen, head zookeeper.”

Karl wasn’t always the only zookeeper. When he started, the zoo had a team of six full-time employees to care for the animals. That wasn’t bad, considering that Safari Park was more of a private menagerie than a full-fledged zoo. It was built back in the seventies by Jackson Ford, mostly to entertain his wife, who had a certain fondness for wild animals. Mr. Ford could have supported the animals and staff out of his own pocket, but why should he? His wife’s little indulgence could pay for itself if they sold tickets and invited the public into their own little collection. So, Ford put a sign out by the highway, a ticket booth at the front gate, and charged ten bucks a head to witness his assortment of wild beasts.

That was a several years ago, now, and Ford has long since disappeared in the way that shady real estate millionaires sometimes do. He went to meet with a business partner at a small airport nearby. The next morning his car was still there, but Jackson Ford was gone. Of course it would now be up to his wife, Marla, to deal with the loose ends her husband left behind. Having only an eleventh-grade education, however, and never having worked a day since she met Ford, she was ill-equipped. Mrs. Ford did the only thing she knew how to do – find another rich guy.

In the meantime, though, Safari Park has suffered. Marla seems to have lost her interest in exotic animals, and is now just an absentee owner. Sometimes she pays the bills. Occasionally she forgets. Most of the staff couldn’t afford to not know whether or not their next paycheck would be signed, so they left. Everyone except Karl.

So, here is Karl Jorgensen, head zookeeper of Safari Park, in a dimly-lit mobile home towards the back of the grounds. A TV drones in the background, throwing its blue light off the walls. Karl sits at a card table, a fork in his left hand, a knife in his right, trembling slightly over the large cut of steak on the plate in front of him.

Bongo rises in the morning to the call of the birds in the aviary. The screaming during the night is now just a fading memory. He goes through his normal routine of stretching, pacing, at waiting to be fed. While he waits for his breakfast, he grooms himself. His dexterous fingers part the black hair on his arms, his belly, his legs. This self-grooming satisfies him. Occasionally he finds a solitary louse or flea or tick and pops it between his fingernails before he inserts the offending beast into his mouth. He finds the exercise somehow calming.

Perhaps, he thinks, it was because it reminded him of Conga, his companion of many years. He had been introduced to Conga upon his arrival to the zoo. He was just an ill-mannered juvenile, but she.... Well, she was a mature female in the prime of her breeding life. She wasn't quick to accept him, quite the contrary. In fact, when they first put him in her enclosure, she had flown into a rage, racing around the perimeter, baring her teeth, breaking sticks, all to show her dominance.

Eventually, she settled down. Bongo was no threat. He remembered urinating on himself, because he was so intimidated. How embarrassed he had been. He guessed that was when she took pity on him, realized what he really was – just a teenager who'd been ripped from his family as an infant in the jungle, then shuttled around from place to place

until he stopped being cute. A drifter through life with no family. She took him in. They mated often, but without results.

One day, some humans came and stuck her with something sharp. They were different humans than he was used to. They wore white, not khaki. Conga grew very sleepy. It looked like she couldn't even lift her arms. Bongo was scared. The humans entered the chimp territory, and Bongo did his best to seem intimidating – screaming and charging – but the humans knew it was all a bluff. A big one picked up Conga as if she were a sack of monkey biscuits, threw her over his shoulder, and carried her out of the enclosure. Bongo was disappointed in himself. How could he let them come into his territory and take his female? He should have ripped their hair out, bitten their fingers off. But he didn't, and she was gone.

Every day he expected Conga to return, and eventually he realized that she wouldn't. The humans who wandered by his cage were always chattering in their own language. He had learned many of their words, even though he couldn't coax his own mouth into forming them. One day, the human called Karl, the one who fed him and removed his feces, looked at Bongo and said a word that he'd never heard before. "Cancer."

Bongo had no idea what the word meant. But he could read the expression on Karl's face. His mouth turned down at the corners. His eyebrows slightly raised. His eyes watery. Bongo knew this was an expression of sadness, and for him, that emotion was recently only connected to one thing – the disappearance of Conga. So that was it. This new word, cancer, was why Conga was not coming back

So now Bongo sits, grooming himself, reminded of a time in the past when he shared his small world with another.

Karl feels sick. He crouches over the plastic toilet in his trailer's too-small bathroom, but wills himself not to throw up. The veins in his temples throb with pressure. He squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them, the fish on his shower curtain swim in front of his face. He's got to come up for air.

Karl takes a deep breath, and he feels a little better. The wave of nausea passes. He tells himself that today will be just like any other day. He'll do all the things he normally does. He'll take a shower, get dressed. He might skip breakfast. And then he'll go to work.

If you could call it work. He feels that every day he gets to do what he loves – take care of animals. He doesn't even care that, besides the feedings, he's mostly a glorified janitor, scraping excrement off of cage floors, cleaning water dishes, picking up soda cans and candy wrappers that kids leave behind. None of that matters to him. What does matter to him are the animals themselves. If they have to be caged, he thinks, then at least he'll give them the best life that he can.

Of course he has his favorites. There's Ollie, the cross-eyed Bengal tiger, what some places call a "throw-away" tiger because the only tigers people want to see are white. Karl can't imagine such a thing. Then there's Berta the alligator. But his real favorite has to be Bongo. There is just something about an animal that seems so humanlike. He's always sensed a special bond with the chimp, especially since Conga

had to be put down a few years back. He just feels that somehow Bongo can understand him, and he believes himself pretty good at figuring out what Bongo's needs are, too.

Often, at the end of the day, Karl finds himself outside Bongo's enclosure. He spends time talking to the chimp about all his concerns. About how the money for the zoo is drying up. About how Marla is getting even more inconsistent with his checks. He hasn't even seen her for months. About how, pretty soon, the park will only be able to afford to be open on weekends, since the cost of electricity in the little gift shop is outpacing the ticket sales on weekdays.

He tells Bongo all of this, and feels better when he's done. He figures that the chimp is like his therapist, or bartender or something. Always glad to lend an oversized ear. There is one thing, though, that Karl hasn't mentioned to Bongo. Not yet, anyway. He wouldn't want to upset him.

Bongo's day passes. Karl comes to feed him. He eats (mostly wilted greens and overripe fruits cast off from the local grocery store). He paces. He grooms. He sleeps. The highlight of Bongo's day is when, towards the end, Karl comes and sits and talks.

He doesn't know what Karl is talking about most of the time. But it's still nice to have some kind of interaction with something, even if it's not of your own species. Sometimes Karl even sits near enough that Bongo can extend his fingers and pick at Karl's scalp. There's never much in there, but it's the only polite thing to do. Plus, it makes Bongo feel chimpanzee again.

Lately, Karl has seemed agitated. He speaks quickly, makes surprising little gestures with his hands. He hasn't let himself be groomed in more than a week. Tonight, though, Karl seems calmer. Even sad. That reminds Bongo of Conga, so he sympathizes as best he can. Karl turns his back and leans up against the chain link. Bongo rushes over to groom him, but something is wrong. Karl doesn't look like he's getting any pleasure out of it. He's not relaxing. Dejected, Bongo stops. Karl turns around like he has something to say, he takes a deep breath, and walks away.

Karl is reaching as far as he can into Larry the lemur's habitat. He presses his cheek against the wire, and pokes a long L-shaped rod toward what appears to be a small pile of mushy oatmeal. The lemurs were always hard to clean up after. Not like the cats. One neat pile covered with leaves and dirt. No problem.

A buzzer sounds, interrupting Karl's thoughts.

The buzzer means visitors. Karl hasn't had to deal with many lately. When a car pulls up to the gate, the buzzer sounds and someone meets the visitors to collect their donation and let them in. Since Karl is the only one left, the job falls to him. At the gate, Karl spies a shiny sedan. He isn't that good with makes or models, but the car looks new. Expensive. Inside the car is a man and a woman. Probably a couple.

As he gets closer, the man gets out of the car. He's young, fit. Could be a young M.B.A. Maybe a trust fund kid, halfway through spending his money. He wears a pair of knee-length checkered shorts and a polo. Reflective aviator-style sunglasses. An insincere smile. "Hey, buddy," the man says, "how about you open up this gate and show

us around?" The man nods to his girlfriend in the passenger seat. She makes no move to acknowledge the recognition. Chews her gum. Looks bored.

Karl doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to disappoint anyone. "We're closed," he says.

The smile remains on the man's face. "That's not what the sign says." It's obvious that the man is not used to being refused anything.

"That sign's old. We're renovating. Making some changes. Wouldn't want to disappoint you folks with our mess." Karl hopes this is enough, that the man will get back into the car with his girlfriend and drive away. Instead, the man walks closer, right up to the gate.

"Come on, man. My girl wants to see the tigers." He extends his hand. It's holding a twenty.

"Sorry, sir. No can do." Karl is tempted by the twenty. The twenty would be a lifesaver. He turns and walks away, the man calling after him.

It is the middle of the day and Bongo is bored. When the humans used to come look at him at least he had some entertainment. The tire swing, the tree stump, the thick ropes strung overhead – he had grown tired of those things long ago.

He wouldn't even mind that much if the humans tried to poke him or toss little twigs at him like they sometimes did. He remembers a time when a little male human with blonde hair threw a pebble at him, and hit him in the eye. It stung, and made his eye fill with water. He raced around his enclosure, feeling the anger rise inside him. He

picked up a branch, slammed it in the floor, shattered it, little splinters flying everywhere. He bared his teeth and screamed, charged toward the little human, letting the chain link catch him like a net.

The little blonde male made a whimpering sound, and ran screaming back to its mother, who carried it away. Bongo had succeeded in showing dominance even from inside. He spent the rest of the day sitting at the highest point in his enclosure – a sawed-off tree trunk bolted to the floor – and looking over the rest of the humans that wandered by with the authority of an alpha male.

Lately, Bongo has taken up a new hobby. Pacing. Back and forth, and back and forth across the front of his cage. He thinks about doing that for a while, but he's feeling tired. He's been feeling tired a lot lately. So, instead, he lies on his side at the front of his enclosure and stares through the chain link.

Dandelion stalks are growing up from the cracks in the sidewalk. A stiff breeze strips the fluff from on top. Bongo watches an individual seed float on the air, dip through the chain link, and land on his upper lip. He licks at it with his thick tongue. No flavor. Only a bit of fuzz, but he swallows it anyway. Bongo would like to pull all the dandelions up by their roots, stuff them into his mouth, taste their juices running down the back of his throat. He hopes something walks by. Anything.

Karl opens his freezer. Full of meat. He has no appetite, but he knows he must eat. He removes a package and puts it in the microwave to defrost. He walks across the room to switch on the TV. Maybe it will be a distraction. *Animal Planet, Discovery,*

National Geographic. There's nothing good on so he turns it off. Nothing to do now but make dinner. Feed himself, just like he feeds the animals, day after day. Concentrate on the meat.

The microwave beeps and he takes the package out. Pink juice bleeds from the loosely wrapped corners of butcher paper. Karl tears open the paper. The smell hits him first. Not a bad smell – gamy, slightly grassy, very fresh – but Karl recoils from it like he's been punched in the face. He forces himself to return to the task at hand and picks up a meat cleaver with the thought of chopping it up for stew, making the meat lose any resemblance to what it once was.

He stands at the counter in his kitchen, staring at what lies before him – what looks like a small ham, except still jointed below it extends a thin, tawny colored leg, at the end of which is a hoof. He sets the cleaver down, thinking if he makes this into some sort of stew, it just wouldn't be right. The idea wasn't to forget what this was. The idea was to remember. He breathed deeply, inhaling the animal scent of the leg.

Karl thought to himself that if he were a real man, if he were truly being honest with himself about his beliefs, then he should just take a bite now, raw. He struggled with the thought a bit, before getting out a crock pot, and inserting the small leg, hoof and all

Over the next several weeks, Bongo notices that Karl's visits are getting longer. These days, however, Karl is barely speaking. Sometimes he just lies down on the grassy strip between Bongo's cage and the sidewalk. Once, he even spent the night like that,

waking up in the morning looking like he needed a good grooming. He definitely doesn't enjoy grooming anymore, Bongo thought. Karl even smelled different.

Bongo also notices that the zoo seems to be getting even less visitors now than it had been. He can't remember the last time he saw a human besides Karl. The weeds were growing onto the sidewalk. Bongo even notices that at night, things seem quieter. He can't see much outside his cage, but he knows something is changing, and in his experience, change was usually not for the better. It stresses him out, and he loses his appetite.

Karl knows Bongo is stressed. He hasn't been eating like he normally does. He thinks it won't be too much longer, and it will be all done. He finds Bongo this evening sitting in a far corner of his cage. As he approaches, Bongo gets up to come closer, but he looks weak. This breaks Karl's heart and he cries.

It's not the first time Karl has cried in front of the chimp, but it's the longest. Karl can't seem to stop himself and he sobs, his shoulders shaking with the ragged intake of his breath, for quite some time. Bongo seems to know, to understand, and he reaches his fingers through the fence to scratch Karl's shoulder.

In all his years as a zookeeper, Karl had tried to maintain a level of professionalism. He did not try to make the animals his pets. He didn't try to tame them. He only wanted to take care of them and, perhaps, to be accepted by them. So, in all these years, Karl has never been inside a cage with an animal alone. Whenever he must

clean an enclosure, he lures the tenant to a separate lock-down area. Once he closes the gate, he is free to operate inside the cage at no risk to either himself, or to the animal.

But now, Karl unlocks and opens the exterior gate that leads into Bongo's cage. He steps inside cautiously, whispering, "It's all right, Bongo. That's a good boy. That's a good monkey." Bongo doesn't move. He only sits there, following Karl's progress with his sad brown eyes. Karl, satisfied that he will not be attacked, settles himself down next to the chimp and relaxes. Bongo immediately reaches over and begins grooming Karl's hair.

"You know, Bongo, I never wanted it to be this way. Marla hasn't paid me in months. Who knows if she'll ever be back? I know one thing, though. When she gets back, I won't be here. Neither will you. None of us will."

Bongo appeared to understand. Karl continued. "I tried contacting other zoos, animal rescues, you name it. The problem is a lot of them are full. Another problem is that who knows how they treat their animals? I know how I treat mine. I guess I just couldn't give you guys up. I could never be without you. I think I've figured out a way."

He couldn't be sure, but Karl thought he saw Bongo nod his head.

Bongo thinks it odd that Karl would come inside with him. Outside seems like the place to be. Bongo is too weak to care much about that now, though, and welcomes the interaction. Karl is acting funny. Crying, smiling. Bongo doesn't know what to think. Mostly, he's frightened. He doesn't want to show weakness, however, so he tries to be strong, accepting Karl and grooming him.

Karl talks a long time. Something Bongo hasn't heard him do in a while. He still remembers some of the words. He recognizes his name. Bongo has always liked being called by his name. When Karl's done talking, Bongo cocks his head, waiting for more. It is only then that Bongo sees Karl has brought him something. He reaches out with the thing. Bongo has never seen one before. Something shiny and flat and hard. Karl lunges forward, tears in his eyes. Something sharp. Bongo hears himself screaming.