

HELL COMES WITH WOOD PANELED DOORS

“You may find yourself in tears by the end, both from nostalgia and the relief that you’re now too big to be crammed into that backseat ever again.”

— Mark Hosack, author of *Identity*



CHRISTOPHER GRONLUND

Praise for Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors

“Gronlund's *Hell* packs plenty beneath the hood. I loved traveling with Michael and his not quite normal (see: all-American) family. It's an endearing shaggy-dog adventure that had me rooting for a little familial love, and hoping they got the devil out of that car, by the time they reached the Grand Canyon with Grandma's ashes. Gronlund transports us so well into the great tradition of the American roadtrip that I'll offer a warning: if you, like me, have memories of being wedged between siblings and panting dogs for hours on end, you may find yourself in tears by the end of it, both by nostalgia and the sweet relief that you're now too big to be crammed into that backseat ever again”

— Mark Hosack, author of the business thriller *Identity*; screenwriter of *Give 'Em Hell Malone*

“Barring androids and certain born-as-adults aliens, I think pretty much everyone can find something to love in this hilarious, well-drawn coming-of-age story.”

— Shawn Kupfer, author of the *47 Echo* series

That Up Front Stuff

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Why allow others to copy and share this story? Simple: people usually share the stories they love with others, and I hope you love this story. I've discovered many favorite authors over the years because somebody loaned him a book I didn't purchase. More times than not, I ended up buying more books by the authors I discovered from friends sharing books with me.

Some might say, "But loaning *one* physical book that was purchased is different than making as many electronic copies as you want and passing them around for free."

Yes, it is. It is my hope, naturally, that people will pay \$2.99 for this ebook. That's not a lot of money. But...if people want to copy and share the story, they are free to do so. If people want to host the story on their website, they are free to do so. If people want to record the story, they are free to do so. If you want to make money from the story, please contact me at:

<http://www.christophergronlund.com>

I hope you enjoy *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors!*

—Christopher Gronlund 2012

Cover photo—Shutterstock/Paul Matthew Photography

For Dad, Laurie, and Jeff.

What I wouldn't give for one more trip with you guys...

“A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”

— Lao Tzu

“I’m gonna die in this crap car, and it’s all your fault, James O’Brien!”

— Mary O’Brien

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HELL COMES WITH WOOD PANELED DOORS

By

Christopher Gronlund

FOREWORD

Everything you are about to read is true. When I was a kid, vacations with my family were a living hell. One year, the hell that was our annual family vacation was taken to a new level; this is the story of that trip.

Now that I'm older, I've gone back and interviewed all parties involved, hoping to make some sense of what really happened. I present to you, here, the tale of that trip. It may sound like I'm taking liberties with this story—that I'm embellishing what really happened—but I assure you, as far-fetched as this may sound, it's the God's-Honest Truth!

Michael O' Brien

May 26, 2014

Atlantic City, NJ

CHAPTER ONE

"Into the Inferno"

I'll never forget that car; I'll never forget the day Dad took me to "Smiling Sam's Used Car Lot."

"The price. It's a little steep," Dad said, looking at the \$21,000 sticker.

The car was a throwback to the days when fins and chrome ruled, a fire engine red behemoth of a station wagon that looked like it could fly! It reminded me of a concept car from the fifties. I could envision it in an old black and white news clip, slowly spinning on a giant turntable with a model behind the wheel at some auto show, while a deep-voiced announcer boomed, "The car of the future is here today!" Dad wanted that car more than he ever wanted anything, I could see it all over his face. So could the salesman.

"You won't find another car like this one, pal," the salesman said, stroking his pointed goatee. I didn't trust him. I hated his red suit and the way he slicked his dark hair back, bringing even more attention to the widow's peak pointing down at his long forehead and thin nose. His shirt was opened wide, showing off a bed of chest hair so coarse, one could scrub pots and pans clean on it, like steel wool. He smelled like matches, and his stale hair pomade reeked of gear oil. He rolled a toothpick around in his mouth—it looked like it was hovering just above his lips, and it clacked against his yellowed teeth as he passed it from one corner of his malicious grin to the other.

"This car's decked out with a lot of old-style goodies," he said, scratching the back of his hand. Tiny bits of skin flaked off and scattered on the breeze. "Look at those wide fenders and big white walls. All that and it's got more amenities than the cutting edge cars rolling out of Detroit today! This beauty does everything you can imagine. Hell, it does even *more* than everything you can imagine!"

He knocked on the door—if nothing else, the car sounded as solid as stone. "And that's real, Honest-to-God wood paneling there! You don't see that anymore, ya know?"

"No, you sure don't," Dad said, already falling for the salesman's spiel. Dad would buy anything pushed his way by a silver-tongued salesperson. Our house was full of slicers and dicers, miracle space-age cleaning solutions, and pocket fishing poles purchased from late-night TV ads. Our front hall closet was piled high with plastic and chrome vacuum cleaners purchased from door-to-door

salesmen who totally ignored the NO SOLICITORS sign Mom put up, hoping to save Dad (and the family pocketbook), from their constant assault. My old man may have been one of the few people in the country who genuinely believed JAMES O'BRIEN MAY HAVE ALREADY WON ONE MILLION DOLLARS! when he read mail-order sweepstakes envelopes. Mom finally hid all the credit cards from him (never mind she probably spent more money on cigarettes, lottery scratch-offs, and Atlantic City slot machines than he did on impulse buys, but any chance to be self-righteous and knock Dad down a notch made her day). Dad still always found a way to buy things he really didn't need. His one saving grace was a frugal streak—at least he rarely paid full retail for things. "That price," he said to the salesman. "It's a little more than I wanted to pay..."

"Oh, I think we can work something out," the salesman said while ruffling my hair. His long fingernails raked across my scalp, sending a cold bolt down my spine. He may have known how to play a man like my father, but he wasn't fooling me. "Look, I can tell you aren't one to BS, or buy into a load of crap," he said to Dad. "You know cars and know exactly what you want, right? No one's ever gonna sell a guy like you something you don't want, so I won't even try. We both know that price is too much, even for a gem like this. You appreciate this car and I want to see you drive out of here in it."

He put his hand on Dad's shoulder.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. My boss upped the price on this baby. I'm sure that's no surprise to you—it's how we make our money, but even I think he raised it too high and I'm not in the business of ripping people off. I'll make you a deal..."

Some words of advice: anytime someone in a cheap, red suit says, "I'll make you a deal," run the other way as fast as you can! I was only thirteen and knew better, but Dad never learned that lesson. The year before, he bought a condo on the beach near Galveston, Texas. It was, in the words of the salesman who sold him the plot over the phone, "A deal too good to be true!" Of course, it *was* too good to be true. The property was still contaminated by the oil spill of the *Burmah Agate* a few years prior, and the tiny shack of a "condo" on the property was still drying out from Hurricane Alicia. But Dad, ever the optimist, told Mom the exact same thing the salesman on the phone said to him: "It may look bad now, but once it's cleaned up, it'll be a dream come true!"

"I'm in the business of putting people in cars and making dreams come true," the car salesman said, removing the toothpick from his mouth and examining it. He saw something on the end, licked it from the point, and then popped the toothpick back into his mouth. "How's this: I'll go tell my boss

you're driving a hard bargain and won't go a penny above sixteen-k, including your trade-in. He was talking just this morning about how he wanted to sell this one-of-a-kind masterpiece by the end of the day and I think he'll let it go. You should have this beauty parked in your driveway inside an hour. How's that sound to ya?"

"Perfect!" Dad said.

"Good, good. I'll go talk with him and be back with the papers in a jiffy!"

I watched the salesman head into the building. Everything about him, from the way he talked to the way he walked, was wrong. He seemed like the kind of guy who would sell his own mother's kidneys if he thought it would put cash in his pocket.

Dad didn't know what to think. He looked at me, hoping for approval.

"So...do you like it, Michael?"

"It's neat, Dad," was all I could say. He knew that used car lot was the last place in the world I wanted to be. I would have rather been forced to stay in Dad's Gulf Coast condo for weeks, with all the water damage and shoddy wiring, than wait ten minutes for the salesman's return.

"What's wrong?" Dad said.

"That guy gives me the creeps."

"That's just the way salesmen are. They get desperate and try pretending they're your friend. It's just one of those silly games adults play."

"Okay," I said, still not buying it. "He's creepy."

"I agree," Dad said. "But look at this car!" He ran his hands across the body, feeling every smooth curve and detail. I never saw Dad look at something with such pure, unbridled delight; it was like that car was made specifically for him, and the devil be damned if he wasn't going to be the first on the block to own one! Lost in a memory, he smiled and said, "It's got fins just like my first car! It's got fat tires just like my first car! And I bet it's even got power to burn under the hood just like my first car."

I thought about what the salesman said, about how he was in the business of selling dreams. That car was a dream come true in my father's eyes—a dream too good to be true, but he didn't see it.

"What kind of car is it?" I said, catching him off guard.

"Hmm...you know something, I don't know."

Right there, I should have known something was wrong. My father may have owned multiple sets of *Ginsu Knives* bought in the heat of the moment, but when it came to cars, he knew the names of models months before they were released to the public. He could name all the parts and tell you everything you

to know about what made them go. He knew the prices—from what it cost to build the car, to what the dealer paid, and what a consumer could expect to fork over. For him to not know the name, or at least ask...there was definitely something wrong.

My father wandered around to the back of the car. "Oh, here's the name," he said. "It's an *Inferno*. Never heard of them."

"There's something weird about this Dad."

"You're right, kiddo: that is pretty strange," he said in a moment of clarity. "A car like this...you'd think I would have read about it. I'll ask the guy for more info when he comes back."

A few minutes later I saw the salesman heading our way, papers in hand, with a Cheshire grin plastered on his face like he was about to take something that didn't belong to him.

"There he is," I said. He walked up to my father and put his hand back on his shoulder.

"I had to fight with my boss a little, but he came down to sixteen-k, just like you wanted. How's that grab you," he said, tightening his grip on Dad's shoulder.

"Oh...that's wonderful," he said.

"Dad!"

The salesman looked at me, sneering with sharp, yellow teeth. Had he been able to get away with it, I'm sure he would have gutted me where I stood and tossed me to the side, saved for further abuse when it better suited him. "Is there something wrong?" he said. "I really stuck up for you two in there. My boss is as tough as they come, but I'm not afraid to put my neck out to put someone in a car they love." He turned to Dad and acted hurt. "What, is sixteen-k not good enough for ya, pal? I thought we had a deal..."

"No, it's perfect," Dad said. "Just what I wanted."

"Good. You look like a man of your word, but for a second, there, I thought you were gonna try scratching the sticker down even more. I'm gonna have a hard time making rent this month with as much as I got knocked off for you."

"I appreciate that," Dad said.

I wasn't about to let the salesman take advantage of my old man. I gave him my best wise guy grin and said, "Why is a brand new car on a used car lot?"

The salesman was ready, though—he was determined to beat me and put Dad in the driver's seat of that station wagon. "It's the brand new *Inferno*, the only one offered in this part of the country. We were chosen as a test market,

kid. My boss knows some people, so we lucked out and got the only one on the East Coast. By next summer, you'll be seeing these everywhere."

That wasn't good enough for me. "My Dad's never heard of it, though."

The salesman patted my father's shoulder and said, "Sure he has, right James?"

"Right!" Dad said. "The beauty of this baby lies under the hood, Michael."

He popped the hood while the salesman kept his grip. The huge engine was a sight to behold, a massive chunk of American steel painted red with a chrome air filter cover that reflected and distorted our faces like a fun house mirror as we stared in awe.

"It's got a classic four-twenty-six Hemi engine with factory superstock crossram intake and two seven-sixty Holley four-barrel carbs," Dad said, as though he were trying to sell *me* the car. "Combine that with a seven-twenty-seven push-button, automatic transmission and power everything and you've got yourself quite a ride." He looked at the salesman for approval. "And I think it even has a classic-styled doorgate in the back, complete with power windows, right?"

"It sure does," the salesman said. "You *do* know your cars!"

The salesman slammed the hood shut and set the paperwork down on top. His hand returned to Dad's shoulder when he said, "Ready to sign?"

"I sure am!" Dad took the pen from the salesman's sports coat pocket without even asking. The salesman pointed a cracked fingernail at the line where Dad's John Hancock was needed. I couldn't believe it; I couldn't let it happen.

"Wait!" I shouted, raising the ire of the salesman again. He looked like he wanted to pick me up by the hair and toss me into traffic. "Aren't you going to read the contract first, Dad?"

The salesman was tired of my interruptions. "It's just the usual contract, kid!" he hissed. He turned his attention to Dad, who was far more receptive than I was. In a calm voice he said, "It's just the payment info, the terms of the warranty, trade-in information...the usual. It's not like you're signing away your soul."

I froze as Dad signed *James O' Brien* on the line and sealed the deal. The salesman gave Dad his duplicate copy and quickly pocketed the original. Then he looked at me, winked, and spit his toothpick at my feet—he walked away the winner of the little battle Dad never even noticed was fought.

"And you have the down payment?"

"Yes," Dad said, pulling out his checkbook, eager to complete the transaction. I watched him fill out a check and hand it over. I didn't know what was wrong; I only knew I wanted to hit the salesman with a low blow to the groin, grab the check, and run like hell, screaming for Dad to follow me to safety. But had I acted on my urges, what was about to happen in the following weeks would never have occurred. In August of 1984, that station wagon became the O'Brien family's savior!

The salesman opened the door for Dad and handed him the keys. He seemed in a hurry to get rid of us now that the deal was closed. "She's all yours, pal! Ready?"

"Just a sec," Dad said. "There's something I need to get from the old car."

He jogged over to his old, yellow '74 Gremlin and cleaned out the glove compartment, stuffing his pockets full of the maps, napkins, and papers contained within. He started trotting back, but stopped and returned to the Gremlin for the plastic Virgin Mary on the dashboard. It wasn't that my father was a religious man; he simply reveled in all that was tacky. His weakness for buying useless stuff reached new heights when it came to cheap trinkets like wind-up chattering teeth, rubber gorillas, and plastic religious figures. Few things are tackier than a plastic Virgin Mother leading the charge on the dash of an old American Motors Corporation masterpiece, like the Gremlin. With a gentle tug, she came free and Dad trotted back our way.

"Almost forgot this," he said, holding the figurine up toward the salesman, who was visibly disturbed by its presence. The salesman stepped back as Dad handed it to me. "You want to do the honors, buddy?"

"Sure," I said, taking the Blessed Virgin and climbing into the front seat of the *Inferno*. I tried sticking Mary to the dash, but had no luck—she wouldn't take hold! I peeled off the vinyl from the Gremlin's dashboard sticking to the bottom and tried again. My fingers were sticking together from the cheap adhesive on the figure, but the damn thing wouldn't stick to the dash, no matter how hard I tried; it was like something was repelling my effort. I set Mary down and climbed out to tell Dad.

"Did you get it?" he said.

"It won't stick."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," I said.

Dad slid into the front seat to take a look. I saw him trying to move the figurine on the dash to no avail. He poked his head out and said, "What do you mean it won't stick? It's like she's fused to the dashboard!"

I climbed into the car as Dad shook the salesman's hand and said goodbye. I poked the Mary figurine and Dad was right—it wouldn't budge! I took a closer look and noticed the dash was faintly melted where Mary sat; she had won the first round. Dad climbed back in, started the car, which turned over in a menacing roar of power beneath the hood, and we were on our way. The salesman waved goodbye to me as we drove off, but I didn't return the courtesy. Even though I was an atheist, I felt more at ease staring at the figurine.

* * *

The ride home was incredible—the car had everything imaginable! The dash looked like the cockpit of a fighter jet, covered in switches, dials, and levers. A big compass reminding me of a snow globe sat at the helm, beside the Virgin Mother. The wood and chrome theme adorning the car's body extended inside, and it really did have everything you could want—and more—just like the salesman promised. It had cup holders that held far more than a standard fast food cup; anything shy of a gallon jug of milk was easily secured within arm's reach. The radio had an old fashioned dial that glided with ease when turned, and even in the sun's glare you could easily make out what station you were tuning in. Dad was overjoyed when he noticed the radio had not only a cassette player, but also an eight track deck to boot! He would be able to assault us with choice cuts from his collection of bad eight-tracks: Ray Stevens, Boxcar Willy, and enough trucker tunes to make even Red Sovine want to claw his eyes out. Yep, that car had every amenity imaginable, and enough foot and headroom that even Magic Johnson could stretch out in comfort. I could tell Dad felt like a little kid, comfortably nestled in the oversized, cushy seats, while still having full access to everything a gadget-hound like him needed. He ran his hand across the dash, almost in tears.

"It's beautiful, isn't it, Michael?"

"Yeah, Dad. It's neat."

He pointed to all the shiny dials and buttons. "Look at everything. I don't know what they all do, but I'm dying to find out. Why don't you pull something, just for kicks?"

I flipped a switch in front of me—the glove compartment popped open. Dad took a quick glance, struggling to keep his eyes on the road instead of all the gadgets calling to him. Something in the glove compartment caught his eye. "Is that the owner's manual?"

On top of some papers, a small red and black book with the *Inferno* logo poked out. The cover of the manual was rather plain, displaying a black and white line drawing of the car, and some text. "Looks like it," I said.

"What's it say beneath the logo?" Dad was now paying more attention to the glove compartment's contents than on the road ahead.

I grabbed the book and read aloud: "'And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. Revelation: Thirteen-One.'"

"I wonder what that's supposed to mean?" Dad said.

"It's from the *Bible*."

"I know that," he said. "I'm just wondering why it would be on the cover of the owner's manual."

"Don't know."

"Weird. We'll have to hide it from your mother. She'd crap if she saw that."

"Yeah."

Mom would have done far more than crap if she came across an owner's manual quoting the Book of Revelation. Mom made up for my total lack of religion, and Dad's lax religious ways. She was a superstitious, Italian Catholic who infused the faith with her own fears and anxieties. Where Dad saw humor in things like plastic religious figures, prayer candles, and other tacky, religious collectibles, Mom saw them as a gift of God, sent down to protect the common man from Evil's sinister and tempting grip. Had Mom accompanied us to the car lot, she not only would have pulled Dad away at first sight of the salesman, but she would have returned with an army of priests, ready to do battle. As religious as she appeared on the surface, however, I don't think she fully grasped the lessons taught in a lifetime of Sunday masses. She slanted Catholicism to suit her needs: she invoked Christ's name whenever she needed luck at bingo, used God's wrath as a scare tactic against my younger siblings and me, and felt that God had given her the power to personally damn anyone who annoyed her in the slightest manner straight to Hell. Was it any wonder I couldn't buy into the whole religion thing?

I thumbed through the owner's manual the last few blocks before reaching the house. Page after page was filled with passages from Revelation. Alongside directions for changing the oil, a description of a blood-red sea where all shall die; beside instructions for filling windshield wiper fluid, a message that Babylon has fallen; and if you wanted to learn how to add radiator fluid, you couldn't do so without reading about Death riding a pale horse, first.

Dad was right, if Mom saw the owner's manual, she'd lose it. I shoved it deep within the glove compartment, under all the papers Dad transferred from the Gremlin and his pockets. When we pulled into the driveway, Mom was waiting. She took one look at the *Inferno* and was ready for a fight.

CHAPTER TWO

"The Big, Orange Hole in the Ground my Grandma Loved So Dearly"

"A station wagon?!" Mom said while puffing on a Virginia Slim. Dad stepped out of the *Inferno*, not realizing she was ready to drop the gloves and go—in his mind he believed she was complimenting him on the wise purchase of a vehicle that could carry our entire family anywhere his wanderlust desired, in comfort and "style." It only took a quick glance into her eyes to see the intensity of her anger, however. The woman lived for complaining. Dad was seemingly immune to the effects of her constant barrage of insults, and totally clueless when it came to realizing the woman he married existed to do little more than eat, gamble, and argue. I didn't understand it; he loved my mother, despite her venomous nature.

"Isn't it great?" he said.

"No! Where the hell did you find such an ugly thing?" She smoothed the wrinkles in her flowered muu-muu and blew smoke through her nostrils. She looked like a fat dragon trapped in the clearance bin at a fabric store.

"The used car lot," Dad said, "but it's brand new."

"Brand new and ugly. Take it back! I don't want this piece of crap trashing up the driveway."

An overweight, chain-smoking woman with a beehive hairdo standing in a front yard full of plastic, pink lawn flamingos and she had the gall to say the car would look trashy in the driveway? While my father saw the novelty in things like pink flamingos and velvet Elvis paintings, my mother saw them as the pinnacle of high art. She would be the first to criticize my father for buying tacky, roadside novelties, but she owned more ashtrays from Las Vegas than I had baseball cards! She collected matchbooks and decks of cards from casinos; velvet paintings lined our walls; she even owned a small army of bobbing drinking birds. I didn't understand my parent's relationship until many years later when the obvious finally dawned on me: in Dad's love of all that was tacky, Mom was the ultimate piece in his collection—he married the Queen of Kitsch!

"I'm not taking the car back," Dad said, defying my mother in a rare moment of bravery. "I've been saving for a car and this is the one I liked best. Please, let me have this one thing, Mary..."

He waited for her answer.

"Are those wood paneled doors?"

"Yes, they are," he said proudly; thinking—I'm sure—that she was warming up to the *Inferno*. "They don't make cars like this anymore. It's a limited edition."

"I'll say! You're probably the only one in the world who buys one, too," she said. Then, in her best sarcastic tone, she added, "I'm sure it will be worth *millions* someday!"

Dad turned and locked eyes with Mom—he was going to fight for this one. As they stared at each other, I thought about just how different the two were. My old man was a pretty sharp looking guy. To look at him, you'd expect my mom to be the mother friends came over to sneak a peek at, and maybe even think about when puberty settled in and they discovered themselves. Dad always reminded me of an actor: he was strapping enough, charming enough, and definitely good looking enough. He had a quirky manner of speaking, as though he were always stating things to a sidekick; his deep, radio announcer-like voice drove points home. He had a swagger to his step that bordered on comedic, but to anyone under thirteen, he simply looked badass and tough. The other mothers in the neighborhood always stopped by and talked with him when he did yardwork, which he did sans shirt, wearing only tight jeans and work boots. As he talked to my playmates' moms, he looked almost posed, sweat dripping from his chest like the condensation from the glass of iced tea or soda he always had nearby. Like every thirteen-year-old, I saw my old man as the top of the heap of coolness. And so did my friends; I had the dad every kid only wished they had—the best dad anywhere!

Why, then, did he marry my mother?

Mom was what happened when you crossed West Virginia with Atlantic City. She was the walking, talking embodiment of tackiness! She spit when she talked and interrupted people. She cursed and told dirty jokes, all while smoking long, pencil-thin cigarettes that she felt made her look glamorous, like a forties movie star. Whereas Dad's physical match of a wife could have been a buxom blonde leaning against his well-defined chest on the front of a B-movie poster, Mom's perfect match, physically, would have been a skinny guy in overalls with a piece of grass wedged between his only two teeth, or a clunky

bingo hall owner with slicked back hair and a cheap suit, who aspired to become a Vegas pit boss.

Mom and Dad met in 1967 when Dad was traveling cross-country. He wasn't on a voyage of self-discovery like the scores of hippies traveling at the time—Dad knew what he was looking for. Armed with an *Exakta* 35mm camera, a notepad and pen, and the dream of becoming a travel writer, Dad climbed into his car, a '57 *Bel Air* wagon not entirely unlike the *Inferno*, and set out from his home in Kansas, to drive up the East Coast in search of old sideshows. While photographing the boardwalk in Atlantic City, he met my mother.

Mom worked in a hotdog stand on the boardwalk. After a morning snapping pictures of old hotels, the beach, and piers, Dad's stomach was filled with an emptiness only the mismatched insides of slaughtered cattle and swine could fill—so he stopped for a hotdog.

I wonder what it was like the moment they first saw each other. Did he look at Mom and think, "This is the woman who will have my children one day!" or did he think, "I wonder if she knows she has a smear of mustard on her chin?" There had to be *something* that clicked at that moment...or maybe some people really *are* destined to be together.

Dad ordered two hotdogs and a Coke. Mom was always very matter of fact (okay, she was rude!), and rarely made small talk, but she asked, "Where you from?"

"Topeka, Kansas," Dad said.

"What brings you all the way out here?"

"Just taking pictures." Dad was very timid and sold himself short, but there was something about Mom that made him feel special. "Actually," Dad said with a hint of confidence, "I'm writing an article about sideshows and boardwalks."

"You're a writer?" Mom said, snapping Dad back to reality. He wasn't a writer—he only wished he were.

"Well, no—not really. I mean I want to be, but I've never written anything."

Mom smiled at Dad and said something totally unlike her; she said something encouraging! "Well, everyone's gotta start somewhere, right?"

Dad smiled. "Yeah, I guess they do." There was something about that plump woman in the hotdog stand spreading relish on his lunch that made him feel invincible.

"How much?" Dad asked.

"Well, if you've driven five thousand miles for a hotdog, you shouldn't have to pay," Mom said. Her perception of distance was a bit skewed; she'd only

really traveled back and forth between Jersey and West Virginia, and usually slept along the way.

"It's only twelve or thirteen hundred miles, actually."

"Still...that's quite a drive." She handed him his hotdogs and drink. "It's on the house."

"Won't you get in trouble?"

"Don't care if I do. It's not like this is my dreamjob," she said, pointing to a vat full of steaming water and old, flaccid franks.

Instead of saying "thanks," Dad summoned the courage to say, "What are you doing after work?"

That evening, as they walked along Steel Pier where Harry Houdini, W.C. Fields, and Charlie Chaplin once honed their skills, and where—in the forties— young couples in love danced to the Big Band sounds of Benny Goodman and the Glenn Miller Orchestra, the first spark of a lifelong love started between Mary Catherine Mangione and James David O'Brien. A strange love, granted, but love nonetheless.

They stopped and watched the diving horse. Growing up in Kansas, Dad had seen his fair share of horses, but he never saw one leap from a forty-foot tall tower and into a shallow tank of water with a rider pressed to its back. To Mom, diving horses were as much an everyday thing as people walking their dogs, but to Dad, it was exactly the kind of magic he had left home hoping to find.

Splash!

Mom and Dad—standing too close to the tank—were covered in foul-smelling water. Dad thought it was wonderful, but he could tell Mom was far from amused. She stood on the pier, arms outstretched, looking like an angry, dripping beachball in her red and yellow outfit two sizes too small.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Dad said. He pulled some napkins from his pocket and handed them to her.

Instead of yelling, Mom smiled though, wiping her eyes and smearing her mascara so she looked like a two hundred twenty pound raccoon. "Ya know, I already smell like a hot dog stand—stray dogs follow me home, for chrissake! What's a little water, even if it smells like wet horses?" she laughed.

Dad said he looked in her eyes and knew then and there that she was the one.

Back in the driveway, Mom was the one winning the staring contest (she could outlast a statue with her evil eye), and Dad, hoping to stave off total defeat, said, "I'll make you a deal..." He sounded like the greasy salesman at the

used car lot. "We take it on vacation and if it doesn't grow on you, we take it back. How's that sound?"

"Okay, but I'm telling you right now, James—there's no way that car's growing on me." Even if the car *did* grow on her and she ended up loving it just as much as Dad did—just to prove her point and tear away another piece of Dad's very being—she would insist he take the car back to the lot when we returned from vacation. She snubbed her cigarette out on a garden gnome in disgust and headed back into the house.

Dad stared off in the distance, smirking about something known only to him; then he turned his attention back to the *Inferno*. He stared at it like it was a newborn child full of potential. "Why don't you go help your mother with dinner, buddy?"

"Sure, Dad." I went around back, toward the kitchen, allowing Dad a moment to bask in his little victory.

Dad bought the car just in time for vacation (he wanted to buy it sooner, but Mom kept hounding him, saying we didn't need a new car—she said the Gremlin had more than enough room to hold her, Dad, my younger brother and sister, my aunt, me, and all our gear for our road trip!). Dad's treks were bad enough without being cramped. His annual family vacations were hell packed into a backseat, taking us from the world's largest Uncle Sam statue, in Lake George, New York, to the La Brea Tar pits, in California, and every roadside attraction, reptile farm, and historical marker in between! For Dad, a road trip was a chance for the family to bond no matter what—his chance to pretend, at least for a short time, that we were a normal, fully functioning family. That particular year we would take a twenty-four-hundred-mile voyage from our home, in New Jersey, to the Grand Canyon, in Arizona. Going to the canyon was my grandmother's idea; she loved the place.

Grandma visited the canyon whenever she had the chance. My great-grandfather took her when she was young and the canyon bug instantly took hold. She visited the canyon forty-nine times in her life, and swore she'd visit fifty times before dying. She used to always say, "Someday you'll have to visit the Grand Canyon, Mikey."

"Why?" I'd ask.

"Because it's healing."

"It's a big, orange hole in the ground, Grandma."

"A hole? That's all you think it is? You don't understand. It's so much more than that. It's healing—"

"You always say that," I'd say. "What do you mean, 'It's healing?'"

She'd stop what she was doing and focus all attention on me, as though I just said something blasphemous. She'd lock eyes and take my hand in hers, as though she were about to say something important; as though she were about to share with me the secret to life. I suppose, in her mind, she was.

"You stand on its edge and something happens," she'd say. "I can't explain it—you have to experience it for yourself. You stand on the rim and it pulls your soul down to the river for a cleaning, then puts it back with a little bit of itself. It's healing, Mikey. Once you experience it, you'll go back. Everyone goes back..."

Grandma was always my favorite relative (I often wondered how such a peaceful, caring woman had given birth to my mother). I think what I liked most about Grandma was she truly seemed content with everything around her. Maybe that sense of calm came from her canyon visits; I don't know. I never understood what she meant when she talked about the healing powers of that big hole in northern Arizona, no matter how many times she tried explaining it to me (and believe me, she tried every chance she had). Whatever she saw in the canyon was beyond my grasp of bigger things when I was younger. All I knew was the pull to the rim was strong enough to make her head out west whenever she had the chance. The summer Dad bought the *Inferno*, we were heading to the canyon, with Grandma...only she was dead!

She died in the spring—she was only fifty five. She was on the phone with Mom, talking about her plans for visiting the canyon, when she dropped dead from a brain aneurysm. She never knew what hit her, but Mom said Grandma knew something was coming. (Mom believed my grandmother was psychic, and passed "The Gift" on to her.) Grandma drafted a will that spring and she swore she'd never draft her will until she was *at least* seventy-five. Her last wish was to be cremated and have her ashes scattered in the Grand Canyon; her way of giving something back to her old friend, the big, orange hole in the ground.

I made my way to the back door and into the kitchen, where Mom was making spaghetti sauce. Looking around the kitchen, one would think she was cooking for an army, instead of just five people. She didn't use normal cookware like most mothers; she used stuff purchased from an old friend of the family's we—even Mom and Dad—called Uncle Mike. Uncle Mike provided industrial cookware to the restaurant industry: huge, ten-gallon stockpots, blenders that could generate more power than Dad's old Gremlin, and her favorite piece, a two-and-a-half-foot-long stainless steel sauce ladle. Mom was never very demonstrative; cooking was her way of showing affection. In her

mind, the more she prepared was a measure of how much she loved us, deep-down, even though she rarely showed it in conventional ways.

Mom looked up from her sauce vat—her face drenched with sweat. "Michael, would you go tell Elvis and Olivia that dinner's almost ready?"

"Sure, Ma," I said. She looked back at the sauce and I noticed sweat roll from the tip of her nose and fall into the pot. Still, I would have much rather stood there watching Mom sweat into the food I was about to eat than spending a moment with Elvis and Olivia.

Elvis and Olivia are my younger siblings, twins who seem to share a strange psychic link, even to this day. When they spoke, most times they'd say the same thing in unison, or flip-flop every other sentence. It still creeps me out; it's something I'll never get used to. But the strange manner in which they spoke was just the first item in a long list that bothered me about them.

They were evil. There's no nicer way to say it. They reveled in making the lives of those around them utterly miserable. From family, to teachers, to strangers—they terrorized those around them with their zombie-like stares and strong penchant for mischief. They weren't normal mischievous kids, content at making fart noises with their armpits for attention, though—that was below them. They calculated every move like Russian chess champions, truly appreciating the depths of their malice when a plan came together as plotted. They didn't act out of childish curiosity—they acted out of the same cold, calculated cruelty of twisted, would-be world conquerors and serial killers.

I went upstairs to their bedrooms, which were situated directly across from each other. They would have shared a room, but Mom felt that was wrong and sick, so they left their doors wide open so they could at least see into the other's room (close one door for even a moment and they instantly suffered from separation anxiety). They pushed all their furniture to the back wall of their rooms so no matter what they were doing, they could stay in constant visual contact. Regardless of how many times Mom rearranged their furniture, they'd put things back the way *they* liked them.

I went to Olivia's room, first. She was sitting on her bed, eating from a bag of marshmallows and staring across the hall, into Elvis's room, where he was doing the same in mirror image. Even with me between the two, blocking their view, they just stared at each other, as though I were a pane of glass. Olivia's staring was worse than Elvis's; the way she stared at things with such purpose and intensity, you expected them to levitate or suddenly burst into flame. She looked like a creepy doll controlled by evil forces.

Elvis looked like a tiny version of The King of Rock-n-Roll (during The King's fatter years). I would have been named Elvis, but Mom promised Uncle Mike she'd name her first-born after him. He saved her life with the Heimlich Maneuver one Christmas Eve when she was choking on calamari. I am forever indebted to Uncle Mike for saving me from such a dreadful name.

"It's time for dinner, you two," I said.

In unison, they said, "Tell us something we don't already know, four-eyes!"

"I hate both of you, how's that?" I returned.

"We know—we hate you even more..."

Even though I was three years their elder, they genuinely scared me. "Well, I'm just telling you what Mom wanted me to tell you," I said. I turned and walked off. A few moments later I heard them say, "He's so weird," as they filed out from their rooms together, like robots.

* * *

Watching my family eat dinner, one would think we were never fed. The twins shoveled bite after bite into their mouths as though they were racing. They barely chewed what went in, and that which they chewed was done with an audible, open-mouthed smacking. My mother slurped spaghetti like a little kid, the ends of the pasta flailing about like tentacles and slapping the outsides of her mouth and face before finding their way into her maw. The sauce splatters looked like an extension of the quickly applied, bright red lipstick she always wore. Dad at least didn't make noise, but he ate as though each meal could be his last. He had a quiet way of eating faster than anyone at the table, so he was usually the first one done each evening. Me, I rarely had an appetite while watching Mom and the twins belch and gurgle their way through a meal, so I picked at my plate until Dad was finished and I could rush off to help him with the dishes.

As sloppy an eater as my Mom was, it drove her nuts that my brother and sister were sloppier. She was a far cry from being Miss Manners herself, but she expected better from us.

"Youse two, close your mouths when you eat! Where'd you get those manners from...cows?!" she said with a full mouth dripping with pasta and bread. Instead of listening to Mom, the twins defied her by rolling their food around on their tongues and letting it spill onto their plates. Mom acted like she was going to get up.

"Don't you two make me get the sauce ladle!" she said while spitting tiny pieces of dinner everywhere. The twins closed their mouths and quickly behaved.

My mother always threatened to hit us with the sauce ladle whenever we were bad. I can't remember ever being hit by either of my parents, but the thought of her meaty arms swinging a two-and-a-half foot long kitchen utensil was always enough to set the twins straight.

As loud as the three of them were when they ate, there was one other family member who put us all to shame. Over their grunts and belches, he was heard chewing on a fork at Mom's feet. That's when Dad asked the question burning in everyone's mind: "Mary...dear...what are we going to do about Lucky?"

Lucky was Mom's pet Chihuahua. He was 2,358 pounds of absolute evil packed into a three-pound body! His head looked like a tiny bruised apple with black marble eyes, fleshy bat ears, and razor sharp shark's teeth. Lucky shredded everything in the house not belonging to Mom—as though he consciously knew what havoc he was wreaking on *our* belongings, while sparing hers. Mom babied him more than she ever babied any of us. She wouldn't allow a soul to say bad things about the tiny beast. Even if he shredded something important (like homework, papers in Dad's briefcase, or our shoes), we were expected to act as though we loved him as much as she did. Couple that with a variety of health issues (stomach problems, rheumatism, and asthma, to name a few), and it's easy to see why everyone but Mom hated the dog.

When I say his head looked like a bruised apple, I'm serious; Lucky's biggest health issue was the fontanel on the crown of his head. Chihuahuas, like humans, are born with a soft spot. Normally, the skull grows together, but in some cases, the dogs go through adulthood with a section of their brain protected only by a thin membrane of skin and short fur. This condition is known as a molera. To shield his brain from danger, Mom carried Lucky cradled on her left forearm, with her right hand covering his head. It was like she believed the moment she left the top of Lucky's head exposed for even a millisecond, everything from bricks and cueballs, to pinballs and shotputs would rain down from the sky and bruise his delicate little brain. When any of us came within ten feet of her precious Chihuahua, she'd scream, "Be careful with him! For God's sake, don't touch his molera!" Elvis once poked the top of Lucky's head, and had he not been faster than Mom, I think I would have grown up with only a younger sister.

As much as Mom worried about Lucky's molera, it didn't stop *her* from using it to her advantage. She discovered when she pushed in at just the right place on his brain, he froze, momentarily paralyzed until she let up. It was like an

on/off switch allowing her to control the little beast's temper whenever he got out of hand.

Perhaps the main reason Mom was so protective of Lucky was she believed he was sent to her with a purpose: to make her rich. The day Mom bought him, she won a thousand dollars on a lottery scratch-off, and the following weekend at the casinos, she came in big on the slots. She attributed her luck with the purchase of the dog, so she named him Lucky. The only thing lucky about him was the rest of us hadn't put him to sleep!

Mom looked across the table at Dad; she was worried. "What *about* Lucky?" "We can't take him with us," Dad said. "He's got his stomach problem and all."

The twins flip-flopped, "Yeah-he-will-shit-and-puke-on-everything."

"Youse two, watch your fuckin' language!" Mom bellowed. "I don't know where you picked up that shit!" The twins laughed and Mom pretended like she was going to stand again. "Don't make me get the ladle—!"

They straightened right up.

"I'm not leaving this house to travel halfway around the world without him," she said. "Especially the way you drive, James. I'm gonna need all the luck I can get on this trip. He's coming with us—no one will take care of him while we're gone. You should have thought of something sooner—"

"We could take him to a no-kill shelter!" I said. The twins nodded their heads in agreement, the first time they were ever on my side. "We can say we found him in the street, then pick him up when we get back."

"Something tells me even a no-kill shelter would make an exception in Lucky's case," Dad said. As much as he liked my idea, he was very pragmatic; he knew if we returned to a dead Lucky, Mom would never let any of us live it down. "There's gotta be something we can do, though..."

Mom picked up the little ball of hate. Around his mouth, Chihuahua slobber mixed with blood from cutting his gums on the fork, making him look like he was eating cotton candy. Mom kissed him on the mouth, not caring about the pink drool. "Don't listen to them, Lucky-Wucky. You're coming with us." She looked at Dad and locked eyes again. "He's coming with us, James."

Dad stood up, leaving his plate behind. "Okay, Mary, he can come along on the trip! But I'm keeping the car, no matter what you think of it. Deal?"

"Deal!" she said while letting Lucky lick spaghetti sauce from the corners of her mouth. She was in rare form and I couldn't take anymore—she and Lucky were making me ill!

"May I please be excused," I said.

"Sure," Mom said. "And make sure you're all packed before bed, all right?"

"Okay." I grabbed my plate and my father's, cleaned them, and went to my room.

CHAPTER THREE

"When I Dream, I Dream of Hell"

While packing that evening, I thought about the relationship my mother and father had; I wondered what Dad saw in Mom. Back then, I thought what they had was a "normal" relationship, something I was destined to follow. The thought of marrying someone like my mother made me consider joining the priesthood, only I didn't believe in God. I didn't understand why my father accepted all the grief Mom tossed his way. I always loved my mother, but the woman gave birth to me. Dad had a choice—he could have had his pick of gorgeous women who appreciated him, yet he chose Mom.

After packing, I put my duffel bag by the front door. I noticed the light was on in Dad's den and I went to say goodnight. That den was his Fortress of Solitude. It's where he housed his collections. He had huge, tacky ashtrays decorating shelves, even though he didn't smoke. Lava lamps, pixie paintings, and truck stop placemats were a prize find in his mind; they shared space with Hawaiian hula lamps, fake African masks, and a stuffed jackalope head on the wall, with tiny red Christmas lights for eyes. The thing reminded me of Lucky for some reason. Dad sat at his desk, looking over roadmaps and putting the final touches on the trip.

"Hi, Dad," I said. "I'm all packed and ready for bed."

"Great!" He signaled me to come over and look at his plan of attack.

"So you have it all plotted out, huh?" I said, knowing the answer.

"As always!" He pointed out our route on a map of America. "First we hit West Virginia, to pick up your Aunt Margie." His finger moved east, along Interstate 64, into Kentucky. "Then it's off to Mammoth Cave—you'll love it...lots of stuff to do there!" His finger dropped down to Tennessee. "After that, your Mom wants to stop at Graceland, now that it's open to the public; better than the last time we drove through Memphis and she tried climbing the gate, huh?" he said, elbowing me gently in the ribs. Mom could barely climb a flight of stairs, but that didn't stop her from trying to scale the wall at Graceland. She was convinced the King was alive and well and still living in his mansion.

From Memphis, he moved his finger west. He crossed Arkansas, Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, New Mexico, and finally stopped in northern Arizona. "Of course there are plenty of roadside attractions along the way."

When Dad said there were plenty of roadside attractions, what he meant were plenty of stops for bad pictures with us all pretending we were getting along; it was our gift to him so he could look at the photos and pretend we were the perfect family he always wanted. One time I counted them; there were over three hundred fifty pictures of my family posed before things on the side of the road: muffler men, historical markers, and fiberglass statues.

"That's a long drive," I said. "After Graceland, we just drive straight through?" It wasn't like Dad to not have every stop planned out. Maybe he finally realized Mom would complain about stopping for landmarks, reptile farms, and reputed UFO landing sites; maybe Mom was calling the shots, even on trips.

"It's a big country, Michael." Dad pulled me closer to the map, hoping it would help me understand what he was about to say. "There are few things better than heading out and seeing all it has to offer. If I could make a living driving around the country, collecting stuff, I would. You can make a few big plans along the way, like Mammoth Cave or Graceland, but the beauty is in the discovery, buddy. There are things out there along the highway just waiting to be found. They aren't on any map; they leap out at the last second! It's all about freedom. It's what your grandpa fought for in World War Two; it's what our forefathers died for."

I like to think my grandfather fought for more than a family pitstop at Stuckey's or a wading pool full of alligators, but the open road made my Dad feel like a pioneer. In his mind, it wasn't about a tired insurance salesman taking a vacation with his overbearing wife and his children—it was about following in the steps of Lewis and Clark...at least in spirit. Then he said it:

"It's healing, you know?"

"So I've heard."

"One day you'll understand," he said, lost in thought. He looked at the clock on his desk—a big, round clock face set in the belly of a ceramic frog he bought in California. "You'd better get off to bed. We're leaving before sunrise."

I gave Dad a hug and said goodnight. As I left the den, he said, "Sweet dreams."

* * *

I usually had no problem falling asleep, but that night was different. If it wasn't my sheets bunching up, or my pillow getting warm, it was the sound of a passing car or Lucky choking on something he found on the floor. Normally, little things like that wouldn't bother me. I was usually able to fall asleep anywhere, in any condition, but that night I tossed and turned for hours. While

my family was fast asleep, I laid wide-awake, thinking about the trip before us. How could they sleep, knowing they were about to embark on a twenty-four-hundred-mile journey to dump a body in the Grand Canyon? To my family, it was just another dysfunctional family vacation, but to me it was a pilgrimage. I finally fell asleep around three in the morning, and even then, I was restless and haunted by a dream.

I was with my family at the canyon, only they were nowhere to be seen. I stared into the canyon—it reminded me of an image of Hell the way it reflected reds and oranges from the deep pit. I heard noise behind me.

"Ashes to ashes," I heard my father say, followed by Mom saying, "Dust to dust..."

I turned and saw my entire family (including Aunt Margie), standing in church robes. Lucky floated alongside my mother, his eyes glowing red like Dad's jackalope head. The twins chanted in Latin as Mom opened the urn holding my grandmother's remains. As eerie as it was, the scene was also peaceful. My family seemed to have come together, finally realizing how important the trip was. We were putting Grandma where she felt she belonged, on her fiftieth trip to the canyon.

It figured Mom and Aunt Margie had to ruin the moment.

Aunt Margie reached for the urn, but Mom wouldn't share it with her. The two fought like children, having a tug-o-war over Grandma's ashes on the rim of the canyon, which filled with flames. When Mom and Aunt Margie tugged at the same time, the urn slipped from their hands and fell in. I leaped after it!

Instead of falling, though, I floated above everything, watching my grandmother's cremains disappear into nothing.

"Grandma?" I said.

"What, Mikey?" Her voice was everywhere.

"What's it all mean?"

"What's what all mean?"

"Everything," I said. "What's it all mean?"

"Look down, Michael. It's healing."

I finally understood!

Floating above something so huge, I realized how small I really was. Seeing something so gigantic put me in my place and reminded me there were things so immense in life, we can only look at them in awe and marvel at their beauty. It was more than healing—it was life changing!

Below me, I saw the flames take shape. A large phoenix shot up from the fire, knocking me back to the rim where my family waited. The experience somehow changed me; it changed my family, as well.

The twins sang "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall," while Mom, Dad, and Aunt Margie hugged me like they'd never let go. Lucky chewed on my pant leg, but I didn't mind; my family—for the first time ever—seemed like a real, functional family! It turned out to be the best dream ever—I didn't want to wake up.

I was awakened by screams.

* * *

"Why the hell ain't youse two packed?!" Mom bellowed. "If we weren't leaving on vacation, I'd ground the both of youse!"

I got out of bed and made my way down the hall, where Mom was rushing back and forth between Elvis's and Olivia's rooms. A cigarette dangled from her mouth. Lucky followed closely behind. I wandered up and feigned confusion; I loved seeing my brother and sister in trouble, and if I could stir things up even more, all the better.

"What's up?" I said. I had to struggle to keep from laughing.

"What's up?! Your brother and sister aren't ready is what's up!"

Mom rushed into Olivia's room, pulling handfuls of clothes from her dresser and tossing them in a suitcase—it was probably the most exercise she had in months!

"Weren't they supposed to be ready last night?" I said.

She stepped back into the hallway, on her way to Elvis's room. "Yes, they *were* supposed to be ready last night! But you don't see them ready, do you?"

It was time to show her how good I was, and how horrible the twins were. "I had *my* stuff ready last night," I said. "Did you see my things by the door this morning?"

She poked her head out of Elvis's room; she was growing angry with me.

"Yes, Michael, I did! Right beside my stuff and your father's stuff. But you're only as fast as the slowest person in the family, so why don't you hurry things along and pack the twins while I make sure we have everything."

She rushed down the hall with Lucky in tow. Just before turning into her bedroom, she said, "Can't believe this crap!"

So much for my plan.

I stepped into Olivia's room first. "Where's your stuff?"

"In my drawers and closet, Dummy-Head!"

I heard Elvis laughing from his room.

"You have *nothing* packed?" I said.

"You're smart, Four-Eyes."

There was no winning with the twins. Try being nice and they pushed even harder. It was like they believed everyone had a trigger deep down, and their sole purpose for existing was to find that button and push it. Maybe there was truth in that theory; they could get under anyone's skin. Give them five minutes with Gandhi and they'd have him swinging like Mike Tyson.

"He's not smart, O. He's a retarded retard!" Elvis said. He called Olivia "O" and she called him "E." They thought it was an absolute riot to sit in the backseat of the car and say "O-E-O-E-O-E-O-E..." for miles.

"Did you hear what E said, Mickey?" (I could stomach my grandmother calling me "Mikey," but I drew the line at "Mickey"). "You're a retarded retard."

They pushed my button. I punched Olivia in the arm—not hard, just a tap to let her know her big brother was there and not about to take her crap. She screamed as though I cut her arm off with a chainsaw, however. In an instant, I was blind-sided by Elvis. I quickly regained my feet.

Elvis was the biggest ten-year-old I've ever seen. Even though I was older, he was bigger than me and able to take me toe-to-toe, so I had to resort to dirty tactics where he was involved. I kicked him in the nuts just in time for my Mom to come rushing back to see why Olivia was crying. Both my younger siblings shrieked in exaggerated pain.

"Mommy, Michael got mad and hit me and then turned around and kicked Elvis in his tenders. We didn't do anything bad. We were just trying to help him pack!"

Mom hugged Olivia, rocking her back and forth as Lucky jumped onto the bed and tried eating a pair of Olivia's socks.

"Michael, you're making a rough morning even rougher," Mom said. "Go see if your father needs any help. I guess *I'll* help the twins."

"I didn't do anything wrong!" I said. "I'll help them."

Mom summoned her best martyr voice. "No, Michael...*I'll* do it."

The dreaded "*I'll* do it!" shtick. The woman could make Christ feel guilty! "*I'll* do it," meant she wanted you to beg and plead to take on the cross she was bearing, but no matter how much you begged and pleaded, she wouldn't let you help. Later, she'd be furious you didn't lend a hand and she'd never let you forget it. Thirty years later, I still hear about that morning. There was no way out, but I didn't care.

"Fine! *You* do it!!!" I yelled. "And have fun, too!!!"

Before Mom could say a word, I stormed off to my bedroom.

"You get back here, young man!" she said, figuring I'd stop. I didn't—I was going to beat her at her own game. "Michael Gabriel O'Brien, do you hear me?!"

I continued walking.

"Fine, I'll do it!" she said, defeated. "Go help your father, then!"

When I reached my room, I understood why Dad always had a smile on his face when he stood up to Mom. She really was an imposing figure, and standing up to her took guts. It felt good to finally win a round, no matter what retribution might follow. For that one moment, she had no control over me and I'd later realize she wasn't half as tough as I grew up believing.

I got dressed and went down to help Dad pack the car. He was already done filling the car, but I noticed I could help him with something.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Flat tire."

"We just bought the car, though."

"I know," Dad said, putting his finger in a hole in the tire's sidewall. It looked more like burn than a puncture. Dad was sweating so heavily, it reminded me of Mom sweating into the spaghetti sauce the night before.

"I don't get it myself," he said. "But that doesn't change the fact it's flat."

He pointed to the jack, a big, old-time chunk of steel. "Can you hand that to me, buddy?"

"Sure."

I went to grab it, but quickly pulled my hand back. It was hot!

"What's wrong?"

"The jack's hot."

Dad looked at the sun just poking its head above the trees.

"Well the sun's not heating it up. You sure?"

"Yeah," I said, trying again. I picked it up and quickly made my way to Dad, before being overcome with pain.

"Oww!!!"

I dropped the jack on the small of Dad's back!

"Oww!!!" he yelled. "What the hell's wrong with you?!"

"I'm sorry," I said, backing up. "I was just trying to help."

"Why don't you go help your mother with the twins, then?"

I went to the backyard and moped, instead...

Mom was the yeller of the family. Dad *never* raised his voice, even when he probably should have, so I was shocked when he yelled at me. In my mind, the trip west should have been bringing us closer together as a family, but all it

seemed to be doing was driving a wedge between us. It seemed sacrilegious to yell at each other when there were bigger things on the horizon. I hardly think Grandma would have wanted us to kick off the trip mad at each other, but that's precisely what we did.

When Mom finally got the twins packed—when the house was all locked and we were ready to go—Mom ridiculed Dad for buying "a piece of crap car with shoddy tires!" He yelled back at her, surprising everyone—especially Mom—who was not used to having people stand up to her. The twins started crying, saying my parents were going to get a divorce, and we all piled into the *Inferno* and pulled out of the driveway hating each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Saint Christopher vs. the Dead Cow"

We took the Atlantic City Expressway to the New Jersey Turnpike. Dad turned north instead of south.

"Where are you going?" Mom said.

"You know where I'm going, Mary."

"We're not stopping for that damned cow, James. We don't have time! It's out of the way!"

Like Mom, Dad was not without his own weird superstitions. He began every road trip with a stop at the grave of Elsie the Cow—it was one of his favorite roadside attractions. I don't recall ever seeing a Borden Milk product in the house growing up, but for some reason, a road trip wasn't a road trip in my old man's eyes unless we stopped and paid homage to that artifact of the dairy marketing machine.

"It's good luck," he said.

"How is a cow good luck?" she said. "It's not even under the headstone. It's buried beneath tract housing."

Mom was right, while Elsie's body rests on land that was once the farm we're told she loved dearly, the headstone was moved a couple times and now rests several hundred yards away from her earthly remains. Elsie's final resting place now has town homes sitting on it! The year of the trip was the same year Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* came out, and I wondered if there was any truth to building housing on a grave; I wondered if building a town home on a cow's tomb resulted in the same horrors building on an Indian burial ground brought about—at least in Hollywood's eyes. Did the person owning the residence directly above Elsie's skeleton ever wander down to get a glass of milk in the middle of the night and came face to face with the spectral body of Borden's most beloved bovine?

"You've got your Saint Christopher necklace," Dad said, "and I have Elsie the Cow."

Mom pulled her SAINT CHRISTOPHER, PROTECT US necklace from beneath her dress. "Are you trying to compare a dead cow to an honest-to-God saint?! That's blasphemy, James—you're going to Hell!" To hear it from my mother, it was like she personally had the power to send people to an eternity in the

company of Satan himself. "I'm serious! That's like the Golden Calf, comparing a cow to Saint Christopher."

"Is Saint Christopher even a real saint?" I said. I may not have been religious, but I kept tabs on things, just so I could get under Mom's skin. Dad tried hard not to laugh.

"Of course he's a real saint!" Mom said. "What would you know about it, anyway?"

"Oh...I just thought the church de-canonized him around the time I was born, but what do I know, I'm just an atheist."

"Quit being a smartass!" Mom said. "I'm gonna have to fight hard to get you out of Purgatory, someday, Michael."

"Maybe not. I'm sure the church will one day decide Purgatory doesn't exist." I was on a roll.

"Stop talking like that—"

Dad interrupted Mom—he wanted to get back to his favorite cow. "Look, we've never had problems on road trips when we stop in Princeton, first. We can cut across Pennsylvania and still make good time. Why break with tradition now?"

"Because this is going to be a long enough trip without heading north, when we should be heading west," Mom said. Before Dad could speak, she added, "If you don't turn around right now, I'm never gonna let you live it down, James!"

"Fine," Dad said in defeat. "But if anything bad happens on this trip, I'm not going to listen when you blame it all on me..."

We cut across Delaware and into Maryland in near silence; the only noises were the sounds of the twins sharing a bag of marshmallows and Lucky chewing on one of my mother's makeup compacts. He got into some green eye shadow. When he jumped up on the back of her seat, he growled at me with green teeth until Mom told Elvis to throw a marshmallow his way. After skirting Baltimore, Dad popped in a Slim Whitman eight track, but fortunately for the rest of us, the stereo and eight track player didn't work—we would at least be spared such road trip classics as the "Whitman Yodel," the "Wabash Waltz," and "Please Release Me."

I tried reading comic books, I tried listening to DEVO on my new Sony Walkman, but nothing worked. Dad could easily drive fourteen hours straight through; I couldn't imagine such long hauls in absolute silence, let alone crossing the country like a family of mimes. Even the twins yakking away behind me would have been welcomed, but they didn't make a sound. It was up to me to break the monotony and bring the family back together.

"Why don't we all sing, or something?" I said, but everyone ignored me.

"I'll start." I sang, "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall...ninety-nine bottles of beer...take one down, pass it around, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall," to no avail. I gave it one more try; this time, louder.

"NINETY-EIGHT BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL...NINETY-EIGHT BOTTLES OF BEER...TAKE ONE DOWN, PASS IT AROUND, AND HOW MANY BOTTLES OF BEER DO YOU HAVE LEFT ON THE WALL, EVERYBODY?"

"None!" the twins said. "Shut up!"

"You shut up!" I said. I was at least trying to make things better, but nobody cared.

"Mommy, Michael's being mean to us, again," Olivia said.

Mom swung around, almost knocking Lucky from his perch on the back of the seat and into my lap. "Stop it, all of youse!"

Realizing she almost hurt Lucky when she spun around, she grabbed him and cuddled his rat-like body. I returned to my issue of *Fantastic Four*, but the twins weren't about to leave well enough alone. I heard Elvis whisper something to Olivia. Next thing I knew, she hit herself in the arm and started crying.

"Oww!!!" she shouted. "Mommy, Michael hit me!"

"I did not!" I said. "She's lying!"

Mom turned around again, this time brandishing Lucky like a weapon. "I said stop! Do I have to tell your father to turn this car around so I can get the ladle?!"

I knew she'd never hit us with that damn ladle, but it would take years before the twins realized it was a threat bearing no weight. They straightened right up and said, "No, we'll be good." Mom looked at me, waiting for a response, but I wasn't about to let her win with the old ladle threat. She wanted some kind of acknowledgement from me that I heard her, but I just looked ahead at I-70 through the windshield. Mom wanted to drive her point home, though.

"Michael, don't hit your sister again—"

"But I didn't do anything!"

She rummaged through her purse and found Lucky's dogbrush. She handed the brush and the little beast to me. "If you need something to do, brush Lucky." She reached back into her purse and fished out her cigarettes.

No sooner than I held him in my hands, he threw up on me! The twins laughed and Mom handed me some napkins. "Poor Lucky," she said. "Did Lucky-Dog get carsick?"

"I'm about to be sick," I said.

"He can't help it, Michael," Mom said. "It's not like he does it on purpose." (I wouldn't be so sure.) "Just brush him and he'll calm down," she said, returning to her magazines.

I cleaned the mess from my lap. Lucky wolfed down a big bowl of dog food before we set out on the trip, and Mom must have also given him a waffle and orange juice from the looks of things. I noticed some tiny pieces of hard green plastic in the frothy pile—maybe pieces from one of Elvis's plastic army men, or chunks of a Tupperware bowl Mom had crammed in the kitchen cabinets Lucky figured out how to get into.

Brushing him was impossible. Each time I tried getting near Lucky, he bit my hand. I finally pinned him down so he couldn't wiggle loose. Sitting there, trying to keep my hands free from his sharp, little fangs just aching to draw blood, I thought about past road trips.

We never got along like normal families, but we usually stuck together on my old man's treks. We *had* to stick together, just to stay sane! Dad could drive for weeks, and if it didn't take at least five days to reach our destination, he felt cheated. When you're forced to stop every twenty miles for side of the road photo opportunities, unity with even enemies like the twins was called for. (Dad was convinced that one day he'd snap a picture of us without the twins making funny faces, or without us all looking so exhausted from being packed into a car for a week or more, that we looked tired and used, like truck-stop prostitutes.) When the madness of highway travel became too much to bear on our own, we all sang, talked, and played games. For fleeting moments, we could even pass as a real family, but during the trip that summer, nothing would ever be normal.

The sound of the brush running along Lucky's scrawny, fuzzy body was actually soothing. There was an orchestra of sound playing in the car: the brush along Lucky's back, the twins quietly muttering to one another in the back of the car, the sound of the tires on the road, and Dad humming Dave Dudley's "Six Days on the Road" softly to himself, since he couldn't play it on his eight track. Lucky calmed down, and for a moment, I thought he was actually going to doze off. Then he bit me—hard enough to break skin. But that wasn't the horrifying part.

What *really* got to me were his glowing red eyes!

He looked up at me while I was brushing him, teeth still green and sticky from eating Mom's eye shadow and a marshmallow. I gave him a dirty look and locked eyes with him; I had heard many animals assert dominance with a glare,

and I was prepared to put Lucky in his place. He won the staring contest, though, when his eyes glowed red, like a tiny demon from Hell. I wanted to hit him, to try knocking whatever was inside his head free, but I froze, allowing him to make his next move.

"Oww, crap!" I shouted, startling Dad.

"What's wrong?!"

"Lucky bit me!"

The twins thought it was funny. "Good dog, Lucky! Good dog!" they said.

We rolled past a REST AREA—1 MILE sign. "We can stop up there and get your hand cleaned up and bandaged," Dad said.

Mom turned around, more concerned about Lucky than her first-born son. Lucky's eyes returned to their normal shade of brown.

"Poor Lucky," she said while taking him from me. "He's just feeling cooped up is all. Isn't that right, Lucky-Wucky?" He kicked his back legs, licked her lips, and snuggled up on Mom's chest.

"Poor Lucky? What about me?!"

"Your father said we'd stop and get your hand fixed. You'll live, Michael." She turned her attention back to her dog.

It was nice knowing my mother cared so deeply about my well-being; her oldest child gets hurt and it's an inconvenience, but her mangy mutt stretches wrong and it's the end of time. At least Dad was there for me.

We pulled into the rest area, and the twins immediately begged Dad for change so they could raid the vending machines for soft drinks and candy. Mom gave them money and told them to get her cigarettes from the machines, too. The twins had their sugar—Mom had her nicotine. All I had was a bloody hand and a father who wasn't quite himself.

Dad grabbed his first aid kit and took me to the men's room to get cleaned up. While packing the *Inferno* that morning, Dad discovered the car came with its own first aid kit, a red metal box with the words of Revelation 5:16 on it: "And out of the temple came the seven angels having the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen, and having their chests girded with golden bands." There was something about a first aid kit with a message about plagues that didn't sit well with him, so he opened it for a closer look. Once he saw, "I looked when he opened the sixth seal, and behold there was a great earthquake; and the sun became as black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood.' Rev. 6:12" written on a package of band aids, he decided bringing along the first aid kit from the garage was a much better idea.

Dad finished bandaging my hand where Lucky bit me. I wanted to tell him about Lucky's eyes glowing red, but I knew he wouldn't believe it.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you this morning," he said.

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I've never yelled at *any* of you. Not even your mother. I don't know what got into me and I wanted you to know I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Dad."

"You know I love you, right?" It was important for him to let us know he loved us more than anything; even more than side-of-the-road trinkets like stuffed Tijuana frog bands and fake Indian head dresses with state names emblazoned across them in plastic beadwork.

"Of course," I said. "I love you, too."

He ruffled my hair and said, "Good. Nothing can ever come between us, right buddy?"

"Right!"

"If I ever act like that again, you slap some sense into me, okay?" he said.

I told him I would and he gave me a hug. We stepped out in time to see the twins making their way back to the car with arms full of root beer, bubble gum, chocolate bars, and a couple packs of Virginia Slims.

"You want something?" Dad said, pulling money from his pocket.

"Sure." I took a dollar and went to the vending machines. I got a candy bar that was already melted from sitting in the sun all day and headed toward the car. I crossed in front to get to my door; when I did, the *Inferno* lurched forward!

I jumped out of the way, dropping my candy as I dove for the sidewalk. I felt the tire against my leg, stopping just shy of running me over!

Dad put the emergency brake on and jumped out. Mom was too busy opening a pack of smokes to notice what happened, and the twins were too busy laughing. Lucky stared at me. His eyes weren't glowing red, but I knew he had something to do with what had just happened.

"Are you all right?!" Dad said.

It happened so fast, I didn't have time to think if I was okay. I looked over my body—everything worked. Aside from two skinned elbows and a knee that needed cleaning, I came out unscathed.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I'm so sorry," Dad said. "My foot must have slipped off the brake."

Lucky continued staring at me.

"It's okay," I said, walking all the way around the back of the car, ready to jump to safety if it decided to lurch back in reverse. When I climbed into the backseat, Mom, who still hadn't noticed I was hurt, said, "It's about time," and lit a cigarette. "How far to Marge's?"

"About two and a half hours," Dad said, putting the car in gear. "We'll see if we can make it straight through."

Two and a half hours packed in a car with my family with no hope for escape. The twins had pooled their money together and bought some soap bubbles on an early stop for gas. About an hour into our silence, they unscrewed the top, took out the little wand, and blew bubbles, trying to float them over the back seat and onto my comic books and me. They ended up floating up front near Mom, instead.

"What the hell?" she said, watching a bubble float just before her face. Lucky popped it with a quick snap of his mighty little jaws, looking disappointed it had no edible interior.

"Youse guys stop that—those things are flammable!" she said. "If they touch my cigarette, they'll pop and it'll be just like the *Hindenburg* in here."

Growing up in New Jersey, home of the *Hindenburg* disaster, the twins had an irrational fear of zeppelins. They cringed when they saw the Goodyear blimp on TV when Dad and I watched the Jets play football; they were sure one day a flaming dirigible would blow all the way down from Lakehurst and crash on the house, killing us all. But they didn't buy what Mom had said about common soap bubbles being flammable—they were evil, but not totally gullible.

"Daddy, is that true?" Olivia said.

"No, sweetie, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't blow bubbles inside the car."

We returned to silence, and I decided to take a nap against my better judgment. Sleeping on road trips is normally a great way to pass time, unless your siblings are evil twins spawned not from their mother's womb, but from the very bowels of Hell itself!

When I fell asleep on road trips, I became a target once my eyes closed and I was off in dreamland. The worst thing about the *Inferno* was the twins had the entire back storage area from which to plot and launch surprise attacks on me. In the Gremlin, it wasn't so easy.

One of their favorite things was asking Mom for her purse, saying they wanted to get some gum. When she handed it to them, they'd grab her lipstick and draw all over my face. I can't count how many times I woke up with "DORK," "WEENIE," and "LOSER," written on my forehead in some strange

shade of red or pink only my mother and circus clowns had the courage to wear in public. Other times they weren't so subtle; Elvis was known to just haul off and punch me! I'd awake to sharp pain in my arm and a charley-horse that lasted twenty miles. Olivia loved waiting until I was sound asleep, then pumping her arm at passing truckers, getting them to blow their airhorns. I'd wake up in a startle, thinking we were about to get creamed by an 18-wheeler while the twins laughed themselves silly. Knowing I'd soon regret it, I closed my eyes and dozed off. Somewhere between finally getting comfortable and a dream in which Lucky was trying to eat a priest, the twins sprung into action.

* * *

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!" I shouted, bolting awake. I felt my face—it was covered in sticky lumps. I thought they poured battery acid in my mouth! My head echoed with the sound of a million Rice Krispies. Something was popping and burning on my tongue, like having a mouthful of bees. Elvis shoved a Coke in my face and said, "Drink this!"

I guzzled the drink without realizing it was part of Elvis's plan. The stinging sensation got worse. The twins stared at my face, and then down to my stomach.

"Shake your belly around, Dork-Brain," Olivia said.

"We want to see you blow up," Elvis added.

I realized what they had done as Dad pulled the *Inferno* to a stop on the shoulder so he could see what was wrong with me. They started with a bag of mini marshmallows—biting them in half, licking them, and then sticking them to my face. After that, they poured two bags of Pop Rocks into my open mouth. They were putting that old childhood urban legend to the test, the one that says if one consumes Pop Rocks and Coke together, their innards will explode in a massive mess of bloated guts. The only thing it did was give me gas, but just the fact they *believed* it would kill me and decided to test that theory out was a reminder of how evil they were when they put their heads together.

"Are you okay?!" Dad said while laughing. He knew what happened—he saw it all unfold in the rearview mirror, but didn't stop it. To my father, a big part of road trips was pulling pranks on each other, and in his book, this rated right alongside putting shaving cream in someone's hand and then tickling their face so they'd scratch and make a big mess.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said.

Mom finally turned around. "What happened?" She saw my face covered in marshmallows and shook her head.

"The twins happened," I told her while picking marshmallows from my face.

Mom put her hand out. "Gimme those." I gave her the marshmallows and she fed some to Lucky.

"They tried killing me."

"How did they try killing you?" Mom said.

"They put Pop Rocks in my mouth and gave me Coke! They thought I'd explode."

"Did you explode, Michael?"

"No."

"Well, then," she said, popping a marshmallow into her mouth. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm not going back to sleep," I said. "There's no telling what they'll do next time." I had visions of the twins filling my nostrils with dog snacks and letting Lucky mine for munchies.

"Then read, or count cars," she said, returning to her magazine. Dad pulled the car back onto the highway and we were rolling along again.

My family kept to themselves. The twins chit-chatted with each other softly enough to hide any other plans of what they had in store for me should I have fallen asleep again. Mom flipped through her favorite beauty magazines: *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. The only thing glamorous or cosmopolitan about my mother was every ten years or so, it seemed heavy makeup and kitschy clothes came back in style, but most times, she looked like a clown with a beehive hairdo dyed a vacuous shade of black.

Dad was always game for chatting on trips, but I knew if I tried talking with him, Mom or the twins would interrupt, so I didn't even try starting a conversation. Besides, I knew what was going on in my old man's head—he was visualizing all the things he'd buy on the road for his collection: shark's teeth, stalactites from caves, miniature muffler men replicas, Jell-O molds shaped like states, and snow globes. He owned hundreds of the things, but said there was always room for another snow globe.

I decided silence was golden and read comic books until Mom announced she had to find a bathroom. Had one of us needed to go, she would have made a big production about how we should have gone at the last stop and remind us Dad wanted to make it all the way to Aunt Margie's without stopping. But since it was *her* bladder about to explode, it was all right. We found a little gas station and Mom rushed off to the bathroom, but quickly returned. She said the stench before even opening the door was all she needed to know about what waited inside. Another stop and another quick turn around; the second stop didn't have a toilet, just a hole where the toilet once sat. Apparently that

didn't stop some people from using the bathroom. Mom said it appeared several people tried using the hole, others the sink, while some were content simply using the floor! She finally told Dad to just pull over on the side of the road.

"Mary, there's no place to go," he said.

"James, if you don't stop, your new front seat's soaked," she told him.

He pulled over to the shoulder and stopped. There wasn't a tree in sight—no ditches, no place to hide.

"I have an idea!" she said, grabbing Dad's camera. Dad liked keeping his camera unpacked and handy on trips, ready to capture an event in a moment's notice. "Kids, Daddy's gonna take your picture."

"I am?"

"Yes, James," she said, gathering a handful of napkins. "Come on, kids—I need your help."

We stepped into the grass along the highway and Dad readied the camera.

"Just make it look like we're taking a nice family shot," Mom said. "Kids, stand over there, right next to each other so no one will see me."

She planned to use us as a screen! She handed Lucky to me and squatted down behind us.

"All right, kids," Dad said. "Say cheese!"

When I said "cheese!" Elvis stepped to the side and Dad snapped a picture of my mother that still haunts me to this day! I punched Elvis in the arm, not caring what kind of vengeance he'd return.

"Stop that!" Mom yelled. "I'm peeing!" There was no doubt about that—we have a picture to prove it!

Elvis came back at me with a tackle, knocking Lucky from my hands. He knocked us back into Mom, who caught her darling dog before he hit the ground. "Be careful of Lucky's molera!" she screamed. "Watch his head, or he'll die!"

Olivia started crying. "Daddy, Michael hit Elvis!"

Dad just stood on the shoulder with his eyes closed, wishing the world would disappear. A semi rolled by and blew its air horn at Mom, whose legs were straight up in the air, her huge buttocks on display for anyone traveling I-70 to see. We could have sold prime billboard space on that butt had she not rocked forward to a sitting position so she could give the trucker the finger. Elvis was working my arms over with rapid-fire punches—he knew better than hitting me in the face. He had a bad habit of breaking my glasses when we

fought, and Mom told him if he ever broke another pair, it was ladle time.

Olivia kept crying until Mom yelled, "Shut up, all of youse!"

She hiked up her panties, dropped her dress, and walked back to the car.

"Elvis, get off your brother," Dad said.

"He started it!"

"I know. Just get off him, please. We need to get to your aunt's."

He got one final punch in as he got up—right in the gut, knocking the wind out of me. What did I ever do to deserve such a family?

We all climbed back in the *Inferno* and this time, made it to Aunt Margie's without stopping.

CHAPTER FIVE

"The Genetic Puddle From Whence I Crawled"

We pulled off the interstate, and soon four lane highways turned into narrow two-lane roads as we made our way into the hills. The narrow roads gave way to a dirt road Dad turned onto and carefully navigated. There were deep ruts and holes cut by past storms everywhere—it looked more like the practice grounds for an army artillery unit than a trail leading up to a residence.

"Hey, kids! Look up there!" Dad said, pointing at a treetop where a large bird roosted. "A red-tailed hawk!"

As we chugged up the trail, careful not to fall into craters along the way, the hawk took off, annoyed by the occasional revving of the engine as Dad maneuvered the *Inferno* from one pothole to another. Further up, we saw a white-tailed deer sprint toward the woods and leap into the trees to safety.

"Isn't that great?" Dad said. I think I was the only one impressed. I loved seeing different animals on our trips: bald eagles in the Northwest, armadillos in Texas, alligators in Florida and Louisiana, roadrunners in New Mexico, and the moose we once saw in a marsh on a trip to Minnesota. Even more common animals, like hawks and deer, were a welcome sight. We had plenty of wildlife back home in Jersey, but right in Atlantic City—aside from some birds—all we had were rats.

"It's just a deer and a bird, James," Mom said while petting Lucky. "They're nothing compared to Lucky. Isn't that right, Lucky-Boy?" The little dog, which reminded me of one of those rats back home, vibrated with excitement.

I let Dad know I at least liked seeing animals in the wild. "That's cool, Dad. Thanks for pointing out the hawk."

Even though I had to put up with Mom and the twins, I always considered myself fortunate to have seen so much of the country by the time I was thirteen. We really had been just about everywhere in the lower forty-eight states on Dad's trips. I appreciated the geography of each area, the subtle things that made each section of the country different and special. West Virginia may get a bad rap, but it's a gorgeous state. The mountains roll on and on and never seem to end. All the wildlife and wildflowers—I thought Aunt Margie was lucky to live in such a pretty place...then I saw her house!

The front yard was littered with old, mismatched appliances and beat-up, rusty cars, all with FOR SALE signs on them. Suddenly a yard full of pink lawn flamingos didn't seem so tacky. If it was a piece of scrap metal that once drove, cleaned clothes, or kept beer cans chilled, it was for sale in Aunt Margie's front yard.

When I finally caught sight of the house, I was surprised it wasn't up on blocks, like most of the cars scattered about the property. Calling it a house is giving it too much credit—shack might even be too kind. It looked like a gigantic fort built by clumsy kids from scrap lumber and tar paper. The only things giving a hint that people actually lived inside was the coal bin beneath the front porch and a big TV antenna on the roof. I'm sure one good shove would have been all it took to bring the whole place down. It suddenly dawned on me looking at that shack on the side of the hill: I was related to *Hee Haw*!

Outside my immediate family, Grandma, and Aunt Margie, I didn't know much about my relatives. Dad's side was pretty normal—at least this is what I've gathered from hearing his stories; my grandparents died before I was born. Dad's mother and father lived on a farm outside Topeka, Kansas and were as Whitebread America as they come: Grandma baked pies and cleaned house while Grandpa took care of the fields and talked a lot about "the good ol' days." They were a tight-knit family and supported Dad's dreams. Dad was an only child, and even though Grandpa needed him around the farm, when Dad decided to head out and see the world, my grandparents supported him. When his writing career never took off, they didn't say, "See, we told you so"; they encouraged him to keep trying. When he gave up the dream to move to New Jersey to be with Mom and sell insurance policies, they gave him money and their blessings. Dad was pretty normal, except for one thing when he was growing up: he thought he was Superman.

He didn't just *pretend* to be Superman like many kids—he was convinced that just like the genuine article, he crash landed in a field in the Midwest after his birth parents placed him in a ship and sent him light years across galaxies to the safety of Earth. He was convinced that one day his "Earth father" would take him out to the barn, show him the ship he arrived in and the spot where he crashed, and his life would never be the same again. His mother would make a costume using the blankets from his home planet that were found in his ship, and he would leave Kansas to fight crime not just in the big city, but all over the world, making the planet safe for mankind.

Even after an episode resulting in injury, he still held on to his belief that he was *Kal-El*, the super kid from another planet. When he was ten, he tied a red

tablecloth around his neck and climbed out his bedroom window, onto the overhang that kept the front porch safe and dry during summer storms. He took a few deep breaths and ran as fast as he could toward the edge, leaping with all his might before going over—throwing his arms out in front of him for even more power. He fell like a stone, straight into the dirt below where he broke his nose, knocked out four teeth, and broke two ribs. For most children that would be proof enough that he was powerless, but it only convinced Dad to try harder. He was more like Wile E. Coyote than Superman.

He was convinced a stress-inducing event would bring out his super powers when puberty hit. He tried racing trains (almost getting hit twice!), and took running leaps at the barn, convinced his powers would suddenly kick in and he'd fly over the weathervane atop the roof. He got a lot of concussions and facial lacerations, instead. He ordered the Charles Atlas system from a comic book, going from a ninety-seven pound weakling, to Topeka's most perfectly developed teen, but the superpowers never came. When he finally accepted that he was, in fact, born of terrestrial parents and was little more than a dreamer trapped in the middle of nowhere, depression set in and he decided the best way to put it to rest would be by seeing the world. That's when he packed his bags and went off across America to find who he really was.

I'm glad Dad was a weird kid. I think growing up convinced that he was the Man of Steel drove him to think big. Most of those big dreams never came true, but he at least gave them a try, which is more than most people can say. While he never saved the world from evil—while he never jumped into a phone booth to change into costume and fly off to save the day—to me, he was still Superman.

Mom's side of the family is where the real fun begins. Her side is chock full of everything from stage magicians, to backwater hillbillies! The only people I really knew on my mom's side of the family were Grandma and Aunt Margie. I knew my grandmother very well; she came for visits a couple times a year, and even when she was traveling, she always called every Sunday to chat with Mom. Aunt Margie came for visits now and then (either my Dad paid for her to come out east, or my grandmother paid). I always knew Aunt Margie was—for lack of a nicer way to put it—a backwards hick, but seeing where she came from drove that point home.

Aunt Margie always reminded me of a cow—I mean that in a good way. She had huge, brown eyes like a cow, and a kindness and calm that went to her very core; a strange, almost Zen-like aura. Like a cow, she had a faraway look about her, always deep in thought about not much at all. She was her father's

favorite daughter, and I always got the impression Mom was jealous; not because she wasn't as loved as Aunt Margie, but because—in Mom's mind—everything between her and Aunt Margie was a competition and it was the one area Mom knew Aunt Margie had an edge. There was no denying my grandfather liked Aunt Margie better; they were very similar.

I always wondered about my grandfather growing up. Mom spoke of Grandpa in the past tense for as long as I can remember. All I knew about him was he died about a year before I was born. If I asked Mom to tell me about him, she'd say, "Your grandfather was a coalminer," as though that explained everything.

Grandma met my grandfather when she was sixteen. By the time she was seventeen, she had given birth to fraternal twins: Mom and Aunt Margie. I figured my grandfather had to be a special guy to have married a woman as neat as my grandmother. Years later, I found out they were never married; in fact, they had never even lived together or spent more than an evening in each other's company. My grandfather was little more than a horny teenager working in a coalmine who happened to win the affections of my grandmother one evening during a chance encounter.

Some family history: my great grandfather (Grandma's father), was a magician based out of Atlantic City. (He went by The Great Gazpacho.) He trained Grandma to be his assistant and the two traveled all over the country doing their act. (The first time he took Grandma to the Grand Canyon was on a drive to LA, where he hoped for a chance to break into movies. It never worked out.) My great-grandmother died when Grandma was young; my great-grandfather was a single father in a time raising children was still considered "women's work." On a trip to Chicago in 1945, he decided to take the "scenic route" and show my grandmother the mountains—this route took him through West Virginia, where his car broke down not too far from Clarksburg.

While waiting around the garage to have the car repaired, my grandmother met Earl Webb, who stopped by to say hi to his friend, a mechanic at the shop. I've only seen one picture of my grandfather, an image of him standing with a group of coalminers. In the photo, Grandpa is standing in the center of a group of hollow-looking men leaning on shovels, all wearing head lamps like big, psychic third eyes allowing them to see in the dark. Looking at their blank stares made me think something was taken from them, something important from deep inside that they all missed dearly. Grandpa, though, was smiling, his arms wrapped around the two men flanking him, both looking proud to know him and stand in his presence. It's an old black and white photo, but Grandpa's

ice-blue eyes shine through the monochrome image and the grit covering his face. I was amazed a human could get so dirty: every nook and wrinkle in his face full of soot, the ridges in his knuckles black with coal dust. I guess he cleaned up well, or Grandma didn't mind getting dirty.

He was fascinated with my grandmother because she was from "the big city," and she was fascinated with him because he wasn't. By the time the car was repaired, my great-grandfather thought it was too late to head back out on the road and decided to spend the night in town. Grandma and Earl made plans to meet later that evening. One thing led to another, and they did everything parents tell their children not to do before marriage. The following morning, Earl showed my grandmother where he lived and gave her a piece of coal to remember him by, but that wasn't all he gave her. For the next nine months, she carried around more than just the memory of Earl Webb wherever she went.

When Grandma showed signs of the pregnancy, she knew who the father was right away. She may have been loose that evening in West Virginia, but she was no floozy—Earl Webb was the only man she ever allowed to know her in such a manner. As Mom and Aunt Margie grew in her belly, she could no longer contort and fit inside secret compartments in magic boxes, and not many crowds wanted to see a pregnant girl in a tight outfit keep trying. With no assistant, my great-grandfather's act went belly up and he turned to his weakness for making money: gambling (at least I know where my mother gets it). He spent all his time at Garden State Park, betting on horses. He ended up in over his head, owing money he didn't have to people you don't want knowing your name. They found his body in a ditch not too far from the track.

With her father gone, Grandma had no choice but take odd jobs to make ends meet. She did everything from selling concessions on the boardwalk, to housekeeping duties at the *Chalfonte-Haddon Hall Racquet Club* on the fifteenth floor of the famous hotel. She sold tickets to shows, and even tried doing her own magic act, but no one wanted to hire a woman about to bear illegitimate children. She did everything she could to earn a buck, right up until things changed inside her and she knew something big was about to happen.

She bought a bus ticket to West Virginia, making it to Clarksburg on Christmas Eve. As she neared town, her contractions hit hard and it was just a matter of time before babies came into the picture. The bus driver, noticing she was in pain and about to deliver, offered help, but she gritted her teeth and told him to keep driving. When she reached her stop, the driver offered help again, but Grandma told him it was her problem, not his. With a smile, she

let him know the sentiment was appreciated; then she stepped from the warm bus into the bitter, snowy night. As the bus pulled away, her water broke, spilling onto the surface of Highway 50. With a blanket slung over her left shoulder and her suitcase in her right hand, she trudged into the woods where she and Earl Webb had their fling nine months prior. She gave birth to my mother and aunt on the very spot where they were conceived.

She didn't rest long before cleaning them up, swaddling them in the cleaner part of the blanket where they were delivered, and taking them to Earl Webb's house. She crept up to the front porch, tucked Mom and Aunt Margie in an open suitcase, and then knocked on the door and ran for the tree line where she hid to make sure someone answered. When lights came on in the house and the front door opened, she made her way back to the highway to thumb a ride out west. I don't know if the Webbs could even read the note she left behind, but Mom still has it:

Dear Earl Webb,

You may not remember me, but we met about nine months ago when my father's car broke down in town and we spent the night. That evening, you and I came together in a union that resulted in the birth of these two precious girls. I am not abandoning them, just asking that you care for them for the time being——I have every intention to provide for them. Unfortunately, the line of work I'm involved with calls for a lot of traveling, and raising two girls on the road is no life for growing children. I will mail money to contribute to their support every two weeks—please consider the included funds my contribution until I can get on my feet. When I am in a more stable position and able to provide for them, I will return and we can discuss their future.

Sincerely,

June Mangione

P.S. The baby on your right is named Mary Catherine, and the one on the left is Margaret Rose.

I wonder what the Webbs thought, receiving such a package on Christmas Eve; my mom and Aunt Margie sitting there like little gifts. For all I know, they may have thought they were good eatin'. Grandma also left a fistful of cash—probably more than the Webbs had ever seen in one place at any given time. But most of all, I wonder what Earl's face must have looked like seeing something he gave to Grandma come full circle and return to him late one Christmas Eve.

Grandma stuck up to her end of the bargain, sending bi-weekly support payments when she landed a gig as a magician's assistant in California. She

later broke off and did her own act, touring nightclubs and learning ventriloquism on the side. Six years later, she was back on the East Coast, doing shows in Atlantic City, where she had her own place. She was finally ready to return to West Virginia, to discuss Mom and Aunt Margie's future with the Webbs.

It had to be very confusing for a six-year-old, the mother you never knew coming out of nowhere to see if you wanted to go live with her in the big city. The Webbs could hardly afford to feed one child, let alone the pair, but Aunt Margie wanted to stay in the hills. Mom, however—even at such a young age—had decided she was destined for far better than a life in Appalachia and was ready to leave. She took Grandma's last name and went off to live far from the hills.

When you think about it, Mom's life was actually pretty neat: born behind a bus stop in the hills, raised by hillbillies in the impressionable years, and later, a strong-willed, female magician. Still, her childhood had to skew things somewhat; my mother was far from normal, and when you factored Dad into the equation, things became even stranger. But no matter how weird my immediate family could be, I was about to see we were far from backwards...

CHAPTER SIX

"Fried Squirrels and 'Buttermilk'"

In Aunt Margie's front yard, my cousins, Debbie and Daryl, were sitting in a bed of dandelions. I have no idea what they were saying to each other as we drove up, but judging by their actions, I'm guessing it went something like this: Daryl popped the head of a dandelion into Debbie's face and said, "Your Mama had a baby and its head popped off!" Debbie grabbed a dandelion from the ground and said, "Hey, Daryl. You can tell if someone is allergic to butter with dandelions." Daryl probably said, "How's that?" and Debbie put the dandelion beneath his chin.

"If your chin turns yellow, it means you're allergic."

She rubbed a dandelion on Daryl's chin, staining it yellow. He laughed. It looked like a loving situation—two siblings at play, but the truth revealed itself when Debbie grabbed a whole handful of dandelions (dirty roots and all).

"Now let's see if you're *really* allergic, you dirty little bastard!"

She violently ground the mass into poor Daryl's face—we could hear him screaming for help all the way from the car. She shut him up with another handful, which she shoved down his throat, choking him. Had they both been boys, my aunt could have named them Cain and Abel; Debbie was always trying to kill poor Daryl. Dad beeped the horn to get their attention.

My aunt burst through the screen door and saw her fighting children. "Y'all cut that out!" she hollered as she made her way to the car.

Aunt Margie was the hillbilly version of my Mom. Both thought beehive hairdos were still all the rage, and they didn't quite understand polka-dotted dresses were not the most flattering thing heavy women could wear. Aunt Margie didn't dye her hair; it was starting to gray. She thought dying hair was a luxury only afforded to "high-class city folk," like Mom. They hadn't seen each other for awhile and the first words from my aunt's mouth after Mom said, "How ya doing, Marge?" were, "You got a smoke?"

"Hold Lucky," Mom said, handing the little beast off to my aunt. Aunt Margie held him at arm's length as he struggled to spin around and bite her. Mom fished her cigarettes from her purse, lit two, and traded one for Lucky. Both inhaled deeply, exhaled and sighed, and then finally hugged.

"It's good to see ya, Mary," my aunt said.

"Good to see you, too," Mom said. "How've you been?"

"We're holding our own up here—we're holding our own."

Aunt Margie caught sight of the twins and me. She rushed over for a hug and kiss. The hugs were never all that bad, but the kisses...the woman had seven teeth, and those teeth looked like hardened pieces of caramel. Her breath smelled like grizzled animal fat and tobacco, and she exhaled smoke in my face as she tried kissing me full on the lips. I was able to turn my head and give her my cheek, but it was still a horrible experience.

"My, how you've grown!" she said, before making her way to the twins.

She hugged them both, smothering the pair against her breasts as she squeezed with her burly arms. "Look at you two!" Somehow the twins were spared kisses.

"Hi, Margie," Dad said. Before she could hug him, he added, "Otis around?"

Otis was my uncle—the male version of Aunt Margie, only dumber. He had given up a career in coal mining to focus on his alcoholism. Aunt Margie refused to be "hitched to a bum," and demanded he work, so he tricked her into believing selling crap on the side of a hill nobody ever visited was a reputable job.

"He's round back working on a fridge," she said. "Business has been pretty good, lately. Shoulda seen how many things we had out in the yard a couple weeks ago."

I couldn't imagine the yard being more littered with junk! Neither could Dad because we both held back laughter when we made eye contact. I looked away and Dad said, "That's not surprising, Margie. I mean this is quite a location; I'm surprised you haven't sold the whole lot." I tried holding my laugh in and ended up snorting, hurting my sinuses and making my eyes water. Dad lived for making me crack up. Anticipating more laughter, Mom pointed to Aunt Margie's kids and said, "Michael, you remember your cousins, Debbie and Daryl, right?"

I didn't remember meeting them before, but said "Yeah. Hi, guys," anyway.

"Howdy," Debbie said. Daryl was still spitting dirt and catching his breath.

Mom turned her attention to the twins.

"You haven't met," she said. "but these are your cousins, Debbie and Daryl. They're twins, just like you guys."

"They aren't like us," they said, refusing to acknowledge Debbie and Daryl.

"I better get back in the house before lunch burns," Margie said. "I'll holler at y'all when it's done."

"Think I'll go see what Otis is up to," Dad said. While he wouldn't want to spend any length of time with my aunt and uncle, I think Dad saw them as a little piece of Americana—honest-to-God Appalachia! He went around back.

The twins wanted nothing to do with their relatives in the hills. "Can we wait in the car, Mom?" they said.

"No, you *can't* wait in the car! You're gonna come inside and help me and your aunt."

"If we have to..."

Mom looked at me and said, "Michael, why don't you hang out with Daryl until then? Have him show you the woods."

To this day, I have a hard time describing Daryl. He looked like the banjo-playing kid in *Deliverance*, only with two black eyes from being knocked around by Debbie all the time. He walked with a limp and spoke in a slow, clumsy manner (I later found out he once stuck his tongue out at Debbie, who kicked him in the jaw at the very moment, causing him to bite off half his tongue!). The thought of venturing into the woods with him scared me, and I wished I had followed Dad around back to see Uncle Otis (safety in numbers).

As I walked toward the woods, I wondered if Dad was having better luck. He told me it went something like this:

He wandered around back, where Uncle Otis was welding a green Kenmore door onto a white Whirlpool refrigerator. Otis had a little fenced off work area where he toiled the day away, creating Frankenstein appliances. His fence was constructed of wood scrap and chicken wire, and a sign reading "Git Back!" hung on the gate. Dad waited as Otis finished his weld and realized he had company.

"Well, hell!" he said. "If it ain't ol' Jimmy! How ya doing, boy?" He called everyone "boy" or "girl" regardless of age.

"Fine," Dad said. "How about you, Otis?"

"Can't complain. You gonna come over and shake my hand, or ya too good for that?"

Dad pointed at the "Git Back!" sign and said, "I figured you'd want me to stand back and not crowd you."

Otis laughed. "Aw, hell! That sign's fer the boy. He comes back here and gets in the fridges. Stupid cuss damn-near done suffocated 'while back, so I put that sign up and told him I'd whip his ass a good'n if I ever caught him back here again."

Dad wandered in and shook Otis's hand.

"Wanna beer, Jimmy?"

"It's still a little early," Dad said.

"Ain't never too early when it comes to beer!"

Uncle Otis pulled two beers from a dirty old toilet bowl stuffed with melting ice and tossed one to Dad. They both popped their tops, but only Otis drank.

"What are you working on?" Dad said, trying to start a conversation.

"Just welding an old door on this here fridge so's I can set it out front to sell."

"You make good money doing this?"

"Enough to keep an old commode fulla beers all the time," Otis said, while flipping down his welding visor. "Lemme just finish this up right quick. Don't go lookin' at it, or you'll fry your eyes all to hell. Stupid son of mine is damn-near blind and it ain't all from touching himself down below, if you know what I mean? He'd watch me weld all day long if I didn't scare him off."

Otis finished up, rocked his visor back, and guzzled his beer. He looked off in the distance, at nothing in particular. Dad tried seeing what caught his interest, but there was nothing there. Otis snapped back to attention and said, "So, that cousin of mine, Mary, around?"

"Yeah," Dad said. "She's in the house with her sister."

While Dad was reminded about the creepy twist in my family tree, I was walking the far end of the property with one of its more crooked branches: Daryl. Their yard gave way to a large cluster of woods climbing up the side of a small mountain. It would have been neat had Daryl not been there and had I not had the creepy feeling some toothless yokel might appear from behind a tree and begin an introduction with, "You sure got a purty mouth..."

"So what do you guys do around here for fun?" I said.

"Dunno. Ain't much to do, 'cept hunt an' stuff."

I tried showing interest. "That sounds cool. I've never been hunting."

"Wanna go?"

"Nah, we're not staying long," I said. "We don't have the time."

I thought I'd be spared the hunt with my excuse, but I was wrong.

"Don't take much time at all," Daryl said, picking up a rock from a pile at the base of the tiny mountain. Before I could ask him what he planned to do with it, he hurled it into the top of a tree. Down fell a squirrel! I was horrified and so was the squirrel; the initial hit didn't kill it, but I could tell Daryl was used to hunting like that because he picked up a larger stone in both hands, ran over to the poor thing, and ended its life with a few savage blows to its head. He picked it up by the tail and wandered my way.

"Wanna learn to skin it?"

"I'll pass," I said in horror. "I think I hear my mom calling."

I ran all the way across the backyard—the length of a couple football fields—and made my way around the side of the house, where I bumped into Debbie.

"Oh, hi," I said.

"Howdy."

She stared at me, saying nothing. I was hoping for some kind of ice breaker, even though I didn't want to speak to her. A pregnant hound dog wandered by, its breasts leaking milk that trailed behind in the dirt.

"That your dog?" I said.

"Yep."

It was like she could only speak in single words.

"What's her name?"

"Buttercup," she said. "She's a milkin' hound. You can tell by her titties."

I didn't know what to say; I wanted to run all the way back to Jersey. She wasn't finished talking, though—perhaps she was proud she finally mastered the fine art of multiple-word sentences. She was on a roll.

"Wanna see my titties?" she said.

I never loved my aunt more than when she yelled, "Y'all get in here if ya wanna eat!" I ran faster than I've ever run in my life...all the way into the house with the tarpaper roof, to a table covered in an Appalachian Feast.

My aunt set the table with paper plates that looked used. In the middle of the table was a green Tupperware bowl older than me, full of chunks of some kind of fried meat. Having "been huntin'" with Daryl, I had an idea what kind of meat the bowl contained. My appetite ran from my stomach. Each setting had a glass full of an off-colored milk. I can only guess it came from Buttercup herself!

"Damn, girl!" Uncle Otis said, coming in the front door. "That squirrel sure smells good!" I was hungry, but I was not about to allow fried squirrel and what I suspected was dog milk to enter my system. For once, my family all agreed on something. When Aunt Margie looked at us and said, "Dig in!" we all replied, "We've eaten!"

"Suit yerself," Uncle Otis said. "More chow for us!" He looked into the living room and shouted, "You gonna eat with us, Paps?"

I hadn't noticed, but sitting in a rocking chair in the living room was an old man—Otis's father. Paps was a frail husk; he looked like a discarded rag doll tossed on an old rocking chair for rustic atmosphere. He could bathe a million times and never look clean, the result of years underground, working as a

drillman in the mines. His pores were packed with grime that would never let go.

"You hearin' me, Paps?" Uncle Otis said. "Gonna eat?"

Paps said something no one but Uncle Otis seemed to understand. When he spoke, it sounded like he was talking through a mouthful of marbles and molasses. A rattle emitted from his chest, and he gurgled like a fancy coffee machine. Every sentence ended in a coughing fit. Black lung.

"You sure, ol' boy? I'll bring a plate to ya," Uncle Otis said. Between the heavy accent and his lung affliction, the only word I could make out from Paps was, "No." I guess when you can hardly breathe and it hurts to move, eating is not high on your list of priorities, even if it's something as appetizing as fried squirrel and hound dog milk.

I felt bad for Aunt Margie and Uncle Otis; even for Debbie and Daryl. It's easy to make fun of people like them, but as easy a target for ridicule as they can be, there was a sadness in that room—everyone waiting for the day Paps's chest would percolate no more. I remember the air in West Virginia filling my lungs on that trip; few places in my travels have I ever drawn as fresh a breath. It seemed criminal that Paps couldn't.

I still hadn't taken a seat, and I was glad when Aunt Margie said, "Michael, I forgot to get the butter. Can you go in the fridge and get it fer me?" It gave me an excuse to stop thinking about how depressed I'd become.

"Sure," I said.

The fridge was one of Uncle Otis's creations—his masterpiece. The body was perhaps once an old, brown GE model from the late 60s or early 70s, but Uncle Otis had stripped it down, painted it with chrome spray paint, and worked it over with a steel wool pad, giving it a poorly-rendered brushed steel look. The reason for such an effort? The door!

Uncle Otis had found a discarded door to a genuine, stainless steel gourmet kitchen refrigerator on one of his outings. Uncle Otis had a strange talent for being able to fit the door from one brand of refrigerator to the body of another. It looked like the door had seen better days, but it was clear Uncle Otis put his heart into repairing this one—he had buffed out the scratches as best he could, hammered the dents back out, and polished it, just like restoring an old car body. That door was their prized possession, and to show their appreciation, they covered it in grease stains and passages from the *Bible* held in place with tacky magnets.

I opened the door; it was so heavy, it almost tipped the entire fridge over. The interior of the refrigerator was pretty vacant, except for some raw meat in

open Tupperware bowls, an empty bottle of ketchup, and a waxy brick of butter I could only assume came from the same source as the milk: an old blue tick hound dog.

When I closed the refrigerator door, I noticed a yellowed newspaper story from 1968 stuck to the door with a smiling watermelon magnet. Reading the first two paragraphs, I finally found out how my grandfather had died, and why Mom didn't like discussing his death.

REOPENING TOMB FOR 78 MEN

WASHINGTON (AP) - Slowly, agonizingly slowly for the relatives of the 78 men whose bodies lie below, the seared walls of Mountaineer Coal Co's No. 9 mine are cooling off.

And as steel bits chew through the West Virginia mountain shielding the shafts and tunnels, officials prepare the plans to enter the mine for the recovery expedition and the first step in resuming digging.

I don't know why I did it—perhaps it was a way, in my mind, to have a piece of the grandfather I never knew—but I took the article from the fridge and shoved it deep into my pocket. I felt like I was stealing a lot more than just a piece of old newsprint, but I also felt I deserved it; after all, Mom and Aunt Margie had known the man—I could only wonder what he was like.

I brought the plate of butter to the table and set it down.

"Y'all gonna at least sit down with us?" Uncle Otis said, taking a seat at the head of the table. I sat down and looked at a *Dukes of Hazzard* glass full of milk that Dad kept eyeing. The house was full of little gems in my father's mind: plastic and glass drinkware from such silver screen classics as *Smokey and the Bandit*, and small screen classics like *Battlestar Galactica*. Daryl, who rushed to the table only after tossing the dead squirrel in the sink (but not washing his hands), drank from a plastic Kool-Aid Man mug I know my father was looking for. From a tacky lamp made from a conch shell that my grandmother gave my aunt after a trip to Florida, to a shellacked frog dressed in tiny overalls and holding a little banjo, I knew my old man was trying to figure out the best way to buy every tacky thing they owned and get it into the *Inferno* without Mom noticing.

My aunt, uncle, and two cousins made short work of their lunch. They maybe had twenty teeth between the four of them, but the teeth they *did* have seemed made to shred gristly squirrel meat into small enough pieces to swallow when chased to their stomachs with warm dog milk. Watching them, I never wanted to eat again! They wolfed everything down as though they

hadn't eaten in weeks (a distinct possibility)—they made *my* family's eating habits seem like the epitome of civilized behavior.

When they were finished, Aunt Margie pointed toward the sink and said, "Ya sure y'all ain't hungry? It won't take but a second to skin that critter up an' fry it fer ya."

"We're sure!" we all said in unison, like the twins.

"What about your dog? We have some table scraps?" I'm guessing Lucky wouldn't have touched their lunch, and he was known to dig in Mom's flower garden and eat poop left there by neighborhood cats.

Uncle Otis wanted us to "sit a spell," but Dad insisted we had a schedule to keep. We packed Aunt Margie's things into the back of the *Inferno* and the twins climbed in the back with all our belongings, not even saying goodbye to Uncle Otis or our cousins. No one seemed to care, though; not many people felt comfortable around Olivia and Elvis.

Dad made one more quick trip to the back of the car as Mom said goodbye to Uncle Otis. I saw Dad set a box in the back and take a quick peek inside. He pulled out the Kool-Aid Man mug and smiled. When Uncle Otis was done giving Mom a hug that was a bit too friendly and bothered her, I saw Dad slide a wad of bills from his pocket and thumb through them. Dad amazed me—he was a pro at buying things right under people's noses, a handy talent to have when you're married to someone like Mom, who criticized your every purchase, even though her own spending habits were questionable at best. For Uncle Otis, I'm guessing it was a bigger payoff than if he sold every appliance and beat up car in the yard; I'm sure old toilets overflowed with cold beer and ice later that evening.

We piled into the *Inferno* while Otis shouted, "Don't go fallin' in that canyon, ya hear?!"

We all shouted "Bye!" but Otis wasn't done.

"An' when you bring my old lady back, be sure to leave some room fer lunch!"

Dad waved politely and put the car in gear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Ring of Fire"

"Doesn't this crap car have air conditioning?" Mom said. We weren't even two miles from Aunt Margie's and already she was complaining.

"Yes," Dad said. "The AC is on, dear."

"Why is it so hot then?"

Dad waved his hand in front of the air conditioning vent. "Feels fine to me."

"Well then maybe it's just my side," Mom said, trying to figure out how to crank up the AC so it would be colder. She couldn't figure out which lever controlled the temperature, so she lit a cigarette instead.

"Can I have one of those?" Aunt Margie said. Mom pulled another cigarette from the pack, lit it using the one she just started, and then passed it back to her sister. The car filled with smoke.

"You two need to crack the windows if you're smoking in the car," Dad said. Mom ignored him—Aunt Margie looked for the window handle. She had never been in a car with electric windows (she may have not even known they existed), so I showed her how things worked, and she cracked her window.

"Put that window back up, Marge! It's a million degrees outside!" Mom said. First it was too hot in the *Inferno*; then it was too hot *outside*. There was no winning with her.

"Mary, please crack your window," Dad said. "I don't mind if you smoke in the car, but it's not fair for those of us who don't smoke to have to inhale that—"

"Not fair?!" she interrupted. "I'll tell you what's not fair, James! Packing me into a steaming hot car with shitty air conditioning and then telling me I can't smoke. It calms my nerves. If we roll down the windows—even a little—I'll melt!" With all the makeup she plastered on her face each morning, maybe there was some truth to that statement. The woman's face was like a kid's birthday cake: colorful, soft, and gooey. I had seen her makeup run on really hot days back home—she looked like a plastic clown doll melting in a fire. But still, I had to agree with Dad—it was not fair to expect us to inhale her smoke just because she was uncomfortable.

When Dad gave in and rolled Aunt Margie's window up from the master control on the driver's door (she thought it was magic), I rolled *my* window all the way down and hung my head out, inhaling the fresh air.

"You roll that window up right now, Michael!" Mom said. I kept my head outside, though.

"Now, young man!" she shouted.

"No!" I yelled back. "I can't stand the smell of your cigarettes!" Standing up to her that morning while trying to pack Elvis and Olivia had given me newfound courage. I wasn't going to let her win this time, either.

"I don't care," she said. "A truck can come by and take your head off! What do you think about that? Do you want people looking at you and saying, 'Oh, look! There's that little boy without the head!' Think of what they'll say about me!"

Mom made everything about her. Had a truck *really* taken my head off, she'd definitely mourn, but she would also figure out a way to turn the spotlight on herself. I can hear it now: "I tried warning him, but he didn't listen. Had he only listened. I guess I wasn't a good mother; I guess I fell short on my responsibilities. Oh woe is me..." She might even evoke pity from strangers, but those who truly knew her would think, "He had you as a mother? No wonder the boy stuck his head out the window to be chopped off by a passing truck. I'd have done the same..."

Mom wasn't about to be outdone. "Well fine, then," she said. She cracked her window and flicked her ashes right into my face. I went to pull my head back in, but couldn't—the window had rolled up to my neck and was getting tighter! I screamed; not just a little yell, but a blood-curdling, terrified scream. Then I could scream no more.

I couldn't breathe—I couldn't fill my lungs with enough air to force another cry for help. I thought Elvis must have climbed over the seat and got hold of Dad's master controls and rolled the window up on my neck as a joke, but I could hear Mom and Dad yelling from inside. This was clearly serious stuff—no joke at all!

"James, roll the window down!" Mom was as terrified as I was. In one way, it was reassuring because she really did care about us, but on the other hand, it scared me even more because when you're a kid and an adult is afraid of something scaring you, you know it's serious.

"I'm trying!" Dad yelled. His voice cracked in panic. That was even worse than Mom losing it. "It won't roll down!"

I gazed down and saw the lines on the highway racing by. I tried taking a breath, but had no luck. Everything started to fade in and out. I felt Aunt Margie pulling on my legs—she thought she was helping, but it only made it harder to breathe! I tried shouting, "Stop!" but couldn't generate the energy.

Dad pulled to the shoulder and eased the *Inferno* to a careful stop. The next moments of my life passed by in flashes. I saw Mom open her door and leap from the passenger seat. She set Lucky on the roof and came toward me. Behind her, I saw Dad slide across the hood in slow motion, like a cop from a bad TV show racing to someone's aid. Then things went black.

During the next flash, I heard Mom shouting, "Lucky, no!" as he sat on the roof licking my ear. He dug inside with his tongue, as though he were hoping to dig deep enough to taste brain. I saw Dad's face—I never saw him look more frightened in my life, not even the time the twins thought it would be funny to lie in the middle of the street like they'd been run over (complete with fake blood on their heads), right as Dad came home from work. I suppose Elvis's uncontained laughter as Dad approached, shaking his chunky little body, could have been mistaken for convulsing at a distance. For a brief moment, the look of horror on Dad's face was unmatched only by the look of anger when he realized he'd been had by his two youngest children. But I wasn't faking a thing; I was in the process of dying right before my family's eyes.

When I awoke, I was lying on the side of the highway with Mom, Dad, and Aunt Margie huddled over me. (The twins stayed in the back of the *Inferno*, no doubt disappointed to see me breathing on my own.) Lucky stood on my chest, staring. "Are you okay, buddy?" Dad said. I inhaled and coughed; few things in my life were as satisfying as that breath. Air rushed into my lungs, carrying oxygen to my head and everything came into focus. I was alive!

"Give him room!" Mom said as I sat up.

"What happened?"

Dad told me how the window rolled up on my neck and wouldn't go down. Mom tried breaking the window, but had no luck. Dad stopped her repeated attempts, worried if the window broke, a shard would cut my jugular vein and not only would I be suffocating, but also bleeding to death. The two grabbed the window on either side of my head and pulled down with all their strength, lowering the window just enough that Aunt Margie pulled my head free.

I just knew it was the car—it was out to kill me! First the salesman; there was just something wrong about him. From the way he dressed, to the way he moved and talked...I was convinced there was a lot more to him than just another greasy used car salesman out to make a quick buck, selling lemons to unsuspecting customers. Then Lucky's eyes glowing red. In Lucky's long list of ailments and strange habits, red eyes were not in his repertoire. And finally the window rolling up on my neck. It all made sense—the *Inferno* was out to get me!

Then I heard Dad say, "The motor in the door's stuck. Your window won't go up or down." He had my door open and tinkered with the window controls. "Not an uncommon thing with electric setups like this." Leave it to Dad to put a dent in my theory.

I got to my feet and now that I was all right, Mom had to say it. "See, I told you to keep your head inside the car and you didn't listen. See what happens when you don't listen, Michael?"

I climbed into the car and scooted over behind Dad, where I sat the rest of the trip, wanting to be as far from that door as possible.

* * *

A few miles down the road, I heard the twins in the back rummaging through a bag of marshmallows. I remembered how hungry I was, now that I was no longer subjected to the sight of toothless hillbillies eating tree rodents. Dad must have been reading my mind.

"I sure could go for a sandwich," he said. "How about you, Michael?"

"That sounds great!"

The twins, mouths stuffed with marshmallows, said, "We want one, too!"

"I thought y'all wasn't hungry?" Aunt Margie said. "There was plenty of food back at the house y'all passed on."

Dad tried sparing her feelings. "Yeah, and it all looked so good, too, Margie. Hated passing it by, but I wasn't hungry until we started driving again. Something about the open road that hits your stomach, right guys?"

"Right!" we said.

"I shoulda brung some squirrel or somethin'."

"Really is too bad you didn't," Dad said, holding back laughter. He didn't dare make eye contact with me in the rearview mirror. "I was just thinking a fried squirrel sandwich sure would hit the spot right about now, but it looks like we're stuck with baloney. Want to grab some sandwiches from the cooler, Michael?"

"Sure." I reached back over the seat, careful not to bump my arm on Aunt Margie's cigarette, which she held at arm's length near Mom's window, as though it bothered her as much as it bothered me. Dad insisted Mom crack her window if they were going to smoke.

I grabbed a sandwich for Dad, my Mom, and me. The ice in the cooler had melted, so the sandwiches floated around like little cellophane baloney boats. I asked Aunt Margie if she wanted one, but she rubbed her belly and said, "Nope, I'm still full." I opened my sandwich and started eating around the soggy parts.

"What about us?" the twins said.

"Get them yourselves," I said. "The cooler's back there with you."

They weren't satisfied with that reply—they were out to get someone on their side and make an issue of things.

"Mom! Michael didn't get us any sandwiches!"

"Michael, get your brother and sister something to eat," she said with a mouth full of white bread, processed meat, and mayo. She let Lucky take a bite directly from her sandwich as she swallowed and took a drag from her cigarette.

I fished two more sandwiches from the cooler and handed them to the twins.

"We're not hungry anymore!" Elvis said.

Olivia followed with, "Yeah, looking at your face ruined our appetite!"

"Let's not argue," Dad said.

"We're not arguing," the twins said. "We're just not hungry anymore."

They handed their sandwiches back to me and Olivia said, "Put these back, Dummy."

"You put them back."

They both shouted, "MOM!!!"

Mom had had enough. She was enjoying her sandwich, her cigarette, and her dog and was not about to let us ruin the moment.

"All of youse, shut up!" she bellowed. "Don't make me tell your father to pull this piss-poor excuse for a car over!"

Suddenly, as if the *Inferno* heard her, it veered out of control. Dad fought the steering wheel, struggling to get the upper hand as we skidded about the interstate. He finally regained control and pulled over. We were all terrified, except Dad, who remained calm and collected throughout the ordeal. He stepped from the *Inferno* and shook his head as he looked at the driver's side front tire.

"Goddamnit..."

"Don't swear at God, Daddy," Olivia said.

"I'm not swearing at God," he said. "I'm asking him to damn this car to Hell. There's a big difference."

"What's wrong?" Mom said, knowing full well what the problem was.

"Flat tire."

"Another one?!"

"We must have hit something in the road."

"Well fix it!"

"I can't," he said. "I used the spare this morning. I'll have to head up the road and buy a tire somewhere."

He shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand, looking ahead. "It looks like there's an exit up a ways—I shouldn't be too long."

He pulled the flat tire he changed earlier from the back of the car and carried it along the shoulder.

"Don't be too long," Mom said, proving she didn't hear a word he said.

We watched him make his way along the highway until we didn't see him anymore; then the twins decided to mess with me.

"Daddy swore at God," Olivia said to me.

"Shut up."

"You shut up!" Elvis said.

"You're both so stupid," I said. "There is no God."

"Mommy, Michael says there's no God!" Olivia started with the fake tears.

"Don't listen to your brother," Mom said. "He's gonna go to Hell if he keeps that crap talk up." She turned around and gave me *the look*. *The look* was meant to intimidate us, and I'll admit that when I was younger, I would have preferred a beating with the sauce ladle over my mother's evil eye.

"Michael, stop telling your brother and sister there's no God. You know better than that."

"You don't believe in God, Michael?" Aunt Margie said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

Aunt Margie looked at me sadly. "That's a cryin' shame."

I actually felt guilty. I didn't believe in God, and I was never that crazy about Aunt Margie, but I could see she was hurt. She tossed her cigarette out Mom's window and said, "Well, I'm gonna get me some shut eye 'til Jimmy gets back."

Mom gave me another look and said, "That's a good idea."

"Yeah!" the twins said, as though it were some kind of final blow directed at me.

I grabbed an issue of *Avengers* and pretended to read. It drove my mother nuts that I didn't believe in God. I came from a Catholic family and there were things you just didn't say. "*I'm an atheist*," was one of those things. I didn't have a problem with religion; it just wasn't for me. It seemed more a scare tactic the way it was wielded in my family, than a thing of beauty and eternal salvation. To hear Mom tell it, you'd expect Jesus and God standing beside her, all threatening you with sauce ladles for your sins! I simply didn't believe in a

divine good and I definitely didn't believe in pure evil. But that was all about to change.

I heard Mom snoring and noticed she still had a lit cigarette. I always had visions of our house burning down from her dozing off while smoking—I had a recurring dream Lucky and I were trapped in the flames, unable to escape. I quietly poked my head over the front seat to see if I could grab her cigarette and put it out so nothing would happen. Lucky was facing the glove compartment, but when he heard me moving over the seat, he turned his head all the way around, à la Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, and said, "DIE, MICHAEL!" His eyes glowed red.

I yelled out loud, opened my door, and leaped out. A pickup truck beeped its horn—I almost stepped directly into interstate traffic. I ran around to the side of the car and stood face to face with a fire!

Aunt Margie's cigarette had rolled into the dry grass and started things burning. It wasn't a huge fire, but it was spreading right up against the *Inferno*.

"Get out of the car!" I yelled, waking everyone. Mom and Aunt Margie panicked; they wanted to leap from the passenger's side, but they would have jumped right into the flames. They climbed out from the driver's side and were almost hit by a van. The twins shot out the back and left the doorgate open, so I rummaged around for a fire extinguisher.

Right beside the first aid kit that came with the *Inferno*, I found one! I pulled the extinguisher's pin while running around the car, pressed the release, and FOOM—more flames everywhere!

I gave the fire extinguisher another burst and the fire spread even more. I smelled gas. The fire extinguisher was filled with gas! I looked at the writing on the side of the extinguisher before throwing it to the side—it said, "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:15." A lake of fire was forming on the side of I-79, thanks to the *Inferno*!

"What did you do, Michael?!" Mom shouted. I didn't have time to argue—I ran to the back of the station wagon, grabbed the cooler, and dumped its contents on the fire, hoping that would do the job. I choked on thick, black smoke, but got a lucky hit—most of the fire was extinguished; those places still burning were easily put out by a few well-placed stomps with my foot.

"What the hell?!" Mom said while petting Lucky.

Aunt Margie added, "Michael, what have you done?!"

"What have I done?! More like what have *you* done, Aunt Margie? Your cigarette started the fire."

I dug around and found her butt in the grass, on the edge of the charred area. I picked it up.

"Does this look familiar?" I said.

"Oh, Lordy. I didn't mean to start a fire."

"You need to watch it, Marge," Mom said. "If that fire got up under the car's gastank, we'd all be dead. Can't believe you."

Mom took her position as big sister by just a few minutes seriously, and deep down reveled in the moment anytime she could belittle my aunt. Mom wouldn't give up until she got a rise out of Aunt Margie. "We could have been killed."

"I'm so sorry," Aunt Margie said. If she had a tail, it would have been planted firmly between her legs. "I didn't mean to."

"Well think next time," Mom said. "You can't just flip a cigarette out the window or fall asleep smoking—"

"Mom!" I shouted, pointing at the *Inferno*.

Smoke billowed from the front seat and rolled out the window. I realized she didn't have her cigarette—she had dropped it in the rush to escape from the car. I held my breath and opened the door. A small fire burned on the floorboard, melting the carpet into a sticky mass. I grabbed an issue of *Vogue* and beat the flames down while Kim Alexis stared up at me from the cover.

Aunt Margie stared at Mom, but was still too frightened of her older sister to speak up.

"How'd that fire start?" Mom said.

"You and Aunt Margie need to stop smoking."

"Yeah!" Even the twins agreed with me.

"I didn't start a fire, Michael."

"Yes you did, Mom," I felt a need to speak up for Aunt Margie, since she lacked the courage to do it herself. "You were just yelling at Aunt Margie about flipping her cigarette out the window and starting that fire," I said, pointing to the charred grass. "But you started a fire inside the car!"

"That's different," Mom said. "I was rushing to get out."

"It doesn't matter. You *both* need to be more careful."

I put the cooler in the back of the car, climbed into the back seat with a comic book after the smoke cleared, and waited for Dad. The twins climbed into the back and went to work on a fresh bag of marshmallows. Mom and Aunt Margie got in and didn't say a word for ten minutes. When the silence was finally broken, it was Mom.

"I sure could go for a cigarette about now," she said.

"Yeah, me too," Aunt Margie said.

"If you're gonna smoke," I said, "go stand where the fire was and be careful." I didn't want to put out any more of their mistakes.

They got out and stood in the charred circle. I heard Mom say to Aunt Margie, "It's all your fault..."

I read two issues of *X-Men*, three issues of *Fantastic Four*, a *Donald Duck* comic, and an issue of *Spiderman* before Dad returned. Mom and Margie were back outside, on their seventh cigarettes. Dad carried a big bag of food. He rolled a new tire along the shoulder with a stick, so he wouldn't have to bend over. As he neared the car, he sniffed the air, smelling the singed grass.

"What happened?" he said.

"Marge started a fire," Mom said.

"I wasn't the only one."

"Is everyone okay?!"

"Yeah," Mom said. "Marge flipped a cigarette out the window and burned down half the county." She pointed to the scorched circle and ruined baloney sandwiches.

"Least I didn't set the car on fire," Aunt Margie said.

"What?!" Dad said.

"Calm down, James." Mom searched for the best way to break the news. "I wouldn't have dropped my cigarette if Marge didn't start the *first* fire. I could have burned alive in there; that car's a deathtrap. I had to jump out quick. I dropped my cigarette on the floor and it burned some carpet."

Dad poked his head in the passenger side window and took a look. A small circle of red carpet melted away in the fire, revealing part of the black, metal floorboard. He looked in the back, at the twins and me.

"Are you guys okay?"

"We're fine," I said.

"Why don't you all stand by your aunt and mother while I get this tire on?"

We stood outside while Dad swapped the punctured spare for the new one. He put the spare in the back and got inside. Mom and Aunt Margie started climbing back in with their cigarettes, but Dad said, "No more smoking in the car."

They stood outside and finished them, tossing the discarded butts to the ground. When they climbed in, Dad got out, walked around to where they were standing, and snuffed out the butts with his foot. He walked back to the *Inferno* shaking his head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"A Breath of Fresh Air"

We drove until it started getting dark; then Dad handed me a map.

"Hey, buddy, see if you can find a campsite on there for us. They should be marked."

I loved maps; I still do. I guess I got it from Dad. I could sit in a room with an atlas and spend the entire day tracing routes all around the world with my fingertips, imagining what each place was like. I could look at Italy and try finding places relatives talked about. I could imagine whole stories about Dad's ancestors in Ireland. The places I might never see, I could at least look at and pretend I was there.

I looked at the map of America and saw how far we had traveled—we would have made better time had we not had so many problems. I found the closest campsite on the map. "There's a place to stop about twenty-five miles ahead," I said.

Mom was happy. "Good, I'm ready for a cigarette!"

The twins were happy, too. "Goody! We can roast marshmallows!"

With the windows down to air out the smell of the burned carpet, I rested my chin on the door, ready in case the window rolled up by itself again, and let the wind blow in my face. Even back then, as much as my family drove me nuts, I appreciated those moments: the windows down, no one talking, and the sound of the tires racing along the pavement. It was easy to lose yourself in the moment—even in a packed car there was a sense of isolation. It only lasted a few minutes at most, but for those few minutes, there wasn't a care in the world. We made it to the campground in time to watch the sun set.

Half the campground was full of RVs, and the rest of the area was full of four-bed canvas army tents. Mom hated the thought of sleeping in tents, it reminded her of a time in Yellowstone when a bear decided all the sugar Mom and the twins left lying about camp was a fitting late-night snack. The campground was torn apart, but our tent was spared. Still, Mom couldn't shake the thought. Even if she had a tent pitched in the middle of *Times Square*—in her mind—a bear would somehow show up.

"I'm not sleeping in a tent, James!"

"You can sleep in the car," Dad said, "but you're not smoking."

She looked at the *Inferno*, then the tents. "Okay, I'll take the tent," she said, "But if any bears mess with me, James, you're taking me home."

"I can assure you, Mary, no bears are going to mess with you."

He looked at me and said, "Let's go find the owners—the rest of you wait here a sec."

We went to the owners' trailer. A husband and wife team who were probably first cousins, sat outside under a canopy, sipping iced tea and watching a television sitting on an old card table.

"Howdy! Can I help ya?" the man said.

"Hi. Yes," Dad said. "We need a couple tents for the night."

"How many?"

"Two should do."

"That'll be twenty-four dollars."

Dad handed him some money and said, "Keep the change."

"Thank y'all," the owner said, pointing to a pair of tents. "Y'all take those two and have a nice evenin'."

His wife nudged him.

"Oh yeah," he added. "With it bein' so dry and all, we ask that you don't start no campfires."

"No problem," Dad said.

We walked back to the car, where the twins had a bag of marshmallows ready.

"Daddy, can we roast marshmallows?"

"I'm sorry, guys. They aren't allowing fires right now, so you'll have to wait. Maybe next time."

"Boooooo!!!!"

Dad pointed to the tents and said, "Those two are ours." The twins immediately stomped off to one.

Mom handed Aunt Margie her evening tobacco ration and said, "That should tide you over for the night."

"Thanky," Aunt Margie said. She looked around uncomfortably, before finally saying, "So who gets Maw?"

"Huh?" Mom said.

"Maw's ashes. We can't just leave 'em in the car. What if someone done stole it?"

"No one's stealing that ugly car," Mom said, looking at Dad. She wasn't going to let him forget how much she hated the *Inferno*. "I'll take care of the ashes."

"I wanna keep them."

"They'll be safe with me, Marge," Mom said.

"I want them. You've had them all this time."

"There's a reason for that. Mom liked me best and she wanted me to hold onto her."

"Maw didn't like you best! She liked me best!"

"Daddy liked you best. Mom liked me..."

Seeing two grown women carrying on even worse than my siblings and me was a sad sight. Within moments, their argument was reduced to, "Did not! — Did too!" They wouldn't give up, and I could tell it was really bothering Dad, who normally let things like that roll off his back. He started sweating and had the same distant look he had that morning, when he was changing the tire.

"Shut up!" Mom said to Aunt Margie.

"You shut up!"

"Both of you, shut up!!!" Dad shouted.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

The *Inferno's* horn went off and wouldn't stop. Dad rushed over and messed with it, but had no luck.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

Other campers came out of their tents, looking to see what the problem was. I wandered over to see if I could help.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

Dad popped the hood. People were clearly annoyed. I saw the campsite's owner standing up, looking our way.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

Dad ripped some wires from the engine and the beeping finally stopped. He dripped with sweat.

"Sorry about that, everybody!" he said to the campground. "I don't know what caused that, but it won't happen again." He held up the wires as proof.

"You can go back to relaxing."

Mom and Aunt Margie weren't through. Mom headed toward the *Inferno*.

"What are you doin'?" Aunt Margie said.

"Going to the car. I forgot something."

"Yer gonna get Maw's ashes is what yer doin'."

"She liked me best," Mom said.

I cut Aunt Margie off before they started again.

"I'm sleeping in the car, tonight. Grandma's ashes will be safe with me."

"Oh..." they both said, disappointed. I don't know why I said it—I didn't really want to sleep in the car, but I wanted them to stop arguing. I felt a need

to defend Grandma, and it *did* beat sleeping in a tent with Elvis and Olivia and struggling to breathe while Aunt Margie smoked.

As they headed off toward their tents, I heard Mom say, "I give you cigarettes and this is how you treat me?"

Before they went their separate ways, Aunt Margie said, "Maw did so like me the best."

"Did not..."

"Did too..."

They finally disappeared from view as Dad closed the hood. He stepped back, looked at the car, and sighed.

"I'm really beginning to regret buying this car."

"It's probably just dumb luck," I said, even though I thought the same thing.

"It's weird," he said.

"What?"

"It's almost like the car is doing things on its own. That's crazy, though."

Now was the time to tell Dad what I wanted to tell him since the rest stop.

"Speaking of crazy...can I tell you something, Dad?"

"Sure, buddy. Always."

"I think there's something wrong with Lucky."

I thought Dad was going to laugh, but he held it back, realizing I was serious.

"We all know there's something wrong with Lucky," he said.

"No, I mean *really* wrong."

"Is he sick?"

I stepped away from the car and looked around, making sure no one could hear me. "I think Lucky's possessed."

"Possessed? Like *Exorcist* possessed?" he said.

"Yeah."

Dad searched for words. "He's a mean little guy—I'll give you that. But I don't know if I'd go as far as saying he's possessed."

"His eyes were red," I said.

"Red?"

"Yeah. Like your jackalope's."

"Look, it's been a rough day," Dad said. "You probably just need some sleep—I think we all do. Sometimes an animal's eyes catch the light on a weird angle and they look like they're glowing. We're all pretty tired. Get some rest, buddy. I'm sure things will be better tomorrow."

"I hope so."

Maybe Dad was right, maybe I was overreacting and just seeing things, but I was definitely going to keep a better watch over Lucky and the things he did.

Dad said goodnight, gave me a hug, and then headed off toward the tent. I slept well that night, with two exceptions. First, when a raccoon wandered near Mom and Dad's tent and she screamed, thinking a bear was attacking her. She woke the entire camp. While the tiny raccoon was a far cry from the ten thousand pound black bear with shark's teeth and fiery eyes my mother was convinced would emerge from the woods and strip the flesh from her bones while she dreamed deeply about Elvis, raccoons—like bears—had a penchant for finding the gooey food wrappers my Mom left scattered around camp. I guess she figured, since she believed bears and raccoons are distantly related, screaming bloody murder was the safest bet. I had to laugh.

The second time I was awakened wasn't so funny...

* * *

I was in the middle of a dream about opening a box that contained the secret of life when I woke up choking! I jolted upright, grasping at my throat while coughing and gasping for air! The windows were rolled up and the doors were locked. I tried the power locks to no avail, and then tried physically unlocking the door with my fingers. The *Inferno* was trying to kill me! It didn't finish me off on the highway earlier that day, so it was trying again, now that it had me alone!

I banged on the windows and yelled for help, but no one heard me. I jumped to the front seat and tried the horn, but it didn't work since Dad disconnected it. I was on the verge of passing out when I remembered something: Grandma! I grabbed the urn from the passenger seat and used it to break the driver's window, waking the camp up for the second time that evening, and bothering them for the third. Dad rushed to the *Inferno*.

"What happened?!" he shouted.

I hung out the window, struggling to catch my breath and fill my lungs with fresh air. "The windows were up and I couldn't breathe!" I said. "The doors were locked, too."

Dad looked at the car—all the doors were unlocked and the windows were down (including the one that tried killing me when Mom refused to crack her window while smoking). He opened the driver's side door and I got out, clutching the urn in my arms.

"What's that?" he said.

"Grandma. I used her urn to break the window."

He felt my forehead as Mom, Aunt Margie, and the twins came out of their tents to see what was happening.

"What's happening?" Mom said.

"Nothing. Everything's all right," Dad said. "Go back to sleep." He checked out the car.

"All the doors are unlocked and the windows are down, buddy."

"I'm not lying!" I said. "Everything really was closed and locked up, Dad. Don't you believe me?"

He struggled to pick me up and set me on the hood. "It's not that I don't believe you, bud. I know sometimes when we wake up on a trip we can forget where we are. I'm not saying things *weren't* locked—I'm just saying I have a hard time believing they were when everything's wide open right now.

"I also know you wouldn't just break a window without reason. It could have been a bad dream. You could have been hyperventilating. What's important is you're okay now."

He gave me a hug and said, "How 'bout I go get my sleeping bag and we can both sleep outside? That sound good?"

"Yeah."

"And hey—I won't have to listen to your mother's snoring all night!" he said, laughing.

Dad may have been right about everything—maybe it *was* just a bad dream; maybe it *was* just a faulty window motor in the car door that got me earlier that day; and maybe Lucky's eyes *were* just a strange reflection, but I wasn't buying it. As he went to gather his things, I looked at the *Inferno* and said, "I know what you are, you son of a bitch." I swear it growled back at me.

Dad came back and we set up camp away from the car, beneath the stars. Dad took my mind off the *Inferno* by pointing out constellations I didn't know. He showed me how to spot Aquarius, Cygnus, and Pegasus. He told me the mythology behind each one. He stared at the stars and said, "You know, there was a time that's all people had to go by. There was a time things weren't all plotted out on maps."

His eyes sparkled beneath the crescent moon—they welled up with tears. Dad could look at the sky and get emotional. Staring up at the vastness of space and all the possibility of what's out there made him feel something I wouldn't experience until finally seeing the Grand Canyon: the feeling that there are simply things much bigger than us—so hard to fathom—that we can only stare in awe.

If I had three wishes at that very moment they would have been, one: that the *Inferno* and Lucky stopped doing whatever it was they were doing and left us alone. Two: that my family could function like a real family, if only for a few days. And three: that Dad could have traveled back to a time when stars were maps and there was still untainted land left to explore. That's what he lived for.

We chatted about the stars a little longer until he finally dozed off, dreaming about uncharted territories, I'm sure. I couldn't sleep; I stayed awake and stared at the car. I knew it was a matter of time before it did something *really* bad, or until my family would finally see that I wasn't nuts in thinking it was possessed. I wasn't going to be near the car alone anymore. After almost being choked to death, I didn't even want to be in it with five other people.

I held Grandma's urn like a teddy bear, thankful I was able to get to it before the *Inferno* got to me. There was something comforting about having Grandma with us. No matter how frightened I was, I felt like nothing would truly be able to hurt me as long as she was around.

I kissed the urn, whispered, "Thanks Grandma," and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER NINE

"Big Dick's Breakfast Revival"

We started the morning cleaning up broken glass from the window I broke the night before. I don't know why, but I picked up a piece and put it in my pocket. (I still have it to this day.) Before leaving, Dad and I wandered over to the owners' trailer and knocked on the door. The wife opened the door, and the scent of wet wildflowers gave way to bacon and eggs.

"Howdy!" she said, obviously wide awake and ready to tackle another day.

Dad fished his wallet from his pocket. He pulled a twenty out and handed it to her.

"I'm so sorry we were such a bother," he said. "Before leaving, I wanted to give you guys a little more for putting up with us."

"Hell, you ain't gotta do that!" she said.

"I do, though. We kept the whole camp awake."

"Aw, don't go worryin' 'bout that!" she said. "That was the most excitement this place's seen in a long, long time."

Just when I was starting to understand what people meant by Southern Hospitality, her husband yelled, "That them damn Yankees?!" He poked his head out the door and looked us up and down; I thought, for some reason, that he would kill us and cook us with his bacon.

"Yep, that's us," Dad said.

"You gonna stand there all mornin' long, or come in for breakfast?" he said, surprising me.

"We really need to get moving," Dad said.

"Hell, Hoss! You ain't goin' far without a good breakfast. We got plenty—get the family." Before Dad could turn the offer down, the owner added, "It's the least you can do for keeping the whole camp up all night with your racket."

Dad couldn't say no to that. They gave Dad his twenty back, even though he insisted they take it. Dad sent me to get everyone. When he saw Mom coming, carrying Lucky in her hands and smoking a cigarette, he said, "Dear. You need to put that out and put Lucky in the car."

"With that broken window, he'll get out," she said, tossing her cigarette in the grass. I walked over and snubbed it out before we had a repeat of the side of the road fire.

The twins, who were looking forward to a marshmallow breakfast in the back of the car and not a hot meal at a stranger's table said, "We'll watch Lucky for you."

The owner's wife spoke up, smashing their hopes. "It's all right," she said. "He's a cute little fella. We don't turn nothin' down from the table; don't matter if it's man or beast."

"Beast is a fitting term," Dad muttered under his breath as he held the door open for Mom.

Introductions were made, and it seemed Aunt Margie found a hillbilly home away from home, although I'm sure she missed the succulent taste of fresh squirrel for breakfast, killed and peeled that very morning. Their names were Dick and Dixie (Dixie affectionately called her husband "Big Dick," and it took everything for Dad and me to keep our composure). Big Dick looked like he could break cinderblocks with his fists and bite nails in half. Dixie was sticky and smelled like a sandbox.

We stood around the table as Dixie set more places. Dad told them where we were heading and why. "That's a big ol' hole," Big Dick said when Dad mentioned dumping Grandma's ashes in the canyon. "Best be careful you don't go fallin' in...would put a damper on your vacation." Dad chuckled, thinking Big Dick was making a joke, but he blushed when he realized Big Dick was being serious. We sat down to eat.

"Before we eat, I'd like you all to bow your heads in prayer," Big Dick said. "That's how we do things around here."

Everyone bowed, except me. Even Lucky looked down, but he wasn't concerned with prayer—he was eyeing pieces of bacon he knew Mom would cram down his black hole of a throat once the meal started.

"Heavenly Father, we thank you for this meal we're about to eat," Big Dick said.

I noticed Lucky writhing in Mom's hands, struggling for freedom. He didn't like the prayer.

"Please protect this family as they travel across this great country to scatter the mortal remains of one of your children in one of the prettiest places you ever created..."

Lucky barked out loud; Mom held his mouth shut between her thumb and forefinger.

"And watch over Little Dick, who never made it from Dixie's womb alive, but was still one of your miracles and something we'll never forget. Watch over him, Heavenly Father and make sure nuthin' evil ever crosses our paths."

Lucky bit Mom, startling us all! It was no surprise when Lucky chewed on a pair of shoes, furniture, or one of us, but he *never* bit Mom. She looked hurt.

"Lucky, no!" she said. She realized she interrupted Big Dick and said, "Sorry."

"No problem, Ma'am." He returned to his prayer.

"Thank you for all you've given us, Heavenly Father. But most of all—even more than giving us Little Dick—thank you for loving us enough to send your only son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for all us sinners. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen."

With those words, Lucky started howling, his head thrown back and his tiny snout turned skyward like a wolf as he cried and yipped in doggie agony.

"Lucky, stop!" Mom said. She looked at Big Dick. "I'm so sorry—he usually behaves. I don't know what's getting into him."

"Maybe he's been touched by the Lord," Dixie said, serious as can be. Lucky stopped baying and looked directly at her, startling everyone at the table. They'd all see it with their own eyes—I was sure of it. His eyes would glow red and I'd be vindicated! Before he barked some more or showed what evil lurked within, though, Mom gently pressed in on his molera, freezing him. When everyone filled their plates and Mom let go of his soft spot, Lucky looked directly at me and licked his little jowls.

When the twins had heard we were eating with Dixie and Big Dick, they returned to the *Inferno* for a bag of marshmallows. They shoved handfuls into their mouths, while everyone else dug into their food. I pushed a piece of bacon around with my fork and pierced a fried egg, watching the yellow yolk spill over and consume the edge of a biscuit like *The Blob*. Dad noticed I wasn't eating.

"Not hungry?" he said. I didn't know if it was genuine concern about my appetite, or if it was his say of saying, "Please be polite and eat." I picked up a piece of bacon and took a bite.

"I'm fine, thanks."

I *was* hungry, but I was more concerned and lost in my thoughts—about Lucky and about something Big Dick said during his prayer that didn't seem to bother anyone else: the mention of "Little Dick," the boy that never was. I wanted to ask about him, but figured it wasn't the best topic for breakfast.

"I'm sorry if the talk of Little Dick set you folks on edge," Big Dick said with a mouthful of bacon, eggs, and biscuits and gravy. It was like he was reading my mind. "Dixie here carried him a little over two months, we reckon, but it wasn't meant to be. He's the closest thing to a child we ever had, so we always include him in our prayers."

"I understand," Dad said. Before thinking, he added, "Have you two thought about trying again?" Mom kicked Dad beneath the table, but talking about Little Dick seemed almost therapeutic for Dixie and Big Dick.

"We tried," Dixie said, " but Big Dick, here, had an accident with a circular saw and ain't got the goods to be siring children no more." Guess he wasn't "Big Dick" after all!

I felt bad for Dixie and Big Dick, but it was probably for the best Little Dick didn't make it. No one should have to endure such a nickname through life. Most guys could live happily with "Big Dick," but "Little Dick?" Perhaps he heard the name he was destined for while still in the womb and decided to make a break while he could!

Eating with Dixie and Big Dick was more uncomfortable than eating breakfast at home. There, I was at least used to things: Dad talking to me, the twins talking to each other, and Mom talking with Lucky. There was order in our dysfunction. But eating with Dixie and Big Dick made me tense for some reason, and that tension grew even more when a huge Saint Bernard entered the room. It walked right up to me and put its wet jowls in my lap, soaking my shorts in drool.

"That there's Susan," Dixie said. "Don't mind her."

"Susan. That's an interesting name for a dog," Dad said.

"Yeah, I named her after my sister," Dixie said. "She's a big ol' bitch, too!" Gravy had collected in the corners of Dixie's mouth—I guess she never grasped the concept of napkins.

I was used to Lucky being around the table, but he was always in Mom's lap, not mine. Susan's head alone weighed more than several Luckys put together. She kept drooling in my lap. I figured she wanted some food.

"Is it okay if I give her a piece of bacon?" I said.

"You can if you want," Big Dick said, "but I don't think that's what she's after."

Susan rubbed the base of her tail against the leg of the table—she was in heat! Lucky could tell she was in heat, too—he squirmed in Mom's hands even harder than during the prayer. He was never neutered and the thought of nailing something thirty times his weight was too much for Mom to handle. He broke free from her grip and mounted Susan right there at the breakfast table!

"Lucky, no!" Dad said.

"Oh, let the little fella have his fun!" Big Dick said. "He ain't hurtin' nothin', and if his aim is true, we could end up with some of the funniest looking puppies this side of the South."

Mom and Dixie didn't want to watch doggie porn while eating breakfast, though; Mom grabbed Lucky from Susan's rear and shoved a piece of bacon in his face to get his attention. Dixie took her plate, said, "Here, Susan!" and tossed the food out the front door. The big dog charged outside and ate bacon and eggs in the grass—Dixie kept her biscuits.

"Well, that takes care of that," Dixie said. "Sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right," Dad said. He was mopping up the crumbs of his breakfast with a piece of a biscuit, already.

It wasn't all right with me, though. Before our very eyes, a dog the size of rolled up socks fornicated with a beast the size of a garbage can while we ate breakfast, and no one but me seemed bothered by it. I had to get away, if only for a few minutes. I turned to Dixie and said, "Excuse me. Where is your bathroom?"

She pointed beyond the living room. "Just go down that hall and you'll see it on the left, sweetie." There was something about the way she called me *sweetie*, as though—in her mind—I was filling in for the son she would never have.

I had found in my thirteen years that the only place one could truly be alone with their thoughts was the bathroom. It's that one place where no one wants your attention, that one place where you can catch your breath and engage in something universally natural. Most times I went to the bathroom at home, I didn't have to relieve myself...I just sat on the toilet with my pants still up and thought about things, but that morning I really had to go. I dropped my pants, sat down, and let loose. When I looked up, I saw Jesus.

Dixie and Big Dick decorated the trailer with Jesus art: Jesus on clocks, painted on wood, and Dixie was obviously a big fan of Jesus paint-by-numbers kits. Hanging on the wall directly across from the toilet—at eye level as you sat there on the throne—was one of the most bloody, pained Jesus images I ever saw! I think it was another paint-by-numbers piece, but Dixie was obviously struck by an artistic urge while painting it, or perhaps she just needed to finish off a tube of red paint. It was a close up of him on the cross, head cocked to the side in anguish, his eyes rolling back in his head. Even though his eyes were rolled back and looking skyward, they stared right at me. I leaned as far to the right as I could; then as far to the left. His eyes followed me. There was no way I could finish crapping with Christ watching me!

I had a thing about going to the bathroom with pictures around. I couldn't stand it when Mom left one of her fashion magazines on the bathroom floor at home and I'd lean forward to wipe my butt and see Brooke Shields staring up

at me from the cover of *Vogue*, or Isabella Rossellini watching me from a *Cosmopolitan*. It was bad enough having models staring at you in that most vulnerable position, but the son of God in agony was even worse! I closed my eyes, but just knowing the picture was there—I still couldn't go. All I could do was wipe and ask Dad to stop when we hit the road, so I could finish what I had started.

When I reached for the toilet paper, all I felt was an empty cardboard roll! Either Dixie or Big Dick—I'm guessing Big Dick—didn't restock after their last drop. The cabinets where I guessed they stored the toilet paper were out of immediate reach, so I rummaged through the garbage can beside the toilet, hoping to find a clean tissue. All I found were pieces of tissue someone had blown their nose into, so I had to make it to the cabinets (I wasn't about to call out, asking for a new roll in a stranger's house).

I clenched my cheeks together and scuffled over to the sink with my pants down around my ankles. When I opened the cabinet beneath the sink, I stumbled upon something that froze me in my tracks. There, beneath the bathroom sink, was Little Dick!

He was in a jar. To the uninitiated, identifying the jar's contents would have been impossible, but after years of attending sideshows with Dad, I was an expert at identifying things in jars full of murky fluid: from pickled alligator fetuses, to two-headed babies, I'd seen it all. Little Dick wasn't that big, maybe three inches long, or so. He was shaped more like a question mark than the usual fetal comma shape, and true, I couldn't make out any discernable features—no eyes, little fingers, or even limbs—but with Big Dick and Dixie, a genetic mistake was bound to happen.

The cabinet beneath the sink was a shrine to their "only son." There were glass, Jesus prayer candles all around the jar. The rims of the candles were blackened by soot, a clear sign they were used regularly. Mom owned similar candles, only she lit them before playing bingo—for luck. It gave me the creeps, thinking about Dixie and Big Dick keeping a fetus in a jar in their bathroom. I could see them putting a ceremonial bath mat on the floor, kneeling before the cabinet, and communing with Little Dick in a candlelit bathroom. It was too much. Maybe Dixie's miscarriage occurred in that very room, maybe right in the very toilet I sat on minutes before! Maybe that bathroom was all Little Dick ever knew.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Someone pounded on the door! They must have somehow known I was looking at their only son!

"Hey, partner!" I heard Big Dick say. "I just remembered there ain't no buttwipe in there." The door opened and I saw Big Dick's hand poke through the opening, holding a bunch of paper towels.

"This'll have to do. Don't use a mess, or the commode'll overflow."

I quietly made my way back toward the toilet. If he poked his head in and saw me looking at Little Dick—if he saw I had found their little secret—there's no telling what he'd have done. I'd never live it down from Mom, hearing about going through other people's stuff, even though she was the queen of the bathroom cabinet peek, seeing what kinds of toothpastes, shaving creams, and medicines friends and relatives used.

"You okay?" Big Dick said. The door started opening.

"Fine," I said when I got closer to the toilet. I grabbed the paper towels from his hand and pushed the door shut. "Thank you."

After sitting back down on the toilet and wiping, I went to the sink and washed my hands. I took one last look at Little Dick in the jar before closing the cabinet doors and letting him rest in peace.

When I made it back to the table, Dad was drinking coffee and talking with Big Dick and Dixie. "So what other big stops you got planned 'sides the canyon?" Big Dick said to Dad.

"We're going to Mammoth Cave and Graceland."

"Graceland—ya don't say?" Big Dick said, picking his teeth with his fork. "So you'll be going through Arkansas on your way to the canyon, huh?"

"Yes," Dad said, wondering what Big Dick was getting at. Was he going to ask for some strange favor to make up for us keeping the campsite awake all night? "Why?" Dad added.

"I got a stop I think y'all'll love: Clyde McAllister's Gator Village and Civil War Memorial," he said, proudly. "My brother owns it. He'll give you a discount if you tell him I sentcha."

Dad's eyes lit up—he lived for side of the road reptile farms. He knew he'd be able to score alligator skin belts, T-shirts with cartoon alligators on them, and maybe even get a picture of me petting one of the scaly beasts.

"Where's your brother's place?"

"You head west outta Memphis after hitting Graceland...hour or so down the road. Can't miss the signs. You don't wanna miss it—he's got quite a show going. He's got a gator that leaps clear outta its tank and snatches broiler chickens off a stick! Betcha don't get to see that back home, huh?"

"No, we sure don't!" Dad said. Leaping gators were far better than diving horses in my old man's order of cheesy attractions.

Mom was ready to hit the road. She looked at Dad and said, "Well, we really appreciate breakfast, but we better get moving." Big Dick and Dixie stood up and headed for the door. Dad lagged behind a moment; I noticed him slide a twenty beneath his plate.

When we all went out front, Lucky caught a whiff of Susan and started fighting again, but Mom wasn't about to let him sire puppies with a "hillbilly bitch-dog," as she later put it. She pressed the molera button and made her way to the car. Dad stopped and stretched, arching his back in an ecstatic moment brought on by a big country breakfast. It was so good, he let loose a loud belch.

"Excuse me!" he said, embarrassed

"No problem," Big Dick said, patting his belly. "Better just hope it's indigestion and not something worse, though."

Dad looked at him, knowing he was going to say something more.

"I had me some stomach distress a year ago and thought it was nuthin'. Next thing you know, I'm flat on my back in the hospital getting my appendix cut out." He pulled up his shirt, revealing a scar on the right side of his jiggling gut. "Got it in a jar under the sink in the bathroom if ya'll wanna see it?"

Mom heard Big Dick's offer and piped in with, "No thank you—that's okay!" before Dad could say "yes!" and ask if he could take a picture.

We said our final thank yous and goodbyes, climbed into the *Inferno*, and were on the road again.

CHAPTER TEN

"Lost Down Deep in the Belly of the Earth"

Just when I thought I was figuring things out, something came along and ruined my theory. So it wasn't Little Dick in the jar after all, but a little piece of Big Dick's digestive system. I was sure I was still right about Lucky and the *Inferno*, though—at least I thought so. I wrestled with my thoughts until Lucky threw up.

He was sitting in Mom's lap this time and just let loose, at least giving her the courtesy of hitting the floor. Had I been holding him, he'd have been sure to cover my legs and arms at the very least.

"Not the carpet *again*," Dad said, reminding Mom he was still less than pleased about the hole she burned with her cigarette.

"The carpet's probably the problem, James" Mom said. "There's no telling what chemicals are in that cheap thing; I think it's making him sick. Have some sympathy." She held Lucky, wiping his face with a napkin he tried eating. When she was done cleaning him, she handed him to me. I didn't want to hold him, but before I could protest, she went to work cleaning the floor with a handful of napkins.

I stared at Lucky, waiting for his eyes to turn red. I gently shook him as he struggled to bite me—I was going to prove once and for all he was possessed, but he behaved.

From the front seat, I heard Dad say, "Mary, please, no!" but it was too late. She sprayed cheap perfume all over the spot where Lucky got sick.

Mom was into covering smells she found offensive with smells the rest of us found offensive. She carried in her purse a cache of air fresheners, deodorants, and "fancy" perfumes (if it was more than ten dollars a bottle and sounded French, it was high-quality stuff in my mother's eyes). I never understood the purpose of covering up a smell instead of properly cleaning it or letting it run its course and dissipate. Whenever any of us left the bathroom at home, Mom charged in with a can of room deodorizer. She feared the odor of our waste would spill from the bathroom and stick to the rest of the house, never letting go. "People would think they're walking into an outhouse when they visit if it wasn't for me!" she'd say. I always wondered—if she was so concerned about smells—why everything she owned, including the bottles and cans housing all

her fragrances, smelled like cigarette smoke. All her bathroom cover-up did was make it smell like one of us had shit in a flowerbed.

Mom may have thought she covered up the scent of dog vomit, but the resulting smell of cheap perfume and partially digested bits of bacon from Lucky's stomach made the rest of us want to retch. The saving grace was, with the driver's side front window broken from the night before, we couldn't run the AC—so all our windows were down, taking a slight edge off the offending odor.

With the exception of Lucky emptying the contents of his stomach, we made it to Lexington, Kentucky in silence. After skirting town, it was back on the open road. I wasn't about to drive another couple hours without anyone trying to make the trip worthwhile. I was convinced, if the moment was right, that I could get my family to sing! I could hear the twins stirring behind me and knew Aunt Margie was restless. Lucky was getting hungry again and it looked like Mom wanted to chat with Dad. It was as good a time as any.

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall," I sang. "Ninety-nine bottles of beer...take one down, pass it around, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall."

It worked! The twins joined in on the next round, as we went from ninety-eight bottles, to ninety-seven, but it quickly became apparent they weren't interested in keeping the song going. When I sang, "Ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall...ninety-seven bottles of beer..." the twins sang, "Michael's IQ is twenty-seven...Twenty-seven is Michael's IQ...He is stupid—he is dumb...and looking at his face makes us spew." They high-fived each other and burst into hysterics.

I continued singing, pretending they didn't bother me. Aunt Margie said, "I'd sing along with ya, but I ain't no good at countin' high." Dad joined in and we sang a few more rounds before Lucky decided he'd join the choir.

While Dad and I sang about the eighty-eighth bottle of beer on the wall, Lucky howled along like he was in pain. Dad knew it meant something to me to have everyone sing that damn song. He said to Mom, "Dear, can you calm Lucky down, please?"

"He's just having fun!" she said.

So Lucky sang along, growling and howling away. Then it happened. While Dad and I sang "Seventy-nine bottles of beer on the wall..." Lucky sang, "ROWRRROWR...MICHAEL! IT'S TIME TO DIE MICHAEL—BURN IN HELL WITH ME...REEOWWRRRRRR..."

It couldn't have been more clear—Lucky told me to die and burn in Hell! I stopped singing.

"Did you hear that?!"

"Hear what?" Mom said.

"Lucky. Did you hear what he said?"

"Yeah!" Elvis said, getting my hopes up. My little brother, of all people, was about to validate all my fears and tell my family he heard Lucky threaten me! I don't know why I was surprised when he said, "Lucky says you're a retard!" instead.

"Nevermind."

Dad knew something was wrong. "What did you hear, bud?"

"Nothing. You'll think I'm crazy if I told you."

"No I won't," he said.

"I just thought I heard Lucky say something. It sounded like he was talking is all."

Dad said, "Back in the fifties when the Today Show first started, it was hosted by a guy named Dave Garraway. He used to get people on the show who insisted their dogs could talk. The owners would get them all worked up, howling and carrying on. Sometimes it sounded like the dogs said something a human would say, and the owners would get all excited. 'See?! Did you hear that?!' they'd shout—"

"It was probably just the wind, Michael," Mom interrupted. "If we had the air conditioner on, you wouldn't have heard a thing, but I'm forced to sweat and suffer the rest of this trip. Trust me, if Lucky could talk, you wouldn't be the first person he'd speak to." She made smoochy-lips at the little beast and said, "Isn't that right, Lucky-Wucky. If you could talk, you'd talk to Mama first, wouldn't you?" Lucky licked her lips, smearing her lipstick. I used to wonder if the nicotine my Mom took in all day long was ingested by Lucky when he licked her, and if that could explain why the little dog was so hyper.

I looked at the rearview mirror and Dad winked at me. "We'll talk later, buddy," he said. Indeed we would! I knew there was no way it was the wind, the hum of the tires on the interstate, or anything like that. It was Lucky, or whatever had taken hold of his squishy little brain, letting me know he was on to me, just as I was on to him and the *Inferno*.

* * *

We made it to Mammoth Cave National Park in record time. Dad, of course, wanted to spend days there, wandering the woods up top and squeezing our way through the caverns and tight passages that went on for hundreds of miles beneath the earth's surface, but we didn't have much time. Mom wanted to skip the cave entirely; she said, "Why the hell would I want to walk up and

down in a dark, dirty hole?" Dad reminded her it was nice and cool in the cave, and we probably wouldn't experience cooler temperatures again until hitting the desert, at night.

"Well, if someone hadn't knocked out the window, we'd have air conditioning," she said. I guess I was supposed to feel guilty.

We paid for our campground, and set up camp. While the rest of us put up tents, gathered wood, and cleared the area, Mom smoked cigarettes and kept an eye out for bears. I have to admit, camping in the Kentucky woods, even I was a little tense.

"Mary, we aren't going to be killed by bears," Dad said. "There aren't any bears in this part of the state."

"Oh, I don't know, Jimmy," Aunt Margie said. "There was a bear back home that kilt a lady hiking in the woods not far up the holler from us. Done tore her face clean off and ate her guts, it did!"

"Thanks for the help, Margie," Dad said.

"You're welcome." Aunt Margie didn't grasp the concept of sarcasm.

After camp was set up, it was off to the cave. We took the general tour, just to get everyone underground for a bit. Dad was right: the cave air was nice and cool—even Mom liked it. Everything was going fine until Mom saw the sign in the visitor's center.

NO SMOKING

When she saw the sign, she told Dad, "I'm not going down in that hole if I can't smoke! I'm going back to camp!" All Dad needed to say to get her to take the tour was, "Okay, Mary. When you get back to camp, remember—don't leave food out or the bears will come." She was right behind us as we walked down the stairs.

Mammoth Cave definitely deserved its name; knowing it went on for hundreds of miles beneath the earth's surface was simply mind-boggling. We wandered along the trail looking at stalactites, stalagmites, and columns where the two met after so many years of formation. Being underground where it was cool, and realizing you were inside the earth, was one of the greatest feelings in my thirteen years of living.

Of course Mom didn't see it that way. When we had to climb stairs, she complained. "Don't know why we have to climb stairs just to look at some rocks that look like drapes. If I wanted to look at drapes, I would have stayed home!" Even though the path was paved and dry, she kept telling Dad, "If I slip and break my neck, it'll be all your fault, James David O'Brien." Her only comfort was Lucky—she hid him in her blouse, riding between her breasts, so

the tour guide couldn't see him. She refused to leave Lucky at camp for fear a bear would eat him, and no kennel was good enough for her precious dog. Lucky stayed put, although the thought of him breaking free and running loose never left my mind. I could see him finding his way deep into the far reaches of the cave, finding some cave animal, and breeding. In a million years, blind cave Chihuahuas would be commonplace beneath Kentucky, wandering the cave floor with their beady, little milky white eyes. Fortunately for the sake of evolution, Lucky stayed put.

The twins, however, didn't. We walked into a huge cathedral chamber, where the guide told us all to stay put as they turned out the lights to show us how dark it was in the belly of the earth. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face—it was total darkness. Sometime in that total darkness, the twins slipped free. When the lights came back on and we wandered the trail more, Mom realized they were gone. "James, where are the twins?!" She was in a panic.

Dad was visibly shaken, but remained calm. "They have to be around here somewhere," he said. He walked up to the tour guide and told him the twins were gone. The guide talked into a two-way radio and told a dispatcher there were two missing children in the cave. The dispatcher told the guide they'd send a search crew immediately. That wasn't good enough for Mom—she was going nuts. She called out their names. "Olivia! Elvis! Where are you?!" Dad rushed to her side.

"Mary, we'll find them. They'll be okay. You need to stop worrying."

Mom was good at worrying, though. If I was ten seconds late coming in from playing, she worried. One minute late and she figured she needed to call the police and hospitals to see if I had been hit by a bus. Ten minutes late, and she was convinced someone kidnapped me and had the police on full alert. On the rare occasions I was an hour late, I don't even want to think what went through her mind—probably stuff involving child-molesting clowns with shovels. In her mind, there was more than cause for panic. In her mind, the twins weren't safe; they had fallen deep into the cave, perhaps to the very center of the earth!

Even I was a little nervous. The twins made my life hell, but they were still my younger siblings. I imagined Elvis and Olivia lost in the cave, wandering regions far off limits, places even the staff never saw. I imagined them in places that hadn't been seen in generations—maybe longer. I imagined them overcome by bats, running from a swarm beating the twins back with leathery wings. I imagined them impaled by falling stalactites, left to die and not found for millennia.

"Ma'am, you need to calm down," the guide said to Mom. "We have someone who will take you to the visitor's center where you can wait. This happens sometimes, and we've never lost anyone. Your children will be safe."

"Don't you *dare* tell me to calm down when my babies are lost in this God-forsaken place! I'm not leaving until I see them. If I have to crawl through those caverns myself to find them, I will!" I'm sure I wasn't the only one who found the thought of Mom's wide body squeezing through the caverns—only to become stuck—humorous. The search party came down and a female rescuer sat with us while the tour continued. The search party went off to look for Elvis and Olivia.

They didn't turn anything up, though. Mom heard one of the rescuers tell the woman sitting with us, "We're going to have to gear up for deeper exploration."

Mom lost it! "What did you just say?! Deeper exploration?!"

"Please, Ma'am," the rescuer said. "I know this is scary for you, but we'll find your children."

Mom's face went flush; she sat down. I remember that being one of the few times growing up where I truly felt sorry for her and believed she was justified in her worrying. She sat on the floor of the cavern, lost like a little kid. She thought of her two youngest children, lost somewhere in hundreds of miles of passageways. I wished I had never mentioned how big the cave was.

Then Aunt Margie sat down beside her and made everything better.

She sat beside Mom and hugged her. "They'll be okay, Mary. Daryl once got lost up in the woods and I was a-scared to death, but we found him—"

Before Mom could finish saying, "How'd you find him?" Aunt Margie interrupted with a brilliant idea.

"Mary! When my Daryl done wandered into the woods and got lost for days, ol' Buttercup got his scent and found him. Maybe Lucky can track the twins like that."

"Yeah, Mom!" I said. "You were holding Olivia's hand. Maybe he can smell it, get the scent, and track them."

The rescuers were shocked when Mom reached into the front of her blouse and pulled out a Chihuahua. That had to be one of the most surreal things they ever saw, a huge woman pulling a rat-dog out from between her breasts. She didn't care, though. She put the hand that held Olivia's in Lucky's face and said, "Smell that, Lucky?! That's Olivia! Go find her, boy! Go find her for Mama!!!" She set Lucky down and he charged back the way we came. We all followed,

including the rescuers who were still trying to figure out where the Chihuahuas came from. Mom lagged behind, continuing to shout encouragement.

"Thataboy, Lucky! You find them for Mama!" Lucky always liked the twins, proof-positive he was in cahoots with sinister forces. He backtracked our every step, and for a moment, I thought he was just following the scent they left behind from our trip to that point. In no time he had us back at the surface and in the Visitor's Center. Elvis and Olivia were eating hotdogs and marshmallows without a care in the world.

One of the rescuers said, "Are these your child—" but Mom shoved him out of the way and smothered the twins in a huge hug.

"You scared the crap out of me, you two." She cried. "I thought I lost you..."

The twins said nothing; they seemed amazed Mom was making such a big deal of them retracing their steps and leaving the cave. Once it sank in that the twins were safe and not lost in the center of the earth, the Mom we knew came through. "Youse two are really lucky we're not back home, cause it would be the sauce ladle for the both of yas!" We were a whole family once again.

Mom looked at Dad. "James, I think we've had enough of your cave!" she said, lighting a cigarette beside a NO SMOKING sign and inhaling deeply. Dad knew he had seen as much of Mammoth Cave as he'd be seeing that trip and quickly ushered us out of the visitor's center before Mom's smoke raised attention.

Back at camp, Dad started a fire. The twins were ecstatic—finally they would get a chance to roast marshmallows. There was only one problem, though: they had eaten their last bag in the visitor's center when they wandered off from the rest of us.

"Can you take us to get more marshmallows?" they said.

"Guys, it's getting kind of late," Dad said. "We'll be stopping at another campground tomorrow night. We can get some more and roast them then, okay?"

"Okay," they said, slipping into depression. They went through withdrawal like heroin junkies when the school year rolled around and they weren't allowed to eat in class. Time away from marshmallows was worse than time away from family. It was the one thing they truly looked forward to each and every day (aside from tormenting me). As long as they had each other and a bag of marshmallows, it didn't matter what was going on around them. The world could crumble and they'd be content. That night had to be as hard a night for them as it would have been for Mom had she run out of cigarettes.

We sat around the campfire while Dad told recycled ghost stories about escapees from insane asylums with hooks for hands sticking in car doors; about Taily-Po and other creatures. The twins kept to themselves, sitting on a log and blowing soap bubbles high over the campfire (Mom still had them convinced bubbles were flammable). They watched the heat carry them high into the treetops where they reflected a sliver of moonlight on their surfaces. Dad told the same urban legends we heard every summer on trips—I was amazed how it seemed every state in America had a hitch-hiking ghost that wanted people to drop her off at the cemetery. Dad loved those stories and could spend hours telling them. They didn't scare us, but I pretended they did, for Dad's sake.

During a lull in the campfire stories, I thought about starting up a round of "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall," but knew only Dad and Lucky would sing along, and I wasn't about to have a replay of Lucky telling me he planned to kill me.

"I've got a story, Daddy," Olivia said after Dad told us about a guy in a raincoat, some teenagers, and a bucket of pig's blood—an old "Get out of the house now, before it's too late!" legend.

"Is it scary?" Dad said.

"Yeah, *really* scary" she said.

"What?"

"Michael's face!" Elvis spewed Coca-Cola from his nose; he thought it was the pinnacle of fine comedy.

Dad knew we had all grown tired of stories, so he resorted to another old campfire standby for our amusement: bodily functions. He belched loudly, striking a pose like a statue of a Greek god.

"That's just absolutely disgusting!" Mom said, inhaling cigarette smoke at the same time she chewed a Twinkie with her mouth agape.

Olivia tried topping Dad, but only managed a little "urp!" Elvis, though, knew how to belch—he was built for it. He chugged the rest of his Coke and jumped up and down, shaking his guts. He swiveled his stomach around like a tiny, hula-dancing Buddha, then he rocked his head back, opened his mouth, and let out a belch that was probably heard for miles. He looked at me and smiled.

Not to be outdone by my little brother at a campfire belching contest, I started slamming my Coke, but there was something wrong with it—I threw the can to the ground! Elvis and Olivia were hysterical. When Dad asked "What's wrong?" I pointed at my brother and sister and said, "*They're* what's wrong!" A bubble floated before my face. They had poured the contents of their *Wonder Bubbles* into my *Coke* while I wasn't looking! I went for Elvis.

Before I could get on top of him and start throwing punches, Dad got a hold of me around the waist and held me back. Elvis, knowing Dad had me, stepped up and mocked me. I think he did it on purpose to teach Elvis a lesson, but Dad let go of me for an instant, just enough so I could step forward and get a good shot in on Elvis before Dad regained his hold. While this was all happening, Lucky lapped up my spilled Coke and liquid bubbles solution.

When Dad finally separated Elvis and me, we all heard Mom shout, "Lucky!" Lucky stood on a log, looking at us all. He exhaled, and a myriad bubbles popped out of his mouth. He looked like a weird little bubble machine; like something Dad would buy on the side of the road and put in his den.

"I think it's about time for bed," Dad said to all of us. Before Mom and Aunt Margie could start in about who got to keep Grandma's ashes, I told them I'd take care of them the rest of the trip. They shuffled off to their tents, the twins closely following Aunt Margie.

I said goodnight to Dad after helping him put out the campfire. I didn't want to be inside a tent with Elvis and Olivia, but even that was better than sleeping inside, or near the *Inferno*. The twins were already sleeping soundly by the time I slid into my sleeping bag. It wasn't long before I joined them in the land of dreams.

I was awakened by Mom screaming. My first thought was, "Bear!" Maybe Mom was right, maybe bears *did* roam the area. Maybe one was ripping into Mom and Dad's tent at that very moment. I sat still for a moment, listening for commotion. Aunt Margie and the twins woke up and looked to me for guidance. I heard Mom scream again and heard Dad shout, "Mary!" I unzipped the tent and charged out in search of a tree branch, or anything else I could use to fend off a bear and save my parents. When I got out, I saw Dad standing outside their tent with something cradled in his hands.

"What's wrong?" I said.

He held out his hands, revealing a salamander. "This woke your mother up. It was on her face."

I laughed and Dad cracked a grin. From the tent, Mom said, "It's not funny, youse two!"

Dad walked to the edge of camp and set the salamander down near a rock. The ground was wet and cool and the stars were bright and everywhere. I stopped and looked up at the sky.

"Don't get that at home, huh?" Dad said. "Too much light, but out here, you can see everything. Wait until we get to the desert...most beautiful skies you'll ever see."

I wanted to tell Dad about Lucky threatening me, but standing there was one of those special moments you don't want to spoil by talking about anything at all; one of those moments that feels so right, you remember it the rest of your life, even though nothing remarkable happened. Finally Dad said, "Night, buddy," and went back to his tent.

"Night, Dad."

I don't know how long I stood there in the wet grass, looking up at the sky, but I remember thinking about how small I was in the grand scheme of things. I remember looking at the sky and thinking that the only big thing humans truly possess are our imaginations. I remember thinking about so many things—until I realized how badly I was itching.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Graceland"

While standing in the grass looking at the sky, chiggers attacked my ankles. The itching got progressively worse throughout the night, and by morning I had practically scratched my lower legs bloody. I tried hiding it from Mom. When it came to bumps and bruises, Dad took care of us because it pained Mom too much to see her precious children in agony, but if it was something she could apply some old family remedy to, Mom took control. She came out of her tent with a cigarette in her mouth and Lucky on her shoulder, like some four-legged, genetically-deformed parrot with a rat tail.

"Morning, Michael," she said, blowing smoke.

"Morning, Mom," I said. The itching was unbearable.

"Something wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"You look uncomfortable," she said.

I wanted to say, "I *am* uncomfortable—bugs ate my legs!" but I knew better. "I'm fine," I said. My eyes were practically watering.

"If you say so." She walked away and I scratched my left leg with my right foot. Mom turned around.

"Ah-ha! I *knew* something was wrong with you."

"Really, Mom—I'm fine," I said, knowing some weird cure would follow if she had her way.

She looked at my ankles and said, "Are those chigger bites?" I was amazed she knew what they looked like, but I remembered hearing a story about Dad taking her camping once, before I was even born, and setting up the tent smack dab in the middle of chigger central. The two were practically eaten alive, to hear Mom tell it.

"I think so."

She pointed to a log near the firepit and told me, "Sit down."

She wandered my way, digging through her purse. "Nail polish remover will stop the itching," she said, pulling out a bottle.

"I think you mean nail polish," I said.

"No, trust me, Michael. This will stop the itching." She opened the bottle and poured the nail polish remover on my ankle. I can't describe how badly it stung—she may as well have been pouring battery acid on me!

"OWW!!!" I yelled, getting Dad and Elvis's attention as they broke down camp.

"Oh, maybe you were right," Mom said. "Maybe it *is* nail polish—not remover—that helps." I fought back tears as she used a free hand to find her nail polish. I hoped she had clear polish handy and not some strange greens, purples, or glittery metallics that would leave my ankles looking like sloppy graffiti. I lucked out; she had some clear polish. I held the bottle while she put the lid back on the remover. That's when Lucky sprung into action. Mom later said it was all an accident, but I knew better; I knew he did it all on purpose.

As Mom put the lid on the nail polish remover, Lucky knocked the open bottle from Mom's hands and into my lap, soaking my shorts. Then he pulled the cigarette from Mom's mouth and dropped it on the remover!

I was on fire!

"AAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!" I shouted. Elvis ran to the *Inferno*, grabbed the fire extinguisher, and came my way. He knew it was filled with gasoline, but he could pawn it off as a mistake; he could say he was trying to help me, when his goal of finally doing me in would be played out before my family's eyes.

"NOOOOO!!!" I yelled.

Dad grabbed the extinguisher from Elvis and told him to get back. I stood up, panicking. Dad tossed the fire extinguisher to the side, tackled me, and rolled me over on my belly. He rolled me around in the dirt until the fire was out.

"See? I told you Lucky wants me dead!" I said to Dad.

"What?" Mom said when she saw I wasn't hurt, just scared. "Michael, it was an *accident*."

"That was no accident. That dog wants me dead!"

"You're crazy. Lucky loves you. He loves all of you," she said, as the little dog licked her cheek. Mom always saw it as a sign of affection when Lucky licked her, but she usually had something sticky and sweet on her face—Lucky was most likely mopping up after Mom's last meal.

"Are you okay?" Dad said. He double-checked to make sure the flames were completely smothered.

"I guess so," I said. He hugged me and didn't let go.

After I cleaned up, changed, and we had all eaten breakfast, it was back on the road. Mom complained about the radio not working; she wanted to play

Elvis tapes the whole way to Memphis. She let Dad know how disappointed she was.

"I finally get to go *inside* Graceland and the moment's ruined because you couldn't buy a car with a working radio, James." Dad just ignored her.

"Marge, wouldn't it be nice to be listening to the King about now?" she said.

"It sure would," Aunt Margie said. Mom thought she'd be able to play her sister against Dad, too, until Aunt Margie said, "That's all right, though. Jimmy didn't know the radio was busted when he bought the car I bet."

Mom decided if she couldn't listen to Elvis Presley sing, she'd force us to listen to *her* rendition of his tunes. She started with "Blue Moon of Kentucky," in honor of the state rolling by; then she broke into "Heartbreak Hotel," her way of letting Dad know how heartbroken she was that the radio didn't work. We were forced to listen to her belt out "Hound Dog," "Viva Las Vegas," and "All Shook Up." Her favorite tune was "Love Me Tender"; she would have sung it, too, but she felt it was blasphemy to sing a song no one could croon like the King. For hours, we were forced to listen to her sing everything from Elvis's gold hits, to deep tracks only die-hard fans knew existed. It drove us all nuts—everyone but Mom and Elvis.

My little brother was a huge Elvis fan. He was convinced, since Mom named him after her idol and not me, that it was an obvious sign she loved him more. He went nuts whenever he heard an Elvis tune. I never understood it, but "Rock-A-Hula-Baby" was his favorite tune, and Mom loved watching him dance along to the song. She'd play it on her turntable and my little brother would dance a mix of the King's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—swiveling his chunky little hips and quivering his lip like his namesake—and a hackneyed hula dance, like a clumsy Polynesian cherub.

About an hour outside Memphis, Mom told us all to be quiet (nevermind none of us had talked for hours while she sang). She said she needed time to meditate and prepare; she was, after all, going to Graceland.

* * *

Mom and Aunt Margie stood at the King's grave, bawling like huge babies. Lucky licked tears from Mom's face as she stared at Elvis's grave and cried.

"It's The King, Mary!" Aunt Margie said. "We're standing before The King!"

"I know, Marge. I can't believe it myself."

They hugged, blubbering on like two upright sea lions.

"I wish he was alive! Oh, Mary...how I wish he was still here!"

"So do I!"

Dad interrupted. "Mary. Dear. I know this is traumatic for both of you, but you need to hide Lucky again. You can't have him out in the open—the tour guide's coming back this way."

"I know," she said, sliding Lucky down the front of her top, between her breasts. He didn't fight it; he was used to riding like that. "I just wanted him to see the King. I just want more time."

"The tour's almost over," Dad said.

"Let's do it again, then!" she said.

Dad knew resisting her request would lead to more grief than good, so he gave in.

"Do you think you'll be able to handle it one more time through?" he said.

"I think I can make it," she said while lighting a cigarette. "Just give me a moment."

"Okay, we'll do the tour one more time, but then we really have to leave."

Dad wandered over toward me. I stood back from it all, still thinking about Lucky trying to set me on fire. Dad looked back at Mom and Aunt Margie.

"Look at those two," he said.

"Yeah."

"I suppose I shouldn't knock it. I've got my alligator farms, they have their King."

"Yeah." I really didn't want to talk about Mom, Aunt Margie, and some guy who died from complications on the toilet.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

I cut straight to the chase: "Lucky's what's wrong."

"What about him?"

"Remember when I told you he was possessed?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not kidding. He really is possessed, Dad. That was no accident this morning—Lucky really tried killing me. Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you *believe* he's possessed," Dad said. "But you know me, I have to see something to believe it."

"You believe in God, though." I thought I had him.

"Yes, I do. And you don't. So how can you believe Lucky is possessed?"

"I don't know. Forget it," I said.

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "I better get your mother and aunt if we're going through one more time."

Dad got up and went to get them while I waited. Elvis and Olivia wandered around, eating marshmallows. I couldn't believe Dad just blew me off. Thinking

about it, maybe bringing God into the whole argument wasn't a great tactical move on my part. And he was right: how *could* I believe Lucky was possessed when I didn't believe in the very mechanics behind possession? I struggled with so much on that trip.

We lined up for the tour a second time, seeing the Living Room, Jungle Room, TV Room, and Trophy Room once more. Mom and Aunt Margie were in much better spirits, but something told me they were building up for the grave again. We all tagged along toward the back of the line, so Mom and Aunt Margie could take a little more time appreciating all the King's things before being moved along by the guide. Lucky was riding shotgun between Mom's breasts; he wasn't as calm as the first time through. He started struggling. Mom patted her chest, hoping to calm him, but it made him fight even more. The woman in front of Mom was bothered by the commotion; she turned around and said, "Shh!"

"You shhh!" Mom whispered, while struggling with her blouse.

"Stop that! What's the matter with you?" the woman said.

"I have a tumor and it's acting up!" Mom said. "Excuse me for living."

The woman turned back toward the group and walked a little faster. Mom struggled with Lucky, but lost the battle. He broke free from her chest's mighty grasp and took off, up some nearby stairs. Mom chased after him as Dad just shook his head.

* * *

Now, this section of the story is taken from an interview with Mom. I can't vouch for its legitimacy, but I will say this: I believe her. I don't know why, but stranger things happened on that trip. No one believed me most of the way to the canyon, so it wouldn't be fair for me to believe Mom was lying. Regardless of her story's validity, whatever was upstairs in the King's mansion, it changed her life.

When Mom reached the top of the stairs, a security guard held Lucky up by the throat. He caught sight of Mom.

"You can't come up here, ma'am. It's off limits."

"That's my dog!" Mom said.

"Pets ain't allowed, here. All pets must be boarded."

"Let go of him!"

"Ma'am, I can't do that."

SMACK!

Mom knocked him out cold with a right hook! Lucky fell to the floor, ran down the hallway, and entered a room through a partially opened door. Mom

ran to the door, but stopped dead in her tracks when she heard a deep voice say, "Oh...hey there, little fella. Want some meatloaf?"

The King!

Mom pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The years hadn't been kind to the King of Rock-n-Roll. He took up most of the bed; a large blanket was tossed over him like a tarp covering a beached whale. But Mom didn't care—she was looking at Elvis Aaron Presley in the flesh, seven years after his "death."

Lucky stood on a TV tray beside the King, eating from a plate of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and tomatoes.

"Yer one hungry little cuss, aint'cha?" Elvis said. He still didn't see Mom.

"Uhm. Excuse me," she said, getting his attention.

"Hey, Cletus! Whatcha doin' lettin' people up here?!" he said. "I've told ya not to do that!"

"I'm so sorry," Mom said. "My dog got loose and I had to get him. The security guard was hurting him and wouldn't give him back, so I hit him."

"Where is he?"

"Out cold on the floor."

"You knocked out Cletus?" The King said.

"Yeah."

He laughed. "You must be one strong woman."

"I guess."

"Can you do me a favor, then?"

"Anything for you," Mom said.

"Can you roll me to my side?"

"Of course."

Mom went to the far side of the bed and pushed. Between the two of them, they had Elvis on his side inside a minute.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Mom almost fainted. "I can't believe you're alive," she said.

"Yeah, but don't go tellin' no one."

"Oh, I won't!"

"I just wanted time alone, ya know?" he said. "It's hard being yourself when everyone wants to see you."

"I understand."

"Can ya do me one more favor?" the King said.

"Of course!"

He pointed to his dresser. "Over on my dresser, there's a backscratcher. Can ya get it and work my side over a good one?"

Mom's big knees buckled. "Oh, I feel faint."

"Yeah, I have that effect on women. Just breathe, honey."

Mom got the backscratcher from the top of the dresser and went to work scratching the side of The King. She went back and forth with it, maneuvering through coarse hair on his side and back, sending Elvis into ecstasy. Mom always told Dad if Elvis were alive and wanting her, she'd leave him in a heartbeat for a night with the King. That afternoon with the backscratcher was as close as she'd ever come. She scratched him for a good five minutes. She brushed the dead skin from his bed sheets as she worked; she even reached out and touched his back with her bare hand at one point.

When Mom finished, the King said, "That was great! Is there anything I can do in return for the favor?"

"Can you still sing?" Mom said.

"Like a mockingbird," Elvis said. "What's your name, sugar?"

"Mary."

"Well, Mary...I'm guessin' you like this tune."

He sang "Love Me Tender," Mom's favorite. Her knees finally gave out; she sat on the bed as he sang to her. It didn't matter that he weighed half a ton—his voice was still gold. It didn't crack, he didn't miss a note...it was absolute perfection. Mom was reduced to tears.

When Elvis finished, he said, "How was that?"

"That was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," Mom said as she sobbed. "Prettier than angels singing."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Mom stared into his eyes and swears to God they would have kissed had Cletus not rushed into the room.

"King?!" He caught sight of Mom. "Oh, there she is! I'm so sorry."

"Cletus, leave us alone," Elvis said. "I'm all right. She's not gonna tell a soul, are ya, darlin'?"

"No."

Cletus left.

"Well, I better get going," Mom said, hoping The King would invite her to stay a bit longer.

"It's been a pleasure," he said.

"I can't believe this. It's like a dream." She held up the backscratcher.

"Where should I put this?"

"Keep it."

"Really?!"

"Yep. It's all yours," he said. "I'm gonna get me some shuteye."

"Would you like me to turn off the TV?"

"No need for that," he said. He pulled a gun from under the blanket and shot the television. "Got my remote right here," The King said while blowing smoke from the end of the barrel.

Mom grabbed Lucky from the TV tray and made her way to the door.

"Goodbye," she said.

"Bye," Elvis said. "And remember, don't go tellin' anyone you saw me."

"I won't! I promise."

* * *

"I'm serious—I saw him! He's alive, Marge," Mom said, keeping her promise to the King for almost half an hour. "He gave me this backscratcher and sang "Love Me Tender" to me."

"Yer lyin'!"

"I'm not lying," Mom said.

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

"Yes you are," Aunt Margie said. "He's dead! I know it's hard to accept, especially after standing right there on his grave and all, but he's gone Mary."

Mom turned around, clutching Lucky to one breast and the backscratcher to the other. She locked eyes with Aunt Margie. I've never seen Mom look more sincere.

"I swear on Mama's ashes he's alive, Marge. I saw him with my own eyes. You know I can't look you in the eyes and lie."

Aunt Margie broke down sobbing.

"Oh, Lordy—yer serious! He's alive! You hear that, kids? The King is alive!"

Aunt Margie chanted "he's alive!" like a mantra for nearly an hour, until we finally found a campground for the night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Midnight Run"

It was dark when we reached the campsite; Dad, however, didn't let that faze him. With a small flashlight held between his teeth, he had our two old Coleman tents up and ready in no time.

"Daddy, can we roast marshmallows?" the twins said.

"It's kind of late for that, guys. Maybe tomorrow, okay?"

Elvis and Olivia wandered into their tent, forced to eat cold marshmallows. Mom was ready to sleep; she didn't even complain about having to sleep on the ground like a wild animal, again—nor did she bring up the possibility of impending bear attacks. Maybe she was still just in a different place entirely, having met her idol, the King.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" Dad said to me.

"The tent."

"Again?"

"Yeah." I think he finally realized there was something really bothering me. He gave me a hug. "Okay. Goodnight, buddy."

"Night Dad."

I rushed into the tent without looking back at the *Inferno*.

I didn't have any trouble falling asleep that night, but I kept waking up every hour or so, fighting with my sleeping bag. One of the times, I was awakened by a crunching sound—something was just outside the tent! I heard a snap and a pop. Eerie shadows flickered on the walls of the tent like tiny demons behind a blue screen. I looked around and only saw Aunt Margie.

I went to unzip the tent flap, but it was already open. The cool breeze coming through the opening shook me awake, and for a brief moment, I never felt more alive. The moon shined down on me; it hung in the sky like a big apple slice. I could smell the crisp air and trees—things smelled better out in the middle of nowhere; back home, everything reeked of crowds and gasoline. I inhaled deeply and smelled smoke!

Crawling from the tent, I heard the twins whispering. They huddled around a small campfire away from our site, just on the edge of the trees, their shadows long on the ground. The two huddled together with their backs to me, forming a little shield to block the light from the flame. For a brief moment, a fireball

floated in front of Elvis's face until he blew it out. I decided to sneak up for a closer look.

When I got right behind them, I could hear what they were saying and see what they were doing: roasting marshmallows and talking quietly about me. They had a bag of marshmallows between them and Aunt Margie's lighter at their feet. The "fire extinguisher" from the Inferno lay beside them—they used the gas to start the fire.

"Michael's such a dumb dummy-head," Olivia whispered. "Yeah," Elvis agreed.

Olivia's marshmallow caught fire and she watched it burn for a moment. She pointed at it and said, "That's Michael." Elvis covered his mouth and giggled.

"You two are in trouble," I said, loud enough to wake up Dad, who was a light sleeper when camping. Maybe deep down, he too had a fear of bears and was always just on the edge of sleep, listening for something to wander into camp. I startled Olivia, who kicked her legs out, knocking the "fire extinguisher" into their campfire. Elvis tried pulling it out, but somehow ended up triggering the nozzle, sending a jet of gasoline into the flames. In an instant, the fire grew to several times its original size, burning the tall grass around them and heading for the trees!

"You two are in *big* trouble! DAD!!!!" I yelled. They stood with their backs toward me, staring at the flames.

"DAD!!!" I cried, but there was no sign of him. Then I heard Olivia, in a deep, unholy voice say, "NO, MICHAEL. *YOU'RE IN BIG TROUBLE!*"

They both turned their heads. They didn't turn their bodies, just the heads, like Lucky in the car. And just like Lucky, their eyes glowed red! Olivia held her burning marshmallow before her and Elvis reached into the fire and grabbed the extinguisher. He sprayed it through the flaming marshmallow, sending a huge fireball my way. I dodged to the right—I could smell my singed hair, but I was safe. I didn't know what else to do, so I opened the front of my pants...and urinated!

I peed all over the place, putting the fire out like a hose knocking the twins back with a blast. I dropped to my knees and kept peeing until I realized I was dreaming. I knew if I didn't wake up right away, I'd wet my sleeping bag!

I woke up to the sound of Aunt Margie's snoring. From the other tent, Mom joined in the nighttime chorus, the two sounding like a pair of two hundred fifty pound bullfrogs calling to each other from iron lungs. The twins talked quietly in their sleep. Even when they were in dreamland, it was like their minds worked as one—they probably shared their dreams, as well. Olivia

inhaled deeply and whispered "Michael's such a dumb dummy head," and Elvis said, "Yeah..." Maybe I heard them talking in their sleep; perhaps that's what triggered my nightmare.

One thing's for sure—sometime in the middle of the night, all the soft drinks and juices I consumed that day got the best of my bladder. I had to pee, but didn't want to leave the tent. I thought about unzipping the opening and hanging it out the flap, but I would have been mortified if Elvis and Olivia woke up and saw me peeing. I had to go outside, but decided to hold it instead. I'd rather my bladder explode and poison my abdomen before going outside, in the dark, alone with the *Inferno*. I tried dozing off, but my body wasn't going to let it happen without relieving myself. I had no choice; I had to go outside and find the outhouses.

I unzipped the tent flap and ventured out. I told myself I wouldn't do it, but I turned and looked at the *Inferno*. All its chrome glimmering in the moonlight made it seem like it was smiling at me, daring me to cross its path. It was up to something. I coughed as I passed Mom and Dad's tent. I figured if I could awaken Lucky into a yapping fit, or make Mom think she was about to be mauled by a bear, there'd be enough commotion—enough people awake for a moment, at least—that I could make it to the bathroom and back with that feeling of safety that comes from knowing your parents are awake. I was greeted with deep, rumbling snores. Even Dad, the light sleeper, wasn't waking up, no matter how many twigs I snapped beneath my feet after trying to rouse them with coughing. My best bet was running.

I ran as fast as I could, refusing to look back. An outsider would have laughed if they knew I was running from a parked car, but their view would have changed after what happened next. I listened to my feet smacking across the gravel and dirt; the outhouses were dead ahead. I was convinced if I could make it inside to close and lock the door, all would be safe. While peeing, I'd figure out what I'd do if the car were outside the door, waiting for me. That plan went to hell, however, when I heard tires on gravel. I ran faster, but the sound got closer. I turned around and the *Inferno* was right there!

I was about to be smashed between the grill of Dad's beloved station wagon and the door of the outhouse. I had this image of my last moments: getting knocked through the door, bouncing off the back wall, and falling into a swamp of feces, urine, and whatever else lurked in the bottom of smelly outhouses. I felt the *Inferno* right on my heels and dodged to my left.

BAM!!!

SPLASH!!!

The *Inferno* took out the outhouse and went hood first into the waste pit, but I was spared! I heard Mom yell, "That better not be a bear, James O'Brien!" and the entire campsite woke up. Dad was the first to the scene of the would-be slaughter. I was nursing a scraped knee and looking at the car tipped into months of waste.

"What happened?!" Dad said.

I lost it. "The car, Dad! I told you the car is out to get me!"

Dad looked at the *Inferno*; he actually gasped at the sight.

"How'd this happen?" he said.

"I was going to the bathroom and it came after me."

"That's ridiculous! Cars don't just stalk people, Michael."

"Well this one apparently does!" I said.

"Mikey peed his pants! Mikey's a big baby!" I didn't see the twins approach, but there they were, laughing and pointing at my crotch.

I looked down. In all the commotion, my bladder decided if I wasn't going to comply with its request, it would take care of things on its own. The front of my shorts were soaked.

"I'm going back to the tent!" I said, stomping away. I stripped out of my underwear and shorts under the privacy of my sleeping bag, slid into fresh clothes, and threw the soiled ones away. I'd take a shower in the morning and change again, but all I could think about was sleeping.

Back at the outhouse, Dad looked at his car hood deep in muck. The back tires were well off the ground—had the pit been deeper, the *Inferno* would have gone in past the windows, filling its insides with the stench of hundreds of digested, barbecued meals.

"I must have left the emergency brake off...that's the only explanation," he said.

He pulled down on the back of the car, trying to rock it back on all four wheels. A couple people helped him out, and the sound of the back end slamming down woke me from a premature sleep. Dad had the back of the car planted soundly on terra firma again, but it came with a cost: both back tires blew when the back end came down. A few big guys climbed on the back bumper, providing Dad with enough weight to at least back the *Inferno* from the pit. He secured the emergency brake, told the campground owner he was sorry and would settle up a price in the morning, and went back to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Swelling Itching Brain"

That morning while I was cleaning up, Dad paid for the damages caused by the station wagon from Hell. He was able to catch a ride into town to get two new tires. While Dad was in town, I broke down the tents, but didn't put them in *The Inferno*; there was no way I was going near that car unless the sun was up and I was accompanied by a large group of people. I finished just in time to hear Mom say, "Oh my God! Lucky!"

For a moment, my heart raced; for an instant I thought she had found him dead and I'd no longer have to deal with him. While I wasn't fond of the little dog, I never wanted to see him hurt, but once full-blown possession took hold, I didn't care what it took to get him away from me...even if it meant Lucky taking his last breath. I was disappointed when I saw him squirming while Mom gently dug through the fur on the top of his head. I wandered over.

"What's wrong?"

"This!" she said while holding Lucky out to me. "Look at his head!"

There, in the center of his soft spot, was a swollen tick the size of a plump blueberry. With no skull protecting the top of his head, the tick had a shot straight to his brain.

"This is far worse than your chiggers!"

I wanted to say, "Why don't you pour nail polish remover on his head and light a cigarette, then?" I said, "What are you going to do?" instead.

"I have to get my special tweezers from my bag and get rid of that thing, is what I'm gonna do." She handed Lucky to me. "Don't touch, and don't you dare try pulling it out."

"Mom, can't you get Elvis or Aunt Margie to help?" I said, but she was already gone.

Lucky looked at me, but didn't try biting. His mouth was closed and he looked like he was concentrating deeply. I waited for his eyes to turn red, but instead, blood vessels on the side of his head started rising beneath his skin and his eyes bulged. The blood vessels swelled and swelled; I noticed the tick getting bigger! It grew at a steady pace, reminiscent of that carnival game where you shoot the clown's mouth with a water gun and inflate a balloon. And just like those balloons, it was only a matter of time before the tick popped! I was able to shield my face with my hand, but I was still covered in

blood when the tick finally exploded. Lucky went limp in my arms just in time for Mom's return.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!?!" Mom screamed. "OH MY GOD!!!" She pulled Lucky's limp body from my hands and held him against her chest. "I TOLD YOU NOT TO TOUCH IT!!!"

"I didn't, Mom—"

"DON'T LIE TO ME!!!" A small crowd gathered.

"What happened?" Aunt Margie said, rushing from the only standing outhouse on site.

"Michael killed my dog is what happened!" she shouted.

"I didn't touch him, Mom. Seriously!"

"The evidence is all over you, Michael!" she said, pointing to the blood on my hands and splattered on my clothes. "Why did you do that when I told you not to?!"

"Mom, I didn't. I swear on the *Bible*—"

"Don't blaspheme!" she said. "You don't believe in the *Bible*."

She was right; I didn't, but I was trying something. I reached out to put my hand on Lucky's floppy body, but Mom quickly smacked it away. Words would have to do the trick.

"Lucky!" I said quickly, hoping to jar him awake. "Jesus...Jesus, Lucky! Jesus loves you, Lucky! Who's your buddy? Jesus is your buddy! Jesus!" At the mention of Mom's savior, Lucky moved!

"Lucky?!" She hugged him like Dad hugged me after I was on fire; she didn't want to let go.

"See," I said. "I told you. He's okay."

Mom dug through his fur, examining the area where the tick attached itself. A small bump had already formed where the tick was. "He's not okay, Michael," Mom said. "The tick's head is probably stuck in Lucky's brain! If it gets infected and he dies..." She stormed off.

When Dad returned with the tires, Mom spent twenty minutes informing him how the tick—which was somehow my fault—almost killed Lucky. She reminded him Lucky would be all right if Dad stopped insisting we sleep outside, "like cavemen." Dad rolled with the punches when it came to Mom's bickering, but he really just wanted to get the tires on the car and hit the road; we were only an hour or so from an alligator farm, afterall. In Dad's mind, if anything could bring us all back together, it was alligators and souvenirs.

We got into The *Inferno*...everyone but Mom. "This car smells like shit! I'm not getting in that car until it's cleaned, James. Ask someone if there's a carwash nearby."

"I already did—when I went into town," he said. "We're out of luck, though."

It turns out there *was* a carwash nearby, but the water was out and the only business it saw were rural skatepunks who grinded their days away on the only friendly slab of concrete for miles.

"Can't believe this crap," Mom said, getting into the car only after Dad opened the door so she didn't have to touch it. "First my dog dies and comes back from the dead, and now I have to ride in the Shitmobile!"

* * *

We rolled down the highway, suffering the stench of the *Inferno*. We rolled up all the windows, except Dad and Aunt Margie's (now that we needed the windows up, her window was rolled down and stuck), hoping to block as much of the outhouse smell as possible. Dad cranked the air conditioner as cold as it would go, which was about the same temperature as it was outside.

"If this heat and stink are gonna kill me, I'm at least smoking, damnit!" Mom said, taking a moment from checking Lucky's molera for signs of infection and digging in her purse for a cigarette. Dad knew better than argue, and I have to admit, it was almost nice having the familiar stench of tobacco masking the smell of feces and urine coating the front of the car.

We pulled off the highway and onto the interstate. Dad hated traveling the interstates; he missed the good ol' days when Route 66 was a major highway and not kitschy nostalgia—when the roads we traveled went through small towns instead of skirting them. Dad felt we, as Americans, lost something in that leap from winding roads to major strips of concrete stretched across the country like long ribbons. No longer did everyday people take their shot at the American Dream on the side of the highway. The only people making money on the interstates, Dad said, were big corporations: gas companies, franchise restaurants, and motel chains.

"I like knowing who I'm giving my money to," he once told me, and I remember thinking it was a pretty noble ideal. "Why stop at McDonalds when you can stop at Big Billy's Barbecue Barn? Why give your money to a huge, faceless corporation when you can give it to the guy behind the counter cooking your food? You wanna know what's wrong with this country, Michael?" he said. I really didn't want to know, but I knew he was going to tell me anyway. "No one makes things with their own hands anymore. No one thinks about *fun* anymore. All they think about is going public and making money at

all costs. Then we complain that no one cares anymore, but we don't care enough to shop at the places that actually *do* care."

He was onto something. I don't know if it was something I noticed as I grew older, or if he really was prophetic, but in losing that love of the corny old guy who thought putting concrete, anthropomorphic hotdogs in Tarzan suits on the roof of his hotdog stand was a good idea, we lost something that made this country great. We went downhill as a nation when we stopped building fiberglass sculptures of hotdogs, giant artichokes, giant bees, and talking cows. Automobiles became something to simply shuttle us to and from work, and sometimes the mall. Hardly anyone packs their family into cramped cars anymore and heads off for weeks in search of American adventure.

I knew somewhere in my old man's mind, there was something bigger to those cross-country road trips than we all felt. He may not have viewed it as a pilgrimage, like I did, but I think to him, it was a way to at least appear like a normal family, come hell or high water. Packing everyone into a car and driving for a week or two will either bring them together, or drive them apart. I think it was a tiny victory for my dad every year when we got home and, for one short moment, we all agreed, "That really wasn't that bad, after all." It may have only lasted a few moments before Mom would say, "Not that bad, except for my aching back!" and the twins wandered off to their rooms, but it meant something to Dad—and deep down—it meant something to the rest of us, too.

I noticed Dad looking at Mom, who had fallen sound asleep in the front seat, snoring in unison with Lucky and Aunt Margie. He looked at the road, then back at Mom. He reached over and gently rubbed Lucky's head and stroked Mom's big arm. He then adjusted the rearview mirror and looked at the twins in the back, dozing among suitcases and sleeping bags. He smiled, knowing they were safe and sound. He looked at Aunt Margie in the rearview mirror before adjusting it and taking a look at me. He caught me watching him. I waved and he waved back before putting the mirror where it belonged. He returned his attention to the interstate. In Dad's mind, we were a functional family.

I dozed off for a bit, but woke up just in time to see a huge sign on the side of the interstate. A cartoon alligator wearing a Confederate Civil War cap and carrying a muzzle-loading rifle stood beside this message:

YOU'RE ONLY 10 MILES FROM CLYDE
MCALLISTER'S GATOR VILLAGE AND
CIVIL WAR MEMORIAL!
GATORS - HISTORY - SOUVENIRS

Five miles later, another sign; it was like a Burma Shave campaign—sign after sign, each playing off the one before. This sign read:

GATOR WRESTLING - 5 MILES!

A mile later:

GATOR SPLASH - 4 MILES!

"Hey, everybody. Time to rise and shine!" Dad said. Mom instinctively went for her cigarettes as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes in time to see:

CIVIL WAR RELICS - 3 MILES!

"Goody!" she said, sarcastically.

Aunt Margie took her seriously, though.

"I hope they has some good ones," she said. "Otis just loves the Civil War."

"I'm sure they'll have plenty of good things, Margie," Dad said. I knew he was picturing all the stuff he'd buy: maybe a Confederate flag with a gator silkscreened on it, or a rubber gator with a muzzle loading pop gun.

GATOR FEEDIN' - 2 MILES!

That one got Dad going. Even if he wasn't the one feeding the gators, just being there with a camera to capture it all was good enough for him!

CIVIL WAR RE-ENACTMENT - 1 MILE!

We were almost there! Dad could hardly contain himself when he saw the last sign:

HALL O' GATORS GIFTSHOP - NEXT RIGHT!

Dad pulled the *Inferno* off the interstate and into the parking lot of Clyde McAllister's Gator Village and Civil War Memorial! The building, probably once a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, was decorated with plenty of Confederate flags and gun-totin' gators. Dad grabbed his camera and we all went inside.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Clyde McAllister's Gator Village And Civil War Memorial"

"Well a-hey!-hey!-hey! and a howdy!-howdy-do! Welcome to Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial!"

Clyde McAllister was everything I imagined, a portly little guy, but beneath all the fat, you could tell there was a lot of knotted muscle for years of backbreaking work. A Korean War vet and self-proclaimed Civil War expert, he chomped on a cigar and wore a cowboy hat almost too big for his large head. His cheap suit didn't fit quite right; the bottom half of the suit was too tight while the top half was too loose (except around his gut, where it must have been a struggle to secure). An alligator pin was attached to his lapel where most people place carnations, and his tie was patterned after a Confederate flag. He looked like he should have been selling used cars; nothing even on par with the *Inferno*—more like old Gremlins and Pacers. I could almost hear him saying, "Yeah, it may have a few dings and pins, here and there, and the mileage may be high, but this car is an American classic!" He stood at a podium. Behind him were curtained doors, one reading IN and the other OUT. He was a national treasure in my father's eyes.

"Nice meeting you, Clyde," Dad said. "Your brother, Big Dick, told us we needed to stop by." Dad reached out and shook Clyde's hand. When Clyde shook back, my old man winced in pain.

"Yep, Clyde's the name, but my friends call me Grip!"

Every sentence he said was an event with Clyde, loud and with purpose. It was like talking with Yosemite Sam. I wouldn't have been at all surprised had he produced two six-shooters, shot the floor, and floated above the ground, just like in the cartoon.

Dad pulled his hand back, massaging it. "Grip...I can see why they call you that."

Clyde rolled up his sleeves, proudly displaying criss-crossed bite marks up and down his arms. "Yep! Gotta have a grip if ya wanna tame them wily beasts! Can't tell ya how many times I've almost had my arms ripped clean off!"

He wiggled his fingers—all seven of them.

"They can have a few fingers, but I'll be damned if I give one of them sons-a-bitches a whole arm!" He rolled his sleeves back down, collected himself, and finally said something in a normal tone. "So y'all want the full tour?"

"Yes," Dad said. "There are six of us. Three adults and three children."

"I sees that. I may be dumber than bricks, but I can count to six!"

"Sorry, Clyde."

"Grip! Call me Grip!" He messed up Dad's hair with one of his heavy hands. "I'm just foolin' with ya, Tex! It's five bucks for old farts and three bucks fer the rugrats. Gimme a twenty and we'll call it even, but y'all gotta promise to buy somethin' before ya leave, okay?"

Dad pulled a twenty from his wallet and handed it to Clyde. "I was planning to, Grip."

He slapped Dad on the back, almost knocking him to the ground. "There ya go! Me an' you is buddies, now! Lemme find the little lady an' we can start the tour. Bonnie!" he yelled.

"Bonnie?" Dad said. "Bonnie and Clyde?"

Clyde smiled. "Yeah, an' all this time you thought we was dead!" He guffawed and went through the IN curtain. "Bonnie! Where is ya, Gator Breath?! We got a show to put on! Bonnie!"

Clyde's wife, Bonnie, wandered through the OUT door while shouting, "I hear ya! I hear ya! I ain't the deaf one, you is!"

Bonnie would have been a waitress in a dirty diner were it not for her duties at the gator village. I imagined her moseying up to a table and saying, "What can I getcha, sugar?" She was tall and skinny and popped her gum as she chewed.

"Howdy, y'all," she said before starting her speech. "Thanks fer visiting Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial. Behind this curtain lies a world unlike any you've ever seen." Everything she said sounded rehearsed and stale; she definitely lacked the passion Clyde had for his job. "See ferocious gators fightin', leapin', and eatin' while also learning about the Civil War," she said. "In mere moments, we will enter. Prepare to be amazed."

"You ready back there, Grip?!" she yelled, startling us all.

"Yeah, Gator Breath—I'm ready!"

"That's his nickname fer me," she said. "Ain't it just the cutest thing?" She fished a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and lit one. Mom and Aunt Margie got excited.

"It's okay to smoke?" Mom said.

"Of course, hon! Ain't no laws against it 'round here. Ain't nobody ever gonna tell me where I can and can't smoke. So smoke 'em if you got 'em!"

Mom and Aunt Margie lit up as Bonnie grabbed a wireless microphone from the podium.

"This way," she said, while heading through the IN curtain. Dad readied his camera and we all followed.

The interior of the gator village was laid out like a cheap haunted house—in any way, it was every bit as creepy! Bonnie and Clyde believed in putting black curtains to good use. The curtains made up the hallways we walked through on our way to the first exhibit. High above us, old fluorescent lighting fixtures crackled and hummed, casting a sickly, flickering green glow on things. Bonnie stopped and pointed toward a taller curtain.

"All right!" she hollered.

Clyde's voiced boomed over a cheap public address system. It faded in and out, but since he was just on the other side of the curtain, when it dropped out, he was still more than audible.

"The American gator," he started, trying his best to sound like the narrator on a legitimate nature program. "One of Mother Nature's fiercest of beasts. For ages, man has tried taming these monsters."

Dad was getting excited; he lived for this kind of thing. He knew whatever was on the other side of the curtain wouldn't be half of what it was hyped to be, but in its own schlocky way, it would be far better than one could ever imagine.

"Growing to lengths of over twenty feet long, with a mouth fulla razor-sharp teeth," Clyde said, dropping in and out on the speakers, "these beasts are akin to a shark on land. Only a complete fool would dare battle one of these hurking monstrosities! Beware, my friends...beware..."

The timing wasn't perfect, but Bonnie wrestled with the curtain, pulling it back to reveal one of Dad's favorite pictures he ever snapped. Clyde, still chomping on his cigar, was in a large, plastic kid's wading pool, wearing cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and a Tarzan suit! He stood over a gator that appeared to be sleeping. Canned jungle sounds and drum music played over the PA as Clyde yelled and rolled around in the water with the gator. He was no Australian Crocodile Hunter, but he had more charm and showmanship. Not since seeing Jack Hanna wrestling with a docile anaconda on *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* did we see a better show. The gator didn't put up even a hint of a fight, but the way Clyde yelled and rolled around, one might expect he could

die at any moment. Dad snapped picture after picture as Bonnie added to the spectacle.

"Be careful, Clyde!" she said into the mic. "Watch out! Oh no!" She looked away, covering her eyes with both hands. "I can't bear to watch! Tell me when it's over!"

Clyde rolled around with the gator, until finally prying its mouth wide open. He stuck his head between the teeth and yelled in victory.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Bonnie looked back at us, feigning surprise. She slapped the side of her face and said, "Why look at that! Never before have I seen such a feat! Let's give a huge round of applause for Clyde McAllister, y'all!"

We all clapped as Bonnie reached behind the curtain and triggered canned applause over the PA system. Dad snapped one final picture before Clyde removed his head from the docile reptile's mouth and stepped out of the pool. The gator fell right back to sleep as Clyde bowed.

When the canned applause stopped, Bonnie closed the curtain, and in mock concern said, "Whew! That was too close for comfort! Clyde coulda lost a limb fightin' that beast. Clyde was lucky, but in the Civil War, many Confederate soldiers weren't. If an artillery shell didn't rip their arms and legs from their torso, gangrene set in and they had to be amputated without the benefit of pain killers."

Just like that, she totally shifted gears, dropping her head and sliding into a sullen voice. "There's a lot more to this place than just fun. Not only do you get to see flying gators at Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial, but y'all'll walk outta here havin' learnt a thing or two. In the next room, y'all'll learn about Yankee atrocities committed during the Civil War."

She led us to a room where a large table, serving as a shoddy Civil War battle scene diorama, waited. The table was pushed against a wall where a cloudy sky had been painted by clumsy hands. The battle scene had seen better days: the paint on the tiny soldiers was chipping and they were so dusty, it was hard to tell the Blue from the Gray. The figures were mounted on pegs that moved back and forth along the table, like an old tabletop hockey game from the 70s. A smooth, flat area was laid into the table. If one looked hard enough, they could see the faded yard markings from a tabletop football game from similar times. Sagging paper maché hills and trees made from twigs rounded out the diorama. The lights dimmed and a spotlight shined upon the scene.

"December thirty-first, eighteen sixty-two," Bonnie said into her microphone. "It would not be a happy new year for General Braxton Bragg and

his men. The new year would be rang in battlin' that back-stabbin' Yankee coward, Major General William Rosencrans and his men. Murfreesboro, Tennessee—site of the Stones River Slaughter."

Flashing red lights strobed the battlefield as canned gunfire, artillery blasts, and screams played over the PA. The troops moved back and forth in their slots as little puffs of talcum powder "explosions" riddled the troops, covering them in even more dust.

"The battle had begun," Bonnie said. "Attacks and retreats—both sides took heavy losses."

The flat section of the table vibrated loudly; the figures standing there fell over, but still bounced around. Dad and I were hysterical, but Bonnie pushed on like a true Southern Belle, not letting our laughter get the better of her.

"Artillery ripped through the mighty Southern Forces, but still...they fought on!"

The table shook violently; explosions threw painted chunks of paper maché at our unprotected faces. Sparks flew from the ends of the soldiers' tiny muzzleloaders, starting a tiny fire that spread quickly. Bonnie was visibly shaken—something was going wrong with the table, but like a mighty Southern soldier with a Yankee in their sights, she pushed on.

"From December thirty-first to January second, the Confederate forces battled the Yankees fiercely. It was an ugly, ugly scene."

The fire consumed the tabletop—Confederate and Union forces were engulfed by an out of control blaze! Clyde's scarred arms poked out from behind the backdrop with a fire extinguisher. A couple short blasts saved both sides from imminent doom.

"Headless horses...mangled bodies...mutilated mules," Bonnie said as we watched plastic figures melt into grotesque blobs. "The countryside was littered with the carnage of 24,988 casualties. Strong Southern soldiers died in a senseless battle with little tactical value. They died at the hands of cold-blooded Yankees. Let's bow our heads in a moment of silence and remember these men, these Sons of Dixie."

We bowed our heads. Dad's face was so red from holding back laughter, it looked like it was about to explode, just like an evil Yankee taking an artillery round to the head. When we thought it was finally over, Bonnie led us through another curtain beneath a sign reading HOSPITAL. Canned moaning and screaming played over the PA. "I hope y'all haven't eaten yet 'cause you're about to witness first-hand the horrors of Civil War medicine."

We were getting to the good stuff!

We entered a room full of poorly sculpted life sized wax medics working on wax soldiers. The scene was meant to be overly gruesome. Fake blood was used like house paint, covering everything. It was obvious the building's air conditioning went out from time to time because the medics and soldiers were partially melted, making the faces of the wounded even more grotesque and pained, and the faces of those left standing even creepier.

Large jars full of formaldehyde and body parts—fingers, hands, and organs—lined the shelves along the walls. I thought I made out a fetus in a jar near a far corner where the light didn't reach. I thought about Little Dick. Mom and Aunt Margie were visibly shaken. I'll admit, it was a ghastly sight; the smell of wax, musty costumes, and formaldehyde made it even more sickening. Dad and I loved it, of course—it was worth the twelve hundred miles we'd traveled by that point. He snapped so many photos, he had to reload his camera. The twins, unaffected by it all, kept to themselves and their bag of marshmallows. Bonnie tried bringing us back to what she and Clyde thought was a serious, touching memorial for fallen Confederate soldiers.

"Imagine the pain of being shot in the leg by a gutless, yellow-bellied Yankee," she said. "Imagine that pain growing and growing as your leg swells and oozes, until finally turning yellow with gangrene. You can't walk; all you can do is cry and drag your diseased limb through the hearty Southern soil of your homeland."

It took everything Dad and I had to hold back the laughter. Patriotic music played over the moaning.

"Finally, the battle is over," Bonnie said. "You finally receive the medical attention you've been needing for weeks, had it not been for the lilly-livered Union holding you down." She pointed to one of the wax medics sawing off a soldier's leg. "There's not much for a Southern doctor to do, but amputate."

Fake blood, remotely triggered by Clyde from somewhere nearby, spurted from the leg wound, splattering Olivia, who examined the scene with morbid curiosity. Elvis plugged the wound with a marshmallow and moved on. Bonnie obviously enjoyed working from the script she and Clyde probably spent months perfecting. To them, this was serious business.

"You take it like a true-blooded Southerner as they saw through your infected leg and burn it shut with a hot iron. All you have to keep ya from passing out is a swig o' whiskey and a strap of leather between your teeth."

She bowed her head as the moaning and music stopped; then paused for dramatic effect. "But still you die," Bonnie said, hoping we understood how horrible it was fighting the North in the war. "Yer just another casualty of

Yankee oppression on the South. Let's all bow our heads in another moment of silence."

We all bowed again, but Dad and I couldn't hold back this time—we laughed out loud, causing Bonnie to shoot us a cold glare. We shut up like two kids before the school's principal and in trouble, until Bonnie finally said, "Well, enough of this sad stuff. Who wants to see more gators?!"

Dad and I cheered, "YEAH!"

We wandered through a curtained doorway with a sign above reading, GATOR SPLASH! Bonnie handed us all plastic garbage bags with head and armholes torn into them.

"Y'all'll need these," she said while pulling one on, herself.

We entered a room with a much larger pool than the wading pool where Clyde valiantly wrestled with the sedated gator. This pool was more like a stand-alone backyard pool about four or five feet deep. There was an excitement in the air that we were actually going to see something exciting. Clyde stood on a ladder above the pool. In his hands were three lengths of rope with Cornish chickens tied to the ends. Bonnie triggered a drumroll over the PA and went into her spiel.

"And now, the pride of Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial...won't you all give a warm round of applause for Splashdown, the highest leapin' gator in all the land!"

More canned applause played over the speakers as Clyde swung one of the chickens near the surface of the water. A much more active gator than the first one took a bite at it, missing by inches as Clyde jerked it away, building anticipation.

"And now, the moment you've all waited fer," Bonnie said. "Let's see the gator fly!"

Clyde lowered a chicken a few feet above the water. Dad snapped a picture right as the gator's head poked up from the water and snatched the chicken in a quick bite.

"Come on, Splashdown!" Bonnie said. "You can do better than that for these kind folks! One...two...three—let's see the gator fly!"

This time, Clyde lowered a chicken high enough above the water that the gator's body rose halfway from the pool, snagging the second chicken! A weak splash rolled over the edge of the pool, soaking our feet in swampy muck. Bonnie and Clyde hammed it up, hoping to create some tension and excitement.

"What's the name of this here exhibit, Grip?" Bonnie said.

"Gator Splash," he said, acting surprised. "Why?"

"Well, we ain't seen no gators splashin', have we, y'all?"

Dad and I shouted "NO!" while the rest of the family looked on, bored to tears.

"Do y'all wanna see the gator fly?!" Bonnie shouted into the microphone.

"Yeah!" Dad and I said.

"That don't sound too enthused," Bonnie said. "Lemme try again: do y'all wanna see the gator fly?!"

This time we shouted "Yeah!" a little louder, but it still wasn't good enough for Bonnie.

"I still can't hear you! That there gator's underwater and he wants to hear y'all loud and proud. One more time: do y'all wanna see the gator fly?!"

"YEAH!!!" Dad and I screamed at the top of our lungs.

The canned drumroll resumed as Dad readied his camera.

"Okay, here we go. One...two...three—let's see the gator fly!"

Clyde held the final chicken high in the air, and Splashdown showed us what he was made of. He came out of the water, flying through the air to the chicken, which he snapped up in his jaws before bellyflopping back into the pool, creating a sound splash that covered us all! Our cheers were joined with applause over the PA. Even Mom, Aunt Margie, and the twins clapped and howled! Dad gave me a hug. For one fleeting moment, a captive gator leaping from a stagnant pool to get a small chicken from the end of a rope brought us all together.

"Whoo-wheee! That sure was fun, huh?!" Bonnie said. "All that's left now is the Hall O' Gators Gift Shop!"

She led us through another curtain. Aunt Margie began pulling her garbage bag splash suit off her heavy frame. "Lemme give ya this back."

"Oh, no, Hon!" Bonnie said. "You keep that. It's a souvenir on the house! Months from now, you'll still be able to smell the gator on them."

Dad and I sniffed our garbage bags. I don't think it was so much gator odor, as much as stagnant, dirty water that was rarely changed. The gator was like a tea bag, just adding to the overall fishy odor.

"I sure hope the Hall O' Gators Gift Shop has a bathroom!" Mom said.

"Nope, Ma'am," Bonnie said, "but we has a porta-pot out back you can use."

Mom handed Lucky to me.

"Hold him," she said. "I'll meet youse guys back in the car."

Mom zipped off, and Aunt Margie followed.

"I need another smoke!" she said, chasing her older sister.

The rest of us meandered toward the gift shop. I lagged behind, checking out a room full of all kinds of gators in large tanks. Above each tank was a sign with the name of each critter and a warning: "KEEP HANDS OUT OF TANKS!"

Dad went straight for the gift shop counter, to buy T-shirts, mugs, and anything else that would remind him he once visited Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial. Bonnie was joined by Clyde. The twins looked at a sandbox in the corner of the room. A sign on the wall read FREE GOODIES FOR THE KIDS. Beside the sandbox was a metal detector and small hand shovel.

"What's this?" Elvis and Olivia said.

"That's the relic dig!" Clyde said proudly.

"The what?"

"The relic dig. You use that metal detector there and it's just like being on an old battleground, excavating for Civil War artifacts. I bet if you looked hard enough, you'd find something."

"Okay," they said. They worked as a team, looking for whatever Clyde had hidden in the sandbox.

Clyde turned his attention to Dad, who was pointing out a rubber alligator brandishing a muzzleloader to Bonnie. "Do they always talk like that?" he said. "Together, I mean."

"Yeah, they do," Dad said.

"That's downright creepy."

"Yeah, it is," Dad said, now holding the alligator in his hands.

I was still in the HALL O' GATORS, looking at a white alligator, wondering if it was spray painted or if it came naturally without pigment. The sign beside the tank read HONKY—RARE ALBINO GATOR. I tapped on the glass, trying to get its attention, but it didn't move. I wondered if it was stuffed. Tapping louder didn't rouse the beast. Something in me had to find out if it was real. I looked around and found a step stool and pole with a hook on one end (for feeding the gators chickens, I guessed). I put the stool beside the tank and climbed up. Before I could poke the gator with the pole, Lucky started putting up a fight.

"Cut that out, or I'll feed you to this gator," I said. He struggled even more, until I held him tightly, staring him down. I shook Lucky, hoping to bring whatever I saw in the car out, but he stayed still, looking like a rat.

"I know you're in there," I said to him. "Come on out, or are you chicken?" Lucky kept staring.

"I thought so. Don't have the guts, huh?"

I hoped my taunts would bring out the demon inside Mom's beloved Chihuahua.

"I know what you are, you son of a bitch."

His eyes glowed red.

"I knew it," I whispered.

His eyes continued burning. Lucky's head spun around in a three-sixty, startling me. I didn't know what to do; I just wanted some confirmation that I could communicate with whatever possessed Lucky, but it was too much for me to handle. I panicked, dropped Lucky into the tank, and found out that yes, the gator inside *was* alive...and hungry. With a quick snap of its head to the side, it swallowed Lucky in one quick bite!

"Oh, shit!"

I heard beeping from the gift shop; I thought there must have been an alarm in case something entered the tank, but it turned out to be the metal detector. I ran to the gift shop, the whole time looking over my shoulder for a sign of Lucky. There was none—he was deep in the belly of Honky.

Olivia dug a plastic skull from the sandbox. When she pulled it free, Elvis ran the metal detector across its surface. When the end of the detector went over the right temple, it beeped; there was a piece of metal in the side of the skull.

"Looky there!" Clyde said to Dad. "Looks like yer young'uns done found a bullet in the skull of a dead Yankee. Y'all found it—y'all keep it!" he said to Elvis and Olivia. "Just another great thing about visiting Clyde McAllister's Alligator Village and Civil War Memorial!"

Bonnie put all the souvenirs Dad bought in two bags—he'd have plenty new additions to his collection in the den when we returned to Jersey. I wandered up beside him, wondering if talking about what happened to Lucky was a good idea. I said nothing.

"Anything else, hon?" Bonnie said.

"Nah, that should do it!" Dad said. "I'd love to stay longer, but we really need to get back on the road."

"Well, hope y'all can make it back some day," Clyde said. "Yer good folk."

"So are you," Dad said. I could tell he didn't want to leave, but he had no choice. "Let's go, kids."

I took one last glance back at the gators as we left. I had no idea what I would tell Mom. The first words from Mom's mouth when we got to the *Inferno* would be, "Where's Lucky?" and I'd have to tell her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"The Writing on the Wall"

We drove along for a good hour before I summoned the courage to tell Mom what happened to Lucky. I was surprised she didn't ask where he was before then.

"Mom?" I said, hoping the tone of my voice wouldn't give me away right from the start.

"What, Michael?" she said.

"Can I tell you something without you getting mad at me?"

"What did you do, now?" she said.

So much for easing my way into things—I went ahead and came clean.

"Mom, I dropped Lucky into an alligator tank by accident and it ate him." I cringed, expecting her to be one hundred percent serious when she told Dad to turn the car around to Jersey so she could beat me senseless with the sauce ladle. Instead, she was calm.

"You dropped him into an alligator tank and it ate him?" she said.

"Yeah. I'm really sorry—I didn't mean to. He was fighting with me and slipped. Please don't be mad."

"I'm not mad," she said.

I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming. "You're not?"

"No," she said. "But I do think there's something wrong with you. Lucky's right here."

She held the beast up where I could see him. He stared at me, and I've never been more terrified in my life.

"Lucky was back in the car, waiting for me," she said. "I don't know what you let him get into or why you let him loose, but he was fine once I cleaned him up."

I closed my eyes and wondered if I was sane. Everything seemed disjointed, like I was disappearing, or floating in space.

"We should drop Michael into an alligator tank!" I heard Olivia say. She sounded far away, or like I was underwater.

Then Elvis: "Yeah, that would be fun!"

I was going insane—that had to be it! I saw Honky eat Lucky whole; there was no way Lucky could have escaped! I had to know how Lucky got out of the

gator, so years later, I returned to Clyde McAllister's Gator Village and Civil War Memorial. I asked Bonnie and Clyde to tell me their version of the story. This is what Clyde told me:

"Gator Breath called me into the Hall O' Gators right after y'all pulled out of the parking lot.

'Grip! Come here, quick!' she done said.

'What?!'

'Just get yer ass in here!'

I went to Honky's tank to take a look. He was deader'n a doornail. It looked like something chewed its way out his side, through the ribs and everything!

'Sweet Jesus in Heaven!' I said. 'What the hell happened there, ya reckon?'

'I dunno,' Bonnie said. 'You think them folk did it?'

'I don't see how they could of. Damn thing woulda bit anyone that got near it.'

'They been the only ones here, though,' Bonnie said.

'Aw, hell. They was good folk,' I said. 'Even if they did it...I can always catch another gator and paint it up really good.'" (I was right! Honky was the result of a couple cans of Krylon Flat White Decorator Paint!).

Had you told me then that Lucky ate his way free from the stomach of a gator, even after all I had seen him do, up to that point on the trip I wouldn't have believed you—but that would all change. I still have nightmares about him to this day.

* * *

We were nearing the Oklahoma border when we passed a sign advertising a Stuckey's ahead, twenty-five miles. With a truck stop complete with facilities, at least there'd be a carwash. Finally cleaning the car was probably one of the last things on my father's mind, however. To Dad, Stuckey's was a beacon in the night. To my Mom, it was a cornucopia of crap!

Dad always left Stuckey's with plenty of proof he spent some time on the open road. He'd gather up paper placemats and buy clear, plastic belt buckles with scorpions inside. Of course, he'd also buy pecan rolls. To Dad, a Stuckey's Pecan Roll wasn't just a snack—it was eaten with all the love and care of a high-dollar New York cheesecake or fancy tiramisu. He'd buy as many as he could sneak by Mom. Once home, he'd pop them in the freezer in his den. Anytime living with Mom became too much to handle, he could retreat to his lair, thaw one out, and sit back in his chair, pretending he was driving cross country.

We pulled into the Stuckey's lot and the first thing Mom said was, "Clean this car right now, James! It smells like we're riding in a toilet."

"That's Michael!" Elvis said from the back, causing Olivia to laugh. I let it slide.

"We can clean it after we eat, can't we?" Dad said. "It doesn't look that crowded inside and you know how it is: one second a place can be almost empty and the next it's packed." He just wanted to get in to buy stuff.

"Okay," Mom said, "but everyone eat quick!" She shoved Lucky down her shirt and we went inside.

Dad fought the urge to head straight for all the souvenirs. A rude hostess seated us at a small booth. I was cramped and wanted some room; I was still reeling, wondering how Lucky had survived being eaten by a gator. I excused myself to the bathroom so I could mull things over a bit more in the privacy of a stall.

The bathroom was cleaner than most truckstop johns, but the scent of human waste was still beating the smell of cleaning supplies to the finish line. I didn't have to go to the bathroom—I just needed some time to reflect on things, but got sidetracked with bathroom wall graffiti. On the condom machine, someone had written THIS IS THE WORST GUM I'VE EVER TASTED, and above one of the urinals, YOU'VE GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN YOUR HANDS. If the graffiti was that good in the open room, the stalls would surely contain a mix of wisdom and humor worthy of a Pulitzer Prize for potty prose.

I found the stall with the best balance of graffiti and cleanliness and sat down to read. There were all the old standbys, sayings like:

THEY PAINT THE STALLS TO COVER MY PEN,
BUT THE SHITHOUSE POET
STRIKES YET AGAIN!

IF YOU CAN PISS ABOVE THIS LINE,
THE FIRE DEPARTMENT WANTS TO SEE
YOU

And that timeless classic:

HERE I SIT ALL BROKEN HEARTED...TRIED TO SHIT BUT I ONLY
FARTED...LATER ON I TOOK A CHANCE...TRIED TO FART, BUT SHIT MY PANTS!

There were also some clever pieces of graffiti I had never seen before:

ROSES ARE RED, VIOLETS ARE BLUE,
MOST POEMS RHYME, BUT THIS ONE
DOESN'T

STOP GRAFFITI!

PATRONS ARE REQUESTED TO REMAIN SEATED FOR ENTIRE PERFORMANCE

GOD IS LOVE...LOVE IS BLIND...RAY CHARLES IS BLIND...RAY CHARLES IS GOD!

URINE TROUBLE!

IF YOU DON'T CARE WHERE YOU ARE, YOU'RE NEVER LOST

(I thought about how much Dad would have liked that one).
There were also gross ones:

EAT SHIT! 1.9 TRILLION FLIES CAN'T BE WRONG!

THE HANDS THAT CLEAN THIS TOILET ALSO PREPARE YOUR FOOD—SO KEEP
IT CLEAN!

And the grossest one of them all: someone had smeared feces on the wall of the stall with their finger and written LAST NIGHT'S DINNER! beneath it.

I closed my eyes and relaxed; I don't know for how long. I thought about all the bad things that were happening; I had a feeling things would have to get worse before they got better. I wanted to know what would happen next. I wanted to know what I needed to do to stop the *Inferno*.

I opened my eyes, and just before leaving the stall I noticed a piece of graffiti I had somehow overlooked. Right in front of me were the words:

AND WAR BROKE OUT IN HEAVEN: MICHAEL AND HIS ANGELS FOUGHT
WITH THE DRAGON; AND THE DRAGON AND HIS ANGELS FOUGHT. REV. 12:7.

When I returned to the table, Mom was trying to figure out if it was Elvis, or Olivia (or both), who put marshmallows in her Tab while she turned away. After eating, Dad could hardly hold himself back from cheap trinkets and pecan rolls. The waitress returned to our table and said, "Can I get y'all anything else?"

"No, just the check, please," Dad said. He had his eye on a cheesy Indian headdress that read "Stuckey's" in plastic beads.

Mom noticed and said, "You already have one of those stupid things, James."

"Yeah," Dad said, "but not in that color!"

The waitress slid the check onto the table and told us to be safe.

"Ready?" Dad said, reaching for his wallet. He paused and patted his back pocket.

"What?" Mom said, sensing something was wrong.

"Did I hand you my wallet?" he said.

"No."

"I must have left it in the car, then. I'll be right back." He left and returned a couple minutes later.

"You're sure I didn't hand you my wallet?" he said to Mom.

"I'm positive. Don't tell me you lost it!"

"I'm sure I just misplaced it. Maybe it slid out of my back pocket, through the seat, and is on the floor."

"Or maybe it fell out of your back pocket, was lying on the seat, and someone grabbed it through the busted window," Mom said, probably right.

"When was the last time you had it?"

"Earlier, at the alligator farm," he said. "I bought a few things in the gift store."

"Well maybe the car ate it, then," Mom said sarcastically.

"Do you have any money on you?" Dad said to Mom.

"All I have is a five."

"That won't cover it." He turned to my aunt. "How 'bout you, Margie?"

"I ain't got nuthin'," she said.

"Kids?" We all shook our heads "no."

"What are we going to do?" Elvis and Olivia said. Dad handed Mom the keys.

"Why don't you all go out to the car and wait for me. Leave the engine running."

"What are you doing, James?" Mom said.

"Just follow my lead. Please, just this once—go along with me."

We all headed toward the door and Dad said, "I'll catch up with you guys in a minute. Gotta go to the bathroom and pay the bill!" He was talking loudly enough for the staff to hear, so they wouldn't catch onto his plan.

In the *Inferno*, Olivia said, "Mommy, is Daddy going to do something bad?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"Didn't he want you to start the car?" I said. I was always looking out for my old man, even though his plans were often weak at best. Mom shook her head and turned the ignition.

Nothing!

"Oh, what the Christ?!" She tried again, but had no luck.

"Here he comes!" the twins shouted. Dad snuck out the door, carrying a handful of paper placemats.

"Mom—" I said.

"I'm trying, Michael!" she yelled. The car wasn't turning over.

A busboy came rushing out from the restaurant, right behind Dad.

"Hey! Hey! Come back here!" Dad picked up the pace to a full-blown run for the car. I reached over his seat and opened the door for him.

As Dad slid into the front seat, Mom turned the ignition one last time and the *Inferno* roared to a start. Dad floored it, leaving the busboy reeling in the car's stench!

Dad zipped onto the highway and drove like he was fleeing a bank robbery—we were in Oklahoma in no time. He kept looking in the rearview mirror. When the coast was finally clear, Mom said, "I can't believe this crap! How could you lose your wallet?"

"I had it with me earlier," Dad said.

"You're always losing things. When are you going to stop losing things, James?"

Dad ignored her. We were now well down the highway from Stuckey's, and I'm sure he was thinking of all the jackalope postcards and fake Indian jewelry he could have scored, had he not lost his wallet. Mom wasn't about to give up, though.

"You can be such a child, I swear."

Dad wasn't biting, but I could tell he was about to lose it. Something just felt wrong in the car. There was always stress when Mom and Dad got into it, but on that trip, it seemed amplified by the *Inferno*.

"James, I'm talking to you!" she said.

"I hear you!"

His reply even startled Mom. He began accelerating and sweating. Mom knew she was getting to him, though, and she lived for getting under people's skin. She was like a bad tattoo.

"You need to slow it down, James," she said. "And tell me, how could you lose your wallet?"

Dad lost it. "I don't know! Maybe because—for once—you weren't hen-pecking me and treating me like a child! Would you just let it rest, for once?! I'm sick of it!!!" he yelled.

We were all shocked. Sweat rolled from his brow, and a slight odor of sulfur filled the car. Olivia cried.

"Mommy and Daddy are going to get divorced!" she cried.

"We're not getting divorced!" Dad shouted.

"Yes you are!" Olivia said. I told her to shut up.

"You shut up!" Elvis said. Mom spun around.

"Both of youse, shut up!"

Dad couldn't take it anymore. "ALL OF YOU, SHUT THE HELL UP!!!"

The *Inferno's* engine made a grinding, popping noise—steam shot from beneath its hood. Dad pulled over near a billboard and rested his head on the steering wheel. He began crying. His shirt was soaked in sweat, even though it wasn't that hot in the car.

"Damnit! Is it too much to ask for us to go on a trip and all get along?" he said. "Is it expecting too much from a brand new car not to keep breaking down all the time?" He punched the dashboard in frustration. "I'm sick of this crap—just sick of it!"

I reached over his seat and slapped him in the face. If Dad's outburst shocked everyone, me slapping Dad gave them all heart attacks.

"What the hell?!" Mom said.

"Yeah, what the hell?" Dad said.

The twins saw an opportunity for a dig. "You're in trouble now, Michael!"

Dad ran his fingers over the part of his face I slapped. It was red and growing redder. My fingers throbbed in pain I hit him so hard.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said.

"Remember back at the rest stop when Lucky bit me? You said if you ever acted weird again to slap some sense into you. Well, I just did.

He started laughing. "Yeah, I guess you did, buddy." I could tell, in a roundabout way, he was proud of me. He looked at us all and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry, everyone. I just wanted this trip to go off without a hitch," he said. "I shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

"Same here," Mom said, looking ashamed. She was still a little stunned from Dad standing up to her. "Sorry."

Steam from the engine rolled into the open windows; it seemed to make the outhouse stench even more vile.

We all got out of the car and stepped to the side of the highway as Dad looked under the hood. I made sure Mom and Aunt Margie's cigarettes didn't start another fire, while Elvis and Olivia finished off their last bag of marshmallows.

"What's wrong?" Mom said.

"It's just a hose," Dad said. "If we had some money, I could get a new one and have us back on the road in no time. But we're broke."

Mom looked at the billboard. She smiled and said, "Not for long. I've got five dollars."

"Huh?" Dad said.

She pointed to the billboard; it read:

CHOCTAW BINGO - NEXT EXIT!
\$5/CARD - \$5000 JACKPOT, THREE TIMES A DAY!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"The Patron Saint of Bingo"

Mom and bingo went hand in hand. She was convinced she could earn a decent living playing bingo, and for a short time, she pulled in more money than my old man with her favorite game. If anyone could turn five dollars into enough money to fund the rest of the road trip, it was definitely Mom! We walked along the access road to the biggest bingo hall I've ever seen.

I never forget the image on the sign above the building. The words HIGH STAKES were prominently featured, and the proud face of a tribal chief was placed over a bingo card. I remember thinking how tacky it seemed as Dad said, "When we come back by here, I'm definitely getting a picture of that!"

We made our way inside and Mom was in heaven! She reached into her purse and pulled out her lucky card blotter—she never left home without it. The hostess knew Mom meant business.

"Can I help y'all?"

"One card, please," Mom said, handing over the five. She pointed to Lucky, her third breast. "Is it okay if I bring him in? He brings me luck."

"I really shouldn't let you," the hostess said, while popping her gum, "but I understand. Go ahead, but if you get caught, I didn't say you could bring him in."

* * *

Mom and Aunt Margie fit right in with the bingo crowd; they were among their own kind. A thick cloud of smoke hung over the room, a sticky fog that wouldn't go away. Over 25,000 square feet of tables, chairs, and people there to win money; it was overwhelming. Players lined up their good luck charms in front of them: rubber troll dolls, rabbit feet, crosses and other religious icons. One woman, wearing a T-shirt with a four-leaf clover on it, wasn't taking any chances. She had stacks of pennies around her cards, a horseshoe, a baseball cap with a rainbow and pot of gold embroidered on it, stuffed animals, and so many Precious Moments angels it was creepy. The entire time we were there, she won nothing.

Another woman's good luck charm was something floating in a jar of liquid; the way she inhaled cigarettes, maybe it was part of her lung. Some people had

chair cushions with everything from slot machine graphics on them, to old cartoon characters, like Betty Boop.

Mom found a chair and we all gathered around to watch. The woman to her right and the guy to her left were each running multiple cards. They had them taped to the table and each time a number was called, they worked over their cards with two-fisted bingo blotters. A woman in the back shouted, "BINGO!" while Mom got settled. By the time they verified the winner's card, Mom had a cigarette burning, her card ready, and her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders, revealing armpits full of stubbly hair.

They called the game and Mom was the first to shout, "BINGO!" She ran her sole bingo card like Minnesota Fats running a pool table. She won twenty-five dollars and immediately sent Dad to buy five more cards. When Dad returned, she set the cards on the table and pulled another blotter from her purse.

"Wanna borrow some tape for those?" the guy sitting next to her said.

"Thanks, but I don't need 'em," Mom said. Bingo was like Zen archery to her; no matter how many cards she played and how fast she had to go over them, they never slid around. All she needed to win was a scratch on Lucky's head, a constant supply of nicotine, and room to throw her arms around like an octopus. In no time, she turned one five dollar card into ten—it was like watching a cell divide over and over. Soon, she drove her neighbors off and had one side of the table to herself. She was never one for exercise, but the way she ran back and forth checking all her cards, she exerted herself enough to last her months. She kept winning, taking over the table like it was a small country. People actually stopped playing their cards and watched her in amazement.

"She's cheating!" someone shouted. I didn't see who said it, but Mom did. She locked eyes with a bear of a man—easily six foot seven and three-hundred fifty pounds. He said, "Sorry," grabbed his good luck Funshine Care Bear, and shuffled away.

"Dear, you need to stop buying cards," Dad said.

"Don't tell me how to play bingo, James O'Brien. I know what I'm doing! If you remember, there was a time I made more playing bingo than you did at work." She loved rubbing that in. "I've got enough cards for that!" she said, pointing to a "\$5,000 POT THREE TIMES A DAY" sign. It was just about time to make her move.

"All right, everybody...thiiiiiiiiiiiiis is the moment you've been waaaaaaaiting for!" the caller said into his microphone. Up to that point, he was very serious, like a Secret Service agent, but he changed—working the crowd over like an

announcer at a monster truck rally. "It's tiiiiiiiime for the fiiiiiiiive thousand dollar jaaaaaackpot! Be sure to get your cards. This is a five minute breather. Gooooooooo luuuuuuuuuuuck!"

Flashing lights and police rollers flashed. People ran to the counter to buy more cards. Mom sat in an almost meditative state, waiting for her big payoff.

"Are ya really gonna win it all?" Aunt Margie said.

"I don't play to lose, Marge. You know that," Mom said.

Everyone took their places at their tables. Cards laid out, blotters in hand; it was like the line up right before a stock car race, and Mom had pole position. The woman next to her was ready to give her a run for her money, though. They snarled at each other as the first ball was announced.

"B-13," the caller said.

Mom and the woman beside her blotted several cards with the first number. They ran neck and neck. Sometimes Mom fell behind; other times she took the lead. Both women were large, sweaty, and smelling like menthols. The game seemed to last longer than others, but when the caller said, "O-25" I saw Mom had it!

So did the woman beside her.

They both went for the last spot; they both hit it at the same time, but only Mom shouted "BINGO!"

The woman beside her slumped onto her card, clutching her chest. In the excitement of hitting bingo on the big pot, she suffered a heart attack! People rushed up to Mom to check her card, while others ran to check out the woman beside her. In all the excitement, Mom did the most deplorable thing I ever saw her do in my life—she reached over and rubbed the winning mark off the woman's card.

While Mom's card was verified the winner, her opponent was on the table, receiving CPR. With one quick lick and swipe of Mom's thumb, not only was the woman going for a ride to a local hospital, she was going twenty-five hundred bucks poorer. Mom, however, was happy she wouldn't have to split the winnings. The bingo hall paid out the pot, Mom stuffed fifty hundred dollar bills into her purse, and we left in time to see the ambulance heading off toward the nearest hospital.

As we walked across the parking lot, Mom came to my side.

"I'm sorry you saw that, Michael," she said. I could see no shame on her face for clearing the woman's card of the other winning spot. "Let it be a lesson: only the strong survive. We'd only have twenty-five hundred dollars right now, instead of five thousand."

"Wouldn't twenty-five hundred have been enough?" I said.

"Yeah, but five grand feels much better," she said with a big smile.

"That's wrong."

"That's helping the family, Michael." She lit a cigarette and dropped back behind me to chat with Aunt Margie, who thought Mom was magic at that moment. I'm guessing the most money Aunt Margie ever saw at once was twenty bucks. In her eyes, Mom was a millionaire.

When we neared the gas station, Dad said, "Why don't you guys head back toward the car. Michael and I will get the hose and meet you."

Mom peeled a Franklin from her stack and said, "Get some cigarettes and munchies...whatever you want."

"Marshmallows!" the twins shouted in unison.

The rest of the family went back to the *Inferno* while Dad and I got a hose for the car, a carton of cigarettes for Mom and Aunt Margie, and a bag of snacks to last us the rest of the day. We walked back to the car. Even from a distance, it was clear Mom was talking bingo with Aunt Margie, who hung on every word. Dad laughed; he looked at Mom with a glimmer in his eye.

"Your mother amazes me sometimes, buddy."

"Yeah, she really cleaned up," I said.

"I know people don't see what I see in her, but back at the bingo hall...that's what I love about her. When she sets out to do something, she does it and doesn't let anything get in her way. I really respect that side of her."

I wanted to tell him I saw her wipe the other winner's card, but didn't want to ruin the moment for him. Instead, I just agreed. "Yeah."

"And I really respect you," he said. "It took guts to slap some sense into me the way you did. No hard feelings. We'll get this hose on the car and head back to Stuckey's, pay for our meal, and hit the car wash. Sound good?"

"Yeah, sounds really good." I looked at the *Inferno* as we got closer. There was something I thought about on the way to the bingo hall and it was time to speak up. "I've been thinking about something, Dad."

"What's that?"

"The car. Lucky. I think they are somehow related," I said.

"How so?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but I *know* Lucky is possessed. Not just kidding around, but *really* possessed."

"I thought you didn't believe that stuff, though?" Dad said.

"I'm beginning to change my mind."

"Why?"

"The Inferno," I said. "I know it was choking me the other night. I know it chased me down last night. I've been thinking...it seems the car only acts up when we're all mad and yelling at each other. It runs just fine when we're all getting along, but when we're mad, it breaks down. And Lucky...it's like he knows I'm figuring things out and he's trying to stop me. I bet I sound crazy?"

Dad didn't say a thing. I thought he was going to ignore me again. When he finally spoke up, he said, "I believe you."

"Huh?!"

"I believe you," he said. "I've been thinking about the way the car's been acting, too. I'm still not sure about Lucky being possessed, but it's all too weird for coincidence. I know you wouldn't make things up if you didn't believe they were happening, or seen them firsthand." He looked me right in the eyes and said, "I believe you, buddy, but let's keep this to ourselves right now—don't want to worry everyone just yet. We'll just stay in a good mood and test your theory. Sound good?"

"Yeah!" I said, giving Dad a hug. "Thanks, Dad!"

"No problem, buddy. No problem."

We finished our hike back to the *Inferno*, where Mom was telling Aunt Margie, "There was even a time I supported this family playing bingo..."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"A Visit from Bubba"

I was so happy to hear that Dad believed me. When you're thirteen, it's easy to think nobody gives you any credit, but I realized on that trip that it wasn't so much that I was ignored, as much as I'd reached a level of maturity that adults expected more from me. *"Dad, I think the car is possessed and I'm scared!"* would work for a seven-year-old, but it's not something adults want to hear from a teenager. So having my father believe me was a big thing at the time. I felt safer. In my mind, since Dad knew the car was possessed, nothing bad could happen. I felt great! Everyone seemed to be in an excellent mood, too. It was like we were all a real, model family. I had to give it another shot.

"Hey, anyone wanna sing 'Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall?'" I said.

"Not now," Mom said, recounting her money for the umpteenth time since winning.

"No, shut up!" from the twins.

"I don't know the words." Aunt Margie said.

Dad said, "Looks like we're out-voted."

Okay, so maybe we weren't a model family, but we were making big strides.

* * *

We rolled into the Texas Panhandle as the sun was going down. First thing, bright and early in the morning, Dad wanted to visit the Cadillac Ranch, where ten Cadillacs were partially buried in a wheat field and called "art." To everyone but my Dad, it was something that could easily be skipped, but it was one of those places he waited years to finally see.

We pulled off I-40 to a campground a few miles off the highway. Mom wanted to stay in a hotel, to celebrate her big bingo win, but Dad insisted he was too tired to drive any further. In reality, Dad wanted to sleep outside in a tent on hard-packed dirt. Mom did her normal, "What about bears?" speech and Dad assured her all was safe.

"The only bears in Texas are in zoos," he said.

We paid for our space, pitched the tents, and started a campfire. Our space was at the back of the lot; it was almost like roughing it for real.

"Goody, we'll get to finally roast marshmallows!" the twins said.

"Yep, you sure will!" Dad said, setting some twigs on tinder. It didn't matter that we lived in an urban nightmare; on these trips, my father was just like Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett. He blew on the dried grass he'd collected, nursing a hot ash started by a flint and steel set he carried with him everywhere since his Boy Scouts days (never know when an insurance salesman will need to start a primitive fire, after all). With a little POOF, the grass gave way to flame and spread to the twigs. He stacked bigger pieces of wood on until we had a good fire going. The twins pulled out a bag of marshmallows and sticks.

"Youse two put those back!" Mom said. "You need to eat a healthy dinner, first!"

The "healthy dinner" consisted of hotdogs, pork and beans, and greasy potato chips, all washed down with soda pop. I'm guessing while a bag of marshmallows didn't have much in the way of nutritional value, that meal wasn't far behind. After dinner, Mom and Aunt Margie lit up and Dad kicked back, relaxing.

"This is the life!" he said, while rubbing his belly. "Nothing like a meal cooked over an open fire and a clear sky above. Can you hear that?"

We all listened. "I don't hear a thing," Mom said, looking around nervously.

"Exactly!" He laughed. "That's what I mean! This is great—we don't get this back home."

"We don't get chewed on by bugs, either!" Mom said, swatting at invisible mosquitoes. "If I get malaria, you're never going to live it down." As she swatted at another bug only she could see, she knocked her Coke over, spilling the can's contents all over the log she was sitting on. She stood up, Coca Cola dripping from her clothes.

"This wouldn't have happened if we stayed in a hotel!"

The twins looked at Mom, ignoring her dilemma. "Can we roast marshmallows, now?"

"Sure, go ahead," she said as she grabbed napkins and wiped her bottom. Then she screamed!

"What?" Dad said.

The twins screamed and Aunt Margie joined in.

"What?!" Dad looked at me.

I screamed, too.

"*WHAT?!!*" he shouted. I pointed to the two-hundred fifty pound black bear standing behind him! Not a monster by any stretch of the imagination, but in Mom's eyes it was a two-ton, twelve-foot tall, fire-breathing Kodiak with a

taste for fat women from New Jersey. It justified all her notions that if one sleeps outside—no matter where they are—bears will descend upon their camp and devour them in the night.

"I told you, James O'Brien!" Mom shouted as we all ran for cover. "I told you bears would get us!" The only place to run was the *Inferno*.

I got there first. "The doors are locked and the windows are up!" I yelled.

"They shouldn't be—we left them unlocked!" Dad said. It was the first time he saw the kind of things the car was doing to me all along. Just like the night it tried choking me to death, it was now trying to kill my family by not letting us in and leaving us to the bear. Dad picked up the twins and threw them in through the broken window, followed by me. Aunt Margie was next, even though Mom tried forcing her way toward the window after we were safe. When Dad tried putting Mom through the window, she got stuck!

"James, if that bear bites my ass, you're dead!" She kicked her legs; her underwear exposed to the wilderness of Liam McGuy's Campground. "Next time you'll listen to me about the bears!"

The bear was still at the campfire, though, rifling through our food. It devoured the twins' marshmallows, filling its belly full of goopy, sugary goodness before moving on to hotdogs, potato chips, and desserts. When it was done devouring everything we had, it headed our way. Dad picked up a nearby stick to fend off the beast. As it lumbered toward us, I noticed it wasn't nearly as large as it seemed when it suddenly appeared behind Dad.

Dad stomped his food and thwacked the stick on the ground, trying to appear menacing. "Yo, bear! Get back, bear!" he shouted. Mom screamed.

"I'm gonna die in this crap car and it's all your fault, James O'Brien!"

Dad stood like a mountain man doing his best to fend off a feral beast. The bear stopped and stood on its hind legs; I thought for sure it was going to attack, but instead, it sniffed the air. It wasn't looking to maul our family—it was looking for food! Dad caught on quick.

"Michael, do me a big favor, buddy. Grab anything from the cooler and slowly hand it to me."

I gave him some old sandwiches. He tossed them to the side and the bear ate them, bag and all. It made its way through the sandwiches in no time and turned its attention back to Dad. "Anything else?" he said.

I handed him a stale marshmallow I found on the floor. Before he could toss it, the bear took it from his hand. Dad thought it was cool. The bear licked his hand and Dad said, "That's it—nothing else." The bear stood up and sniffed the

air again; it was still picking up the scent of something sweet. It moved to Mom and licked Coke off her butt.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!" she screamed. "IT'S MAULING ME!!!"

Dad pulled the bear back like it was a big dog trying to hump someone's leg. From the trees near camp, we heard someone shout, "Bubba! Bubba Bear!"

A skinny guy in a cowboy hat stepped out. A belt buckle as big as a wrestler's champion belt held his bootcut jeans at his waist. He walked right up to the bear and pet it.

"There you are, Bubba," he said. "You messing with these nice people?" He pulled out a candy bar and fed it to his pet. I realized Bubba had no teeth. Years of consuming sweets ensured he at least wouldn't have been able to bite us if he were feral.

"Your bear?" Dad said.

"Yep—he got out of his cage. I'm really sorry."

"He's tame?" Dad said.

"Harmless as a bunny-rabbit." He extended his hand to Dad. "Name's Lance."

Dad shook his hand. "James."

"Nice meeting you."

Dad started helping Mom out of the window. Lance, realizing his bear was the cause of the problem, gave a hand without even asking. Bubba joined in, too, returning to lick more Coke from Mom's rear.

"You're a dead man, James O'Brien," she said. "Hear me? Dead! When we get back to Jersey, it's ladle time for you!" I knew she would never hit me or the twins with the ladle, but even Dad looked like he wasn't sure if she was kidding or serious.

Once Mom's feet were back on solid ground and Lance had Bubba away from her, the rest of us got out of the car. Dad asked if we could get a picture with Bubba; Lance took a picture of all of us, except Mom, standing with the stinky bear. Lance explained he bought Bubba several years before from a guy who owned a gas station. The gas station owner put Bubba in a cage near the pumps to attract customers; he had bought Bubba from a small circus that went under and couldn't afford to keep him. Dad took a couple more pictures of us with the bear before Lance said he had to get back home.

As I watched him walk off with Bubba, I couldn't help but feel sorry for the bear and all the other animals we'd seen along the way. In a cage or a wading pool on the side of the highway wasn't the way animals were supposed to be

viewed. I thought about the hawk and deer we saw at Aunt Margie's back in West Virginia—that was the way things were meant to be.

I like to think Bubba escaped from Lance and wandered back to his birthplace in the hills, but the reality was he probably died with a belly full of sugar, on a concrete slab surrounded by chainlink fence.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Of Half Buried Cadillacs and Fully Possessed Chihuahuas"

When I woke up the next morning, I heard Mom and Dad talking—it was still dark. The episode with Bubba really got to Mom, and she was laying down the law to Dad, telling him how it was going to be.

"James, since I won so much playing bingo and you've lost your wallet and have nothing," she said, "I think what I say is gonna stand from now on. And I say from tonight, forward—for the rest of this trip—we're sleeping in hotels."

Dad looked as disappointed as a little kid called in early on a summer evening. Ever since the visit to Yellowstone years before, he couldn't convince Mom to take traditional camping trips anymore, so he had to settle for second best: sleeping in tents on road trips, or in the backyard with me.

"Okay," he said. "But can we at least sleep with the windows open?"

"No," Mom said. He knew pushing the issue would get him nowhere, so he shut up.

Breakfast that morning was gas station junk food: strawberry Zingers, Honey Buns, and doughnuts washed down with chocolate milk. It only took a few minutes to make it to Cadillac Ranch. The sun was just peeking over the horizon; Dad wanted to get there before anyone else.

"I don't think this place gets crowds, James," Mom said on the drive there.

"It's famous, Mary," he said. "You never know with these things..." He just used it as an excuse for an early start. The more time spent on the road was more time for adventure in his mind.

There's just something about ten Cadillacs buried face down, halfway into the flat earth in a wheat field in the Texas Panhandle—you either love it or hate it. Mom hated it, of course. Had it been a field full of pink lawn flamingos, she would have stood in awe, insisting Dad take plenty of pictures. But Cadillac Ranch offered nothing for Mom, except a chance to complain some more.

"This is crap!" she declared. "A total waste of good cars! Cadillacs are classics, not like that station wagon you bought." Dad could have argued that point; I'm sure he saw the *Inferno* as a distant cousin to the Cadillacs, but he knew better than give Mom what she wanted. "We should bury that piece of junk car of yours *totally*—none of this half out crap!" She lit a cigarette, and Aunt Margie moved her way like a moth to flame, hoping for a handout.

You could count me in as one who loved Cadillac Ranch; it was one of the neatest things I had ever seen—the kind of thing kids love. To Dad it was so much more—to Dad, it was a testament to humanity. Burying Caddies in a wheat field and calling it art was what separated us from animals, like Lucky. That someone even thought about burying cars in the earth, and that people came from all over the country to have a look—to Dad it was a thing of beauty. No admission; this was a gift to mankind for free, making it "truer" art in Dad's mind than something one would pay to see in a gallery. No one even selling souvenirs on the site—just ten Cadillacs face down in the dirt!

"Isn't it beautiful, Michael?" Dad said.

"Yeah, Dad." I didn't see the beauty in it, but knew it meant a lot to him so I went along. "It's neat."

He peeled his T-shirt off and handed it to me. "Hold this, please." Something had come over him.

He went up to the '59 Coupe DeVille and ran his hand along its body, as though it were a horse and he were asking for permission to climb aboard for a ride. And that's precisely what he did: in a flash, he climbed onto the car and stretched his arms toward the sky. He looked like a pagan god, standing atop the half-buried car, calling the sun from the horizon to do his bidding, the master of his own Stonehenge of rubber and steel and spraypaint. He let out a primal "YAAAWWWWWWWP!!!!!!" and then inhaled deeply.

"What's wrong with Jimmy?" Aunt Margie asked while blowing smoke into the morning air.

"He's nuts is what's wrong!" Mom said. She turned her attention to Dad. "James, you get down from there right now." She said it like she was scolding one of the twins or me.

As if ripping his shirt off and climbing on top of one of the cars wasn't weird enough (even for Dad), what he did next was even more surprising. He turned toward the horizon, so his back was facing us, and he leaped backwards, pulling into a little ball. He was doing a backflip! He was no gymnast, though. He spun too much and landed flat on his ass before slumping forward.

"Jimmy!" Aunt Margie shouted.

"James!"

"Dad!"

We all rushed to his side. I thought he was crying, but he flopped on his back in the dirt and laughed.

"That's not funny, James!" Mom said. "You almost gave me a heart attack!" He kept laughing.

"Stop that right now!" she said, but he didn't. She stomped off with Aunt Margie trailing behind. "I'll be waiting in the car..."

I wondered what made Dad act the way he did. I thought maybe he was stressed and needed a release, that all the years of living with Mom and taking her crap had welled up inside him and communing with the sun on top of the epitome of American machinery was the only way he knew to let it go. A religious experience. My theory wasn't far from wrong.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"I've never been better, Michael."

I handed him his T-shirt. He pulled it on after knocking dirt from his back.

"Why'd you do that?" I said.

He looked at me with intense purpose, like he was bestowing some ancient secret. "Michael," he said, "there are moments bigger than our thoughts that can't be explained. That was one of those moments and it was special. I can't explain it anymore than that. It's healing..."

We watched the sun rise. Over the years, I've heard many people talk about Texas having the best sunsets, but the sunrises are pretty impressive, too. To begin the day looking at something so beautiful...it sent us on our way energized and ready to tackle all that lay ahead.

* * *

We had hardly made it into New Mexico when Dad saw a sign advertising a reptile farm. BIG TEX'S RATTLESNAKE PIT AHEAD - 10 MILES!

"James, we can't stop—we don't have time," Mom said. "Haven't we seen enough reptiles on this trip already?" Mom should have known better than to give Dad an option.

"These are snakes, though!" he said. "Rattlesnakes! We got an earlier start than usual, and the kids would love to see it, I'm sure. Right kids?"

Elvis and Olivia went nuts—the thought of seeing something as venomous as themselves appealed to them, and I'm sure their minds instantly set to work figuring out a way to get copious amounts of snake poison into their big brother's body, while making it seem accidental. I wasn't as enthusiastic.

"How 'bout you, Michael," Dad said as he looked at me in the rearview mirror. I was still thinking about Bubba penned up somewhere; how if I wanted to see rattlesnakes, I should go out on the plains among the rocks and see them as they're meant to be seen. "Rattlesnakes, buddy! How cool is that?"

I knew we were going to end up stopping, regardless, so I said, "Yeah..."

The reptile farm wasn't nearly as big as Clyde McAllister's Gator Village and Civil War Memorial, but how big does a side of the road attraction featuring a

pit of vipers need to be? Judging by the one other car in the parking lot, they did twice as much business as Clyde McAllister, with maybe one fifth the square footage.

We wandered in and were greeted by a rail thin guy carrying an almost full Dr. Pepper bottle. Just like Lance, he wore a belt buckle so huge, that it reminded me of a satellite dish. He had tobacco stains around the edges of his mouth, and introduced himself as Big Tex (even though we were in New Mexico and he maybe weighed a hundred pounds in cowboy boots and leather chaps). At first, I thought maybe he'd eaten a chocolate glazed doughnut and forgot to wipe his mouth, but as he talked, he constantly spit tobacco into the bottle, making a mess. (If you ever visit the American Southwest, a word of warning: never drink from a Dr. Pepper bottle that isn't yours, or one that has left your sight—you just never know what may be inside.)

Big Tex took a headcount and told us admission would be twenty dollars. Dad instinctively reached for his wallet, quickly remembering he'd lost it. He looked at Mom, who was probably thinking she should have remembered she was the breadwinner du jour, and therefore, should have told Dad to keep driving when he saw the sign. Instead, she forked over the cash and said, "This is the last stop for something like this, James. Including the drive home..."

Big Tex took her money and noticed Lucky between her breasts.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we got a no pets policy. One of these snakes sees that little guy and they'll think he's dinner."

"I just gave you twenty bucks and you can't make an exception?" she said.

"Sorry, ma'am. Those are the rules."

"Fine!" She set Lucky down. "Go to the car and wait for Mama, Lucky! Mama will be right there."

He ran beneath the swinging saloon doors at the entrance and hopped into the *Inferno*.

Mom looked at Big Tex. "See if we ever come back here."

Big Tex's Rattlesnake Pit was pretty much just that—a pit full of rattlers. He had a couple aquariums with other snakes lining the walls, complete with little signs like GARTER SNAKE: NON-POISONOUS-SAFE TO HANDLE; COPPERHEAD: PRETTY DURN POISONOUS—WATCH OUT!

The highlight of Big Tex's place was the old redwood hot tub he'd converted into THE RATTLE PIT! He built a little deck and railing up to the side of the hot tub—you climbed a couple stairs and looked down on his pit of poison. In what appeared to be an old pool cue holder, he had fishing poles with balloons tied

to the ends so you could hang a balloon over a rattler's head and watch it strike the balloon in annoyance.

"Rattlesnakes and balloons!" Dad said. "That's a picture dying to happen. Go for it, buddy!"

Normally, I'd be going nuts over something like that, but I kept thinking about how wrong things suddenly seemed after meeting Bubba bear.

"Nah," I said. "I'm not feeling so good. I think breakfast isn't sitting well."

Across the pit from me, a fat kid with a crew cut, glasses that made his eyes look as big as baseballs, and a striped shirt bonked a docile snake on the head, trying to get it to strike his balloon. When it finally did, Dad snapped a picture and smiled. He turned back toward me.

"You sure? Just one picture?"

"Okay," I said, knowing Dad wouldn't give up until he had his photo.

I grabbed a fishing pole and waved the balloon over the snake pit, but the snakes seemed to not be into it just as much as me.

"Agitate them a little bit," Dad said with his camera readied. "Bonk 'em on the heads—that should work!"

I did, but the snakes did nothing. I let the fishing pole droop into the tank and stared at Dad. He wanted that picture more than anything—capturing the very moment a poisonous viper hit his son's balloon, making a pop and scaring the snake half to death (no wonder the snakes didn't want to strike). I zoned out until I heard Dad shout, "Michael!"

He was yelling at me! I couldn't believe it—against my own will, I tried getting the snakes to strike for his amusement, and now he was yelling at me!

"Michael!" he yelled again. "Look out!"

He wasn't yelling because I didn't get the snakes to strike; he was yelling because a rattlesnake had wrapped itself around the fishing pole and was crawling up it like a branch, toward my arm! I flinched, sending the snake off the end of the pole, through the air, and landing on Mom!

"AAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!" Mom shouted as she rushed about, doing her best to keep the dangerous end of the rattlesnake as far from her as she could. Instead of tossing it from her shoulders and running away like a normal person, she thrashed about, running in circles like a cartoon character. She fished her lighter from her purse and tried setting the snake on fire! Mom figured that would do it, but in her panic, she couldn't get the lighter to work. Dad rushed over to save her; the snake was about to strike! When it finally did, Lucky came to her rescue.

He charged across the floor (how he knew Mom was in trouble is beyond me), and leaped with all his might, taking out the snake that would have struck Mom right between her eyes! He flopped to the floor with the middle of the snake firmly in his teeth, thrashing about like a feral little mongoose against a cobra. He got the upper hand, biting the snake several times, rendering it useless for a fight. He took its head in his mouth and swallowed the snake in a few quick bites, stopping for a moment at the rattle, where—I swear to God—he looked right at me and shook the rattle like a warning before swallowing the last bit of snake!

"That's why we allow no pets!" Big Tex shouted as he ran over. "That dog just ate one of my snakes!"

Mom puffed out her chest, dwarfing Big Tex and sending a message to back down. "That dog just saved you from a huge lawsuit!" She looked at Lucky, making sure he was okay.

"I think it would be a good idea if we left, guys," Dad said.

* * *

We passed a few more signs for side of the road attractions: caves, more reptile farms, and UFO landing sites. Dad knew better than to ask if we could stop.

The incident at the reptile farm shook us all up. We drove along in silence, making our way across the state in record time. In a weird way, it was nice seeing Lucky save Mom—it meant maybe there was still a glint of the good Lucky in that little body after all ("good" being relative when it came to the mean little canine).

Dad finally pulled in for gas late that afternoon. Mom grabbed Lucky and jumped from the car.

"Gotta pee!"

"I'll be in after filling up," Dad said, as she ran in. The rest of us got out to stretch our legs and see what the convenience store had to offer in the way of food. When I entered, I heard the cashier telling Mom, "Excuse me, ma'am. You can't be bringing your dog in here."

"What is it about this state and no dogs allowed?" she said. "Nobody else in this country has a problem with him. It's not like he's a drooling Great Dane, or something."

"Those are the rules," the cashier said. "Sorry."

Mom opened the door and set Lucky down on the pavement. "Go to the car, Lucky! Go to the car—Mama will be right back," she said. On her way to the bathroom, she huffed at the cashier and said, "That's a stupid rule."

"Like it or not, it's still a rule," he said as she opened the door to the lady's room.

The twins went straight for the marshmallows. I grabbed good "road trippin' food," as Dad called it: pork rinds, tiny chocolate and powdered donuts, soda, bubble gum, and plenty of beef jerky; some sandwiches and chips, as well. Mom came out from the bathroom, grabbed what she wanted, and we all headed for the register. Dad timed the fill up perfectly and met us. He took one look at everything I held and gave me a thumbs up; I grabbed exactly what he wanted, too.

"This all together?" the cashier said.

"Of course," Mom said, hoping to start something with the guy who put her beloved Chihuahua out. He was smart and ignored her.

"Yes. And the gas on pump four," Dad said.

"That'll be fifty-three sixty-seven."

Mom pulled a wad of bills from her purse and handed them over. "We're giving you all that money and you couldn't let me bring my dog in? How's that for gratitude?"

The cashier ignored her. "Thank you."

"Yeah, right!" Mom snapped.

The twins went right into their fresh bag of marshmallows as I divvied up my haul with Dad. Mom was the first back to the *Inferno*.

"AAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"What's wrong?!" Dad shouted.

"Who let Lucky do this?!" she said, holding up the backscratcher Elvis Presley gave her. Lucky had chewed it beyond recognition.

"Oh, sweet Jesus—no!" Aunt Margie said. "That thing touched the King!"

"Why didn't somebody keep an eye on him?!" Mom bellowed. "How could youse guys let this happen?!"

"Mary. Dear," Dad said. "Please. Calm down."

I thought she was going to hit him. "Don't you *dare* tell me to calm down, James David O'Brien!" she said. "Just when things start going good, this crap happens. Why didn't somebody watch him, damnit?!"

Dad started pleading with her. "Take it easy, Mar—"

"I WILL NOT TAKE IT EASY!!!" she shouted. Her nostrils flared and her face turned beet red. She was about to explode; that was exactly what the *Inferno* wanted.

"Mom, you've gotta stop!" I said. "Stop!"

Everyone stared at me.

"Mom, you've gotta believe me. Lucky chewed the backscratcher, but it wasn't *really* Lucky," I said. "It was a demon or something that's possessed him. It's trying to get us all to fight. So is the car. The car's possessed, too!"

"See, told you he was nuts," Olivia said.

"No duh!" Elvis replied.

"What do you mean, he's possessed?" Mom said.

"I swear to God," I said. "He's possessed!"

Aunt Margie said, "I thought you didn't believe in God, Michael?"

"Just trust me on this."

Dad backed me up. "Trust him, dear."

Mom looked at Lucky. It was like he knew what we were saying. He opened his eyes even wider than usual and did a little pant that looked like a smile. He was trying to look cute.

"He's not possessed, Michael."

"His eyes turn red, his head spins in circles. Trust me, Mom—he's possessed!"

She pointed Lucky at me. "I don't see any red eyes."

"Try this," I said, pointing to Dad's plastic Virgin Mother on the dash. "Say some Catholic thing to Mary and touch Lucky to her."

"Huh?"

"Dear, just try it," Dad said, nodding.

She went along with us. Whatever had hold of Lucky's soul knew something bad was about to happen. He started fighting. "Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee," Mom said. "Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Lucky thrashed about in Mom's grip, but she was not about to let go.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," she said even louder, "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Lucky howled; his eyes finally glowed red. Olivia screamed and ran from the car. Aunt Margie sat frozen in her seat, paralyzed by utter terror. Mom touched Lucky to the figurine. He yelped, and his head smoked where he touched the Blessed Virgin.

"Amen," she said. She let Lucky go out of fear; he floated in mid-air! I knew he was about to do something; before he had a chance to react, I grabbed an Elvis statue, took a big swing, and knocked Lucky to the floorboard, out cold.

Mom was in shock—she wasn't even mad that I may have hit his molera. "We need to find a church..." she said.

Dad rushed into the convenience store

"Can I hel—"

Dad interrupted the cashier. "Is there a church around here?!"

"A couple," the cashier said. "What do you need?"

"An exorcism!"

The cashier tried not to laugh. "I don't know of any churches in town that do that. Who do you need exorcised?"

"Our Chihuahua!" Dad said.

The cashier laughed—he couldn't hold it back any longer. When he finally regained his composure he said, "There's a place called the Church of the Holy Visage up on Route 666, between Tohatchi and Naschitti. Probably about half an hour's drive. The guy who runs the place is a nutjob. He might help."

"Route 666?" Dad said.

"Yeah, I'm not making that up, either. Just a ways up to the right," the cashier said, pointing down the highway.

Dad ran back to the *Inferno* and we sped away. As we raced along I-40 for Route 666, Dad suggested we wrap Lucky in a sleeping bag, in case he woke up. Elvis and Olivia handed a sleeping bag to me without argument. Granted, it was mine, but for once we worked together. I helped Mom wrap Lucky up—just enough to give him air so he wouldn't suffocate, but tight enough to at least give us a fighting chance of controlling him if he woke up.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"The Church of the Holy Visage"

As Dad flew along Route 666 full-tilt, he dug through one of the bags we filled at the gas station and tore into a big bag of chips. When he was nervous, he liked snacking on things.

"James, you need to stop eating and keep your eyes on the road," Mom said.

"I can eat and drive at the same time, Mary."

That was true. My old man could eat Thanksgiving dinner in his lap while flying down the interstate at sixty-five miles an hour. Forget cup holders; he just shoved his drink between his legs and didn't care if it looked like he wet himself when he got up. His flat lap served as a tabletop where he could lay out a cheeseburger, French fries, and ketchup on some napkins and not be distracted by less-important things, like the traffic before him. On those occasions he pulled a sixteen-hour haul and needed more food than the average drive-thru could provide, he used everything to hold food and drink: the armrest on the door, the space between him and Mom, the dashboard—and even the floor on rare occasions.

There was no stopping his appetite for eating and driving at the same time; he believed in moving down the highway at all costs. The only thing he stopped for were side-of-the-road attractions, and those times we could no longer hold it and *really* had to use the bathroom. (Even then, he'd see if we could "hold it another fifty miles to the next rest stop?" even if we were a mile from one at the time. And if it was Elvis or me simply needing to pee, he was known to pass back a bottle or cup and tell us to fill it. He stopped that practice, though, the time we were driving to Yellowstone and Elvis decided it would be funny to "accidentally" spill a Coke bottle full of urine on me. The ensuing fight was one of the rare instances I actually defeated Elvis. It took everything Dad had to separate my hands from my little brother's throat!)

Mom usually asked Dad to stop on the side of the road when he wanted to eat on a trip, but to pull over would be admitting some kind of defeat in my father's mind. As long as he had a car packed with the children he sired and a fast-food meal in his lap as he maneuvered a huge, gas-guzzling American-made automobile down the road, he was a man!

Dad used Lucky's possession as an excuse to see just how fast the *Inferno* would go. Mom was so concerned about Lucky's well-being, she didn't care when he brought the car over one-hundred miles an hour, even though he was munching on chips while struggling to open a can of soda. She prayed out loud when he had us going one-forty on a straightaway, though.

"James, I'll open the pop for you; hand it here. Just keep your eyes on the road."

"I've got it," he said. Right as the pop-top made a little FWOOSH sound, Dad lost control of the *Inferno*!

We bounced from one side of Route 666's shoulder to the other—at over a hundred miles an hour! Dad dropped his chips and drink on the floorboard; he gripped the steering wheel like Gilligan and the Skipper on their fated three hour tour, just holding on for dear life and hoping for the best. He totally lost control, sending us into a spin. I don't know how many three-sixties we did; all I remember was hearing Mom pray. We skidded to a sudden stop in a poof of dust. When it cleared, we found ourselves safe and sound in the parking lot of The Church of the Holy Visage.

"Is everyone okay?!" Dad said.

None of us could speak. He looked at Mom, then in the rearview mirror at the rest of us, seeing we were all fine, just very shaken. We stared at the church.

It was a tiny mission at one time, the kind of place most towns restore and turn into tourist traps, but years of neglect told the story about this old church. Even the sign out front, a painted face of Christ meant to look like a stained glass pattern, looked ancient.

Dad grabbed the sleeping bag with Lucky inside and stepped from the *Inferno*. He looked back at the highway, smiling. Racing along a lonely old road with the engine wide open and living through an out of control skid with the needle on the speedometer almost pegged as far as it went made him feel manly, I'm sure—the kind of thing he only dreamed about. When the rest of us regained our composes, we piled out of the station wagon and went inside the church.

The interior was a continuation of what greeted us outside. The place echoed, creaked, and had a dusty look that reminded me of a movie set. Scavenged pews, chairs, and a podium before the altar were taken from other churches. As we walked up the center aisle, antique, ornate Catholic pews sat beside plainer Protestant pews. Folding wood chairs with faded, stenciled names like FIRST METHODIST CHURCH, BISBEE and MARY IMMACULATE sat

beside rented steel folding chairs. There were definitely plenty of places to sit, but I had the feeling none of the pews and chairs had seen the backside of a disciple in decades.

The altar consisted of a podium that was probably scrapped from one of the churches where the old chairs or pews were found. Behind the altar, a plain, white T-shirt was placed on the back wall about ten feet up. I thought I was seeing things, but if you looked hard enough, you could see a faint—almost glowing—image of Christ on the T-shirt. The image didn't appear to have been printed on the shirt. I looked around to see if there were any stained glass windows in the church where maybe a beam of light was shining through from outside, casting a stained glass image on the shirt. All the windows were boarded up—only a couple cracks let tiny beams of light shine through, illuminating particles of floating dust.

Flanking each side of the podium were pedestals surrounded by clear, acrylic cases. I walked up the aisle to see what the cases contained. In one case, a tortilla with a Shroud of Turin-looking Christ face on the surface. The other case contained a red mechanic's rag with Christ's face appearing in an oil stain. I almost laughed.

"Hello?" Dad said. "Hello?!"

Nothing.

"Is anybody here?!" Mom said.

A figure in a hooded robe stepped out from behind the altar, startling me. I wanted to run back down the aisle and into Mom's arms, but I stood my ground and looked. The robe was fashioned from the rag-tag dregs of what appeared to be holy robes from several denominations. As the figure stepped toward me, I saw the rubber fronts of green canvas sneakers poking out with each step.

"Greetings, weary travelers and welcome to the church," the figure said. "How may I help you?"

"We need an exorcism," Mom said.

He pulled the hood back, revealing his scruffy face. I don't think he was dirty, but he sure *looked* dirty. A scraggly beard stopped at his chest, and when he shook his head free from the robes, waist-length hair (some of it matting into dreadlocks), flopped all about. He looked homeless. He reminded me of Jesus for some reason.

"I am Brother Rob," he said. "I can help you. You may look at me and see a madman, but remember: there were those who believed Christ a madman, too."

"This has to be a joke," I thought.

"No, Michael—no joke," Brother Rob said, locking eyes. "I am for real."

I felt sick. "How did you know my name?" I said. "How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"There are things I just know; a gift from Him," he said, pointing to the T-shirt. "I was bathed in His light seven years ago to the day. I was a janitor in a church and an unbeliever just like you, but that would all change."

He took a deep breath and went on. "I was wearing that very T-shirt when it happened. I mopped all the floors and scrubbed all the toilets in the church where I worked. After locking the doors for the night, I went to the chapel and turned the lights out. The streetlights outside cast the images from the stained glass windows across the chapel floor. The unbeliever that I once was, I laughed and danced on the images of the saints and the Savior. When I stopped, I noticed his visage was cast onto my white T-shirt from the lights outside. I laughed at Him and left the chapel, but His image stayed on my T-shirt. I was bathed in His light and given sight. With His gift, I know things. That is how I know you saw a message on the wall of a bathroom stall signaling the battle that lies before you. That is how I know your name: Michael, the name of the Archangel who drove Satan out of Heaven." He looked at Mom and Dad.

"Your parents named you well."

I'm sure Dad thought the story was all well and good, but we were there for a purpose. "Can you help with the exorcism?" Dad said, hoping to get started before Lucky woke up.

"Indeed. May I see the afflicted," Brother Rob said.

I stepped back, behind Mom and Dad. Dad opened the sleeping bag enough for Lucky to poke his head out and struggle. The instant he saw Brother Rob, his eyes glowed red and he said, "DIE!!!" in a deep, gravely voice. Had it not been so terrifying, it would have been humorous!

"I see..." Brother Rob said. He stepped to the tortilla at the side of the altar and removed the case. He placed the tortilla in the palm of his hand and made his way toward Lucky, who started fighting Dad. The room went cold, like someone opened a door in the middle of winter.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, our God and Lord..." Brother Rob said.

"...strengthened by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God; of Blessed Michael the Archangel—" When he said "Michael," Lucky's head spun around backwards and looked right at me.

"MICHAEL..." Lucky said in the deep voice. A wind picked up from out of nowhere, almost knocking me over. "MICHAEL, IT'S TIME TO DIE!"

The church shook; it felt like an earthquake!

"YOU CANNOT STOP ME, FOOLISH CHILD!" Lucky said. "I AM TOO STRONG FOR YOU. I AM TOO STRONG FOR ALL OF YOU!"

The cracks in the boards covering the windows grew larger, bathing the interior of the church in white-hot beams of light.

"YOU SHALL ALL PERISH AND BURN WITH ME FOREVER IN THE PITS OF HELL!" Lucky said, punctuated by a sinister laugh.

Chairs and pews flew through the air, heading straight for Brother Rob, who calmly ducked out of the way. He shouted above the wind, continuing.

"...of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints; and powerful in the holy authority of our ministry, we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the devil."

Lucky wasn't finished. "BY THE 7 HEADS AND 70 HORNS OF THE BEAST, I WILL STRANGLE YOU WITH YOUR ENTRAILS, ENSLAVE YOUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN, AND LEAVE YOUR WORLD A SMOLDERING PIT WHERE NOTHING PROSPEROUS WILL EVER GROW AGAIN!"

Lucky, now frothing at the mouth and snapping his jaws, flew from the sleeping bag, through the air, straight at Brother Rob, who parried with the tortilla. He slapped Lucky in the head and shouted, "Be gone, demon!"

The force knocked Lucky back into Dad and me, sending us both to the ground. Lucky and the tortilla fell to the floor as well. The first thing I thought about was being on the floor with Lucky. I was convinced, in an instant, I'd have a possessed Chihuahua ripping my throat out and no one—not even Brother Rob—would be able to save me. There was no attack, however, but I did hear chewing.

"Lucky, no!" Mom shouted. Lucky wolfed down the Jesus tortilla.

"It is okay," Brother Rob said. "He is healed."

The twins laughed. "It's like a big holy wafer!"

I sat up in time to see Lucky taking his last bite of the flour sacrament. "Is he normal again?"

Dad looked at me. "Was he ever normal to begin with?" He helped me to my feet.

Mom bent over, clapped her hands, and Lucky jumped into her arms. He licked her face and wriggled about. He was still the rancid little creature he always was, but we all knew whatever had a grip on him was finally gone—we just sensed it and somehow knew he was free.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Mom said.

"Nothing," Brother Rob said. "Just be careful. The demon may be gone from your dog, but I see a greater evil ahead for all of you."

"The car!" I said.

"What about the car?" Brother Rob said.

Mom answered. "Our car is also possessed. 'Least that's what they say—I think it's just a piece of crap."

"Think you can fix that, too?" Dad said.

"I am not a mechanic," Brother Rob said. "I only perform exorcisms on living beings. There is nothing I can do for you, there. I am sorry."

Dad shook Brother Rob's hand. "You've done more than enough. Thank you."

"You are welcome."

We all said goodbye to Brother Rob and thanked him at least three times before leaving. I lagged behind as we made our way up the aisle. Dad opened the front door and the church flooded with radiant light, practically blinding us. I had to turn away. I thought it was my eyes adjusting; all the pews, chairs, and other things tossed about during Lucky's exorcism were right back in their place. For that moment, the church was one of the most beautiful things I ever laid eyes upon. It didn't matter that the pews were mismatched; it didn't matter that the chairs were a hodge-podge from other places. Something seemed so right to me at that moment...something I couldn't put my finger on, but welcomed.

Brother Rob looked at me. He winked and said, "Remember this, Michael. Remember, you have the power. Godspeed..."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Yes, It's True—Satan Owns My Father's Soul!"

I must confess, seeing Brother Rob in action threw a wrench in everything I believed. You hear about half-baked freaks all over the country claiming to work miracles, and all you can do is laugh at them. But seeing Brother Rob got me thinking...maybe there *was* something more. Like Dad said at Graceland, if I didn't believe in God, how could I believe Lucky was possessed? To believe in one phenomenon and not the other didn't make sense. I did a lot of thinking on our way to the Canyon; I wanted to keep thinking, but my family had more pressing issues on their minds.

"So what are we gonna do about the car?" Mom said.

"I think Michael's onto something," Dad said. "He thinks it feeds off our arguing. The more we argue, the worse the car acts up, right Michael?"

"Huh?" I was still thinking about Brother Rob.

"The car acts up from our arguing, right?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"I still hate this car, possessed or not," Mom said.

Dad felt a need to defend it, now that he could attribute all its problems to possession. "It's not that bad a car, really, if you look beyond the possession. It handles really well when we're not all arguing and it serves our needs. It's a fun car when you get down to it."

"Well, it does have more legroom than that crap Gremlin." Mom almost seemed to be warming up to the *Inferno*. She ran her hand along all the dials and levers on the dash. "It does have a peculiar charm, I suppose. Do you know what all these things do?"

"No," Dad said, looking a little nervous. "I haven't had time to read the owner's manual."

"Where is it?" Mom said.

"What?" Dad was trying to play dumb, but Mom wasn't about to give up.

"The owner's manual—where is it?"

"Oh...yeah..." Dad said, searching for an excuse. "I took it out because I planned on reading it. I left it at home."

Mom saw right through him. "I know you, James O'Brien. You wouldn't leave home without the owner's manual. It's gotta be in the glovebox. How do you get into this damn thing?"

"I don't know," Dad said, knowing Mom was getting warmer.

"Well there's gotta be a way in." She fumbled around with buttons, dials, and levers until finally triggering the switch. "There we go!" She dug around and found the owner's manual. She looked at the cover and read the quote from The Book of Revelation.

"Jesus Christ!"

"What?" Dad said, acting surprised.

"You liar!" Mom said. "The owner's manual's right here! You had to have seen it when you put paperwork in the glove compartment. How could you have seen this and not questioned it, James?!" She held the manual up for everyone to see. She dug around the glovebox some more, before pulling something out and reading it.

"Holy shit!"

"What?" Dad said. She held out the contract.

"The down payment was six-hundred sixty-six dollars, James. Didn't that trigger warning bells in your head?! You almost deserve all this, you're so stupid!"

"Now remember, dear. If we get mad, the car's going to act up," he said. "Take some deep breaths. You have to stay calm, or the car gets bad."

"I'm not gonna yell at you," Mom said, "but how could you fork over a check for six-hundred sixty-six dollars and not given things more thought. How could you have looked at the cover of the manual, seen the quote from Revelations, and not been just a little suspicious?"

"It's Revelation, not Revelations—"

"I don't care if it's from the Book of Christ Himself, James! How could you not have at least thought *something* a little weird was going on?!"

"Shh!" he said. "We don't want to anger the car." I could tell he tried coming up with a good excuse, but the best my old man could summon at that moment was, "I really liked the car. It's neat."

Mom read the contract; I never saw Dad more nervous. After a couple minutes of uneasy silence, Mom smiled and said, "So we're not supposed to yell or get frustrated about things, right?"

"Right," Dad said, knowing Mom was about to drop a bomb. "Why?"

"I just don't want you getting mad when you see you signed your soul over to Satan."

"What?!" Dad hit the brakes so hard, the car went into a skid. He pulled over to the shoulder.

"Take some deep breaths, James," Mom said. "You gotta stay calm or the car acts up. Remember?"

"Oh, crap!"

"I can't believe you of all people didn't read this before signing it."

"I figured it was a standard contract," he said. "I wanted to get behind the wheel." He tried reading over Mom's shoulder. "What's it say?"

"Exactly what I told you," Mom said. "By taking the car and signing the contract, you give Satan your soul for all eternity when you die."

"Can I get it back?" Dad asked. "Is there a refund clause?"

"There's fine print," Mom said, while pulling her reading glasses from her purse. "Lemme see what it says." She mumbled to herself as she scanned the document. "Oh, here we go! 'While the signee forfeits his soul to Almighty Satan, standard means of redemption apply. One: Almighty Satan reserves the right to trade signee's soul with any party Almighty Satan chooses. In this occurrence, rights to signee's soul transfer to the party with which Almighty Satan traded. Two: if biblical prophecy—as stated in the Book of Revelation—occurs and the Rapture arrives before signee dies *and* signee is a Christian, his soul will be placed in turnaround and revert back to the property of God Almighty. Three: if the *Inferno* is destroyed by an act of God, the signee's soul will revert back to the original owner and not be claimed by Almighty Satan at the time of signee's death.'"

"That last one sounds the most promising," I said.

"Yeah, but if a guy who can drive a demon from Lucky can't do the same thing for the car...it doesn't sound very good."

"Well, according to this," Mom said, "it's gotta come straight from the Big Guy upstairs anyway."

"Those don't sound like the best odds."

"Ya never know," Aunt Margie said. "He works in mysterious ways..."

* * *

We drove along for a couple hours, all of us silent, thinking about the contract. Before leaving New Jersey, I was a skeptic, but knowing Satan owned your father's soul could change your mind. The whole trip, from thinking it was a pilgrimage of sorts, to seeing Brother Rob—it all seemed to be adding up. I was right: something big *was* going to happen at the canyon, and somehow I knew I would be an important part of that event.

The twins finally broke the silence. "Are we almost to the Grand Canyon?"

"We're getting closer," Dad said, "but we'll be going in the morning, after we sleep."

"Are we going to stop someplace where we can roast marshmallows?" they said.

"I don't think your Mom will ever sleep outside again," Dad said. "I think it's hotels the rest of this trip, so we probably won't get a chance to roast any marshmallows, guys. Sorry."

"BOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!"

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"Salvation at the Rim of Hell"

"Garsh, it sure is purty," Aunt Margie said. "I can see why Maw always came here."

"Yeah..." Mom said. She pointed things out to Lucky, who seemed just as mesmerized as the rest of us.

We stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon in awe. Mom and Aunt Margie didn't smoke. The twins took in the view, although they couldn't separate themselves from a bag of fresh marshmallows. We all just stood there staring at the big orange hole in the ground my grandmother loved so dearly.

Looking at that big hole, I realized what Dad meant when he told me there are things bigger than our thoughts you just can't explain. I understood why he did the backflip from the top of the Cadillac; I wanted to leap into the canyon for no other reason than I was overwhelmed by a feeling that I couldn't explain.

"Remember how Maw said it's like it takes your soul down to the river and cleans it?" Aunt Margie said. "I think I see what she means. It *is* healing."

"It's gorgeous!" Mom said. For the first time I can remember, Mom was humbled by something. The beauty of the canyon transcended things like pink lawn flamingos, bingo cards, and themed casinos. At that very moment, she probably would have admitted the canyon was as beautiful as the King of Rock n Roll himself!

"So what do you guys think?" Dad said.

"It's great," the twins said.

I was practically moved to tears. The best I could get out was a long, "Wooowwwwww..."

"How about a picture?" Dad said. He ran off to get his tripod and camera before any of us could answer. He set everything up, framing us through the viewfinder.

"Okay, everybody get together," he said.

We huddled together, putting our arms around each other like a real, fully-functioning family. Elvis didn't make any smart-alec remark when I put my arm around him—he simply wrapped his arm around me and smiled for the camera. Olivia didn't make any sour faces, and even Lucky behaved. The canyon did somehow change us. I felt that everything from that moment

forward would be different in some way, like we'd all get along and be a model family.

Dad triggered the camera's auto-timer and rushed into the picture beside my Mom. "Say cheese!" he said.

"CHEESE!"

The image the camera captured is one of my most prized possessions. Dad had finally—after years and years of trying—snapped his perfect family photo! We looked happy standing there as the morning sun poked out through the dark clouds in the distance, covering everything in the kind of lighting you only seem to see in movies. In the years that followed, when the twins acted up, when Lucky was on a tear, or when Mom and Dad were arguing, all I had to do is look at that photo and remember that deep-down where it mattered, we were a family.

"Well, I suppose it's time to do what we came for," Mom said. "Time to scatter Mama's ashes just like she wanted," Mom said. It seemed a fitting event for Grandma's fiftieth trip to the canyon.

"I'll go get the urn," Dad said, pointing to approaching clouds. "Need to get moving because it looks like rain." As he trotted back to the *Inferno*, a few fat drops fell here and there. He came back with the urn and one of the garbage bags from Clyde McAllister's Civil War Museum and Alligator Village. He covered the camera with the bag and handed the urn to Mom.

Mom set Lucky on her shoulder and carefully took the lid off the urn so the wind didn't blow its contents free. Aunt Margie reached out, and they both held my grandmother's cremains. I figured someone would say something special, but seeing the two of them sharing in one of the most special moments of their lives, I realized words would have only ended up getting in the way. They stepped to the rim of the canyon and I thought I was going to see a perfect moment.

I should have known better.

Mom tugged at the urn and said, "Are you gonna let go?" to Aunt Margie.

"Are *you* gonna let go?!" Aunt Margie said, standing up to her big sister. Sibling rivalry was turning a beautiful moment into something ugly.

"I'm the oldest!"

"Only by ten minutes!"

"Still, it's the way Mama would have wanted it," Mom said.

Aunt Margie wasn't about to give up. She tugged a little harder and said, "She woulda wanted me to scatter them. She liked me best!"

"No she didn't!" Mom said, pulling the urn back to her side.

"Yes she did."

"You're wrong as usual, Marge. She *told* me she liked me best."

"Look me in the eye and say that, Mary."

"No!"

"You can't because you're a liar! Maw did so like me best!"

"Did not!"

"Did to!"

I couldn't take it anymore. We were there to give Grandma a fitting send-off, not watch two grown children fight over their mother's mortal remains and argue which one was more loved. I didn't pack into the back seat of the *Inferno* only to drive cross-country just to see my mom and aunt fight.

"Both of you!" I yelled. "Stop it!"

"Leave us alone, Michael," Mom said. "You don't understand!"

"What's to understand about two greedy sisters who are too dense to see that maybe their mother loved them both equally?!"

"He's right, you two," Dad said.

They both shouted, "Shut up!"

I tried reasoning with them. "What about the car? You guys keep fighting and the car's gonna do something."

"Screw that piece of shit car!" Mom yelled. "I'm here to dump my mother's ashes and damnit, I'm gonna dump them if I have to throw my little sister in to do it!"

"You're both doing a disservice to Grandma!" I said.

"She'd understand, Michael" Aunt Margie said. "And she'd want *me* to dump her ashes!"

"No she wouldn't!" Mom said. "She'd want *me* to dump them, you white trash bitch!" (Like Mom *wasn't* white trash!)

"Don't call me names, Mary!"

Mom was going for the jugular. "I'll call you whatever I want, you hillbilly sow!"

"That's why Maw liked me best," Aunt Margie said, almost crying. "I'm not mean, like you."

"You guys, shut up!" I yelled. The twins joined in the argument.

"You shut up, Mister Michael Know-It-All!"

Dad had enough. "EVERYBODY! SHUT THE HELL UP!"

With that, the clouds changed to a deep bruised color, unable to hold their contents. Sheets of rain broke loose and were driven down by the hard wind. Lucky was almost knocked from Mom's shoulder and into the canyon. He took

shelter in Mom's blouse. Mom, Dad, Aunt Margie, and the twins kept yelling at one another; I was the only one who was thinking about the car. Before I could say something, the car had everyone's attention, though.

BRRRAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRR!!!

The sound was half mechanical, half unholy! A deep growl punctuated the engine's revving. We all looked at the *Inferno*, which rocked back and forth, feeding off our anger! When Mom slapped Aunt Margie across her face, it finally happened. With a squeal of tires, the *Inferno* bore down on my family. Dad instinctively pushed the twins and me free from the charge, but Mom and Aunt Margie stood directly in the way. For the first time ever, Lucky abandoned Mom, leaping from her blouse and rushing to safety. I looked up just in time to see Mom and Aunt Margie pull at the urn so hard, they lost their grips and fell back, out of the *Inferno*'s path.

BAM!

Mom and Aunt Margie were safe, but the *Inferno* slammed into Grandma's urn, sending her ashes scattering over the edge of the canyon. The only good thing was the car went over with Grandma's cremains and exploded on the canyon's floor, sending a huge fireball all the way up near us, reminding me of my nightmare the night before leaving on the trip. We got up and looked. Grandma's ashes floated on the heat thermals from the burning car and scattered across the canyon on the winds. When she was gone, we all watched the *Inferno* burn until the fire went out. I tried thinking of something to say, but was speechless.

The twins were the first to speak: "At least the car's gone."

"So's all our stuff," Mom said.

I lost it! We were all almost killed by an act of greed and all they could think of was the car finally cashing it in with all our stuff!

"Forget the car!" I shouted, "do you really think that solves our problems?! Look at us! We just had a possessed station wagon scatter Grandma's ashes into the Grand Canyon because two grown women were too stubborn to give their mother a proper send-off, like she wanted. And what about Dad's soul, now? How's he gonna get his soul back now that the car's been destroyed by our stupidity and greed and not by an act of God? You two make me sick!"

Mom turned my anger toward Aunt Margie. "It's all your fault."

"It's all *your* fault," Aunt Margie said.

The twins saw a chance to take another dig at me. "You make us sick, Michael Barfbag!"

I gave up trying to be the level-headed one; the *Inferno* was gone and so was Dad's soul. I was going to drop to their level, and family be damned if I was going to care about what I said. I turned to the twins. "Shut the hell up, you fuckin' retards!"

"You shut up!" Olivia said, stepping toward me. I punched her in the arm. When Elvis charged me, I was ready. I kicked him between the legs and started pounding on him. All I remember is his bloody nose, Olivia screaming and kicking me, and my grip on his shirt so tight that Dad couldn't pull me off. We all fought each other: me taking on the twins; Mom and Lucky working over Aunt Margie. No matter how hard Dad tried, he couldn't pull me off Elvis.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

The Inferno!

BEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!

We all turned to see it right back where we left it, revving its engine!

BRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!

"Oh...shit..." the whole family said in unison, like the twins. The twins cried and were quickly joined by Aunt Margie. Mom prayed, and Dad stepped in front of us all, as though that would protect us from a car sent from Hell to destroy our family. I pushed my way past him, remembering what Brother Rob said. I had a mission; my name and the situation was all the proof I needed to summon some confidence.

"Okay...everybody just be cool. Remember...get along," I said.

Mom and Aunt Margie shut up, but still continued shooting dirty looks back and forth. The car kept revving.

"Even your thoughts, guys!" I shouted over the wind and rain. "You gotta get along!" Lightning hit a nearby tree, splitting it in half.

"Just get along," I said.

Lightning flashed and thunder crashed. A cloud swirled directly above us. Something big was about to happen.

"Just get along..."

I was asking for too much, apparently. "Who died and made you God?" Olivia said. Elvis quickly recovered enough to laugh.

I was at the end of my rope. "Why the hell do I even try?"

"YAAAHHHHHH!!!" I shouted as I charged the *Inferno*. I threw myself onto the slippery hood!

"Take me, damnit!" I shouted. "Take me and spare my messed up family!" The *Inferno* bounced up and down, trying to throw me, but I got a grip on the

windshield wipers. "Take me and spare my brow-beaten father who works his ass off for a family that doesn't appreciate him! I love him, damnit!"

The right wiper broke free as the car shook violently. I gripped the left wiper so tightly, it drew blood. "Take me and spare my hillbilly aunt!" I yelled skyward. "She may eat crap that turns my stomach, but she's got a big heart!" I felt the hood pop open beneath me. Green goop spewed from the radiator and through the cracks in the grill. "Take me and spare my overbearing mother! Her bark is worse than her bite and I know, no matter how many times she threatens us with that damn sauce ladle, she'd never do anything to hurt us!"

The *Inferno* levitated! I didn't know if I was hurting it, or simply pissing it off, but either way, something was happening. "Take me and spare Mom's rat-dog, Lucky! I don't care if he pukes on everything I own! If he makes Mom happy, I can live with him, damnit!" The *Inferno* spun in circles; I held onto the left wiper blade for my life, like a bull rider in a rodeo! "Take me and spare my freaky brother and sister! I may not get along with them and they may torment me 'til the day I die, but damnit, I really do love them!"

The *Inferno* did everything it could to throw me: spinning in circles, jolting up and down, and spewing steam and hot green goop from the engine. I looked toward the heavens. "Are you listening to me?! Huh?! Damnit, I'm talking to you!"

Nothing.

"Listen to me, damnit! Prove to me you're up there!"

Nothing at all. I was about to give up.

"Why the hell do I even bother?! JUST DAMN THIS CAR! DAMN IT STRAIGHT TO HELL!!!"

CRACK!!!

A bolt of lightning hit the *Inferno*, blowing it to pieces and knocking me back. I hit the edge of the canyon and bounced in!

"MICHAEL!!!" everyone shouted. They rushed to the rim and looked down, where I held on to a rock for my life.

"There he is," Mom shouted.

Dad got down on his stomach and leaned over. "Quick! Everyone hold my feet!"

Mom, the twins, and Aunt Margie grabbed Dad's feet to lower him down to me. Even Lucky joined in, grabbing Dad's pant cuff and pulling back.

"You're too heavy, James!" Mom said.

"I'll do it!" Olivia said, already climbing down Dad's back. They pulled Dad up so his waist was on the canyon's edge and held him there. He grabbed Olivia's

feet and lowered her to me. I remember thinking, "She's too weak!" when I saw her, but when we grabbed each other's hands, nothing was going to separate us.

"Pull!" Dad shouted.

I was pulled to safety and smothered in hugs.

"Thank God, you're alive!" Mom said, looking skyward. "Thank you!"

"See, told you there's a God," the twins said.

"He sure works in mysterious ways," Aunt Margie added.

We turned back to the *Inferno*. It was really gone.

"How are we gonna git home?" Aunt Margie said.

"Mary still has her purse and money," Dad said. "We'll fly home."

"All our stuff..." Mom said.

"We still got each other," Aunt Margie said. "That's what really matters. And I know God done kilt that devil car—that means Jimmy gets his soul back!"

"Yeah!" the twins said.

We all wandered toward the crater where the *Inferno* was just moments before. Nothing remained, except a small fire and the windshield wiper I pulled free. I picked it up and said, "I'm gonna hold onto this."

"Why?" Mom said.

"I just think I'm supposed to."

Dad entered the crater; something caught his eye in the center, near the fire. I stepped down near him to take a look as the twins wandered off toward some bushes.

Dad bent over, picked something up, and kissed it. "What's that?" I said. He turned around holding the Plastic Mary figurine.

"Hold onto this while you're at it," he said.

The twins came down with six sticks and handed them out. They grabbed some marshmallows from their bag, put them on the sticks, and passed the bag around. We all roasted marshmallows as the rain stopped and the skies cleared.

I started singing. "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall..."

Then Dad: "Ninety-nine bottles of beer..."

Mom and Aunt Margie joined in—Lucky howled along, but this time, didn't tell me to die or burn in Hell. "Take one down, pass it around..."

And finally, the twins: "Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall..."

"Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall," we all sang. "Ninety-eight bottles of beer. Take one down, pass it around...ninety-seven bottle of beer on the wall..."

I'd like to say the events of that trip made us the perfect *Leave it to Beaver* family, but they didn't. We still argued, we still got on each other's nerves—and we still loved one another unconditionally, despite our setbacks. There's no such thing as that perfect 50s sitcom family; there never was, but Mom and Dad, the twins and me, and that little rat-dog stayed together through good and bad. People on the block talked behind our backs—I knew what they said about my mother and I knew they wondered why my father stuck with her throughout the years. That trip showed me what Dad saw in her; that trip showed me what we all saw in each other. That trip showed me we may be "dysfunctional," but you know what? There's function in dysfunction, and that's good enough for me.

EPILOGUE

"Where Are they Now?"

Aunt Margie spent the rest of her days in the mountains of West Virginia, selling beat-up cars and fridges with Uncle Otis. Daryl lost his life three years after our visit, while out hunting with Debbie. Everyone who knew them suspected it wasn't a "hunting accident" at all, but no charges were ever brought against Debbie.

The Twins wrote a series of successful, no-holds barred self-help books, which led to their very own daytime TV talk show: *Get a Life!* They travel the country giving "motivational speeches" and have their very own brand of marshmallows on the market.

Mom won the country's largest lottery on Lucky's seventh birthday. She found a couple investors and used the money to open a casino in Atlantic City called *Lucky's Sevens*. She swoons every time she hears "Love Me Tender" on the radio, swearing up and down the King of Rock-n-Roll sang it just for her.

With money brought in from Mom's casino, Dad was able to fulfill a life-long dream and open a specialty shop called *Another Roadside Attraction*, where he sells highway memorabilia and tacky oddities, like jackalope heads with glowing red light-up eyes. He now has a valid excuse for his long summer cross-country treks; he even gets to write them off as a business expense.

Lucky lived to the ripe old age of twenty-one. He was evil to the bitter end and is forever immortalized in Dad's store, where he's stuffed and mounted (complete with red eyes of his own), right next to the cash register.

And me? I'm a travel writer now, but you know that already. I've got a wife and four great kids (twin girls and twin boys). We go to the Grand Canyon on vacation whenever we can. When the kids ask why it's always the Canyon, I tell them the same thing Grandma always told me: "It's healing." They say they don't understand, but I have a feeling—just like me—one day they will...

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Even though this story crawled from my mind, books don't happen on their own. Living with a writer is no easy task—my wife, Cynthia Griffith, has proven her patience in the 20+ years we've been together. My mother, Mary Salerno, has been putting up with me for 43+ years. I'm lucky to have their support.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Christopher Gronlund helps and entertains people by moving words around pages and screens. His writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, comic books, and the Web. Christopher blogs at [The Juggling Writer](#). You can listen to him read *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* for free at [roadtripfromhell.com](#). His personal website can be found loitering at [christophergronlund.com](#). If you like Twitter, check out [@cgronlund](#).

If you're interested in what Christopher plans to release next, you can get a sneak peek of his next novel, *Promise*, [right here](#). For a sneak peek of his novella, *Old Man*, [go here](#).

ABOUT THE BOOK

Like a good road trip, *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* (HCWWPD) had quite a few stops along the way. Initially a short story idea, it was clear the O'Briens' tale couldn't be contained in just 2,500 – 5,000 words. So, when I was 21, I decided to write a novel...only I didn't know *how* to write a novel. A few chapters in, and I set the story aside for almost a decade.

When I revisited HCWWPD, it wasn't as a novel, but as a screenplay that went on to advance in the Austin Film Festival's "Heart of the Screenplay" competition (comedy category). From there, it received the attention of Castle Rock Entertainment. There was strong interest in the screenplay, but Warner Brothers was in the process of taking over Castle Rock Entertainment; sadly, there wasn't *as* much interest from the new development team. Other interest followed, but obviously, HCWWPD never got the green light as a movie.

After sitting as a screenplay for awhile, I thought, "Wouldn't this be a great graphic novel?" but the comic book artists I once worked with all went on to bigger things and didn't have the time to work on a proposal. (I got my start as a writer in independent comic books. I'd *still* love to see HCWWPD as an original graphic novel.) So, again, the story sat.

Several more years passed. I finally had the skill and discipline as a writer to tackle a novel. It only made sense to write HCWWPD, using the screenplay as an outline. Agents who read the novel liked it, but felt it was too quirky to represent. I moved on to querying weekly alternative newspapers, seeing if they'd like to serialize the story. There was an overwhelming enthusiasm for the idea, but sadly, there was just no room in the interested newspapers. I shelved HCWWPD and moved on to other writing.

And then the e-book boom hit.

I had self published some comic books in the 90s, so why not publish an e-book years later? I fought the urge to rewrite HCWWPD, opting to release the version agents and editors liked, but felt was too quirky. The story's finally come full circle, parking itself on your e-reader. It's been worth the trip for me; I hope you've enjoyed the ride as well. Thank you for taking time out to read *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors*.

— **Christopher Gronlund**

INTERVIEW

The Existentialist Minotaur vs. The Juggling Writer

This is an interview I did about *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* and writer with [Shawn Kupfer](#), author of the *47 Echo* series.

* * *

Folks, I'm proud to present an interview today with a fascinating writer, a good friend, and a fellow geek. Christopher Gronlund has written a lot, but what I've read and loved is a novel called *Hell Comes With Wood Paneled Doors*. Here's the blurb:

When Michael O'Brien and his father, James, buy a new car just in time for the family's summer vacation, James signs over more than the title to his old AMC Gremlin in his rush to buy the brand new Inferno station wagon.

Joining them on the trip are Michael's creepy younger siblings, Elvis and Olivia; his overbearing mother, Mary, and her pet Chihuahua, Lucky; his backwoods aunt, Margie; and the cremated remains of his grandmother, June, whose dying wish was to have her ashes scattered in the Grand Canyon.

Can the O'Briens pull together to defeat the possessed station wagon, or will the forces of evil destroy the family in the process? Find out in this humorous coming-of-age story.

Sounds pretty great, right? Trust me, it is. Christopher was nice enough to take an hour and answer some questions for me. It's a bit longer than my usual post, but totally worth it.

Shawn: Question the First (imagine a minotaur standing in your way in a large, circular maze): What's your secret origin story? How did you start writing?

Christopher: I grew up wanting to be an artist. Somewhere along the way, though, I did better in English classes than art. The first time I thought about writing as something more than just a school thing was when the movie *Time Bandits* came out. I made the connection that "somebody wrote that!" and I wanted to do that. Several years later, I read Stephen King's *Different Seasons*

And John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and I knew I wanted to write, even though I kept it until myself until my early 20s.

S: Now, I know you have a comics background, as well. How'd you get into that?

C: I moved to a college town so a friend who got in could have me as a roommate. I worked selling encyclopedias door to door, and a guy I worked with— an artist —was really into comic books. I got back into comic books and worked on scripts to give him something to draw. At a comic book convention I met an editor named Rick Klaw who bought the first thing I ever wrote for publication, a 12-page story for a horror anthology called *Creature Features* that was eventually published by MOJO Press.

S: It's always a gamble when comics creators decide, "hey, I'm going to write a novel now." I've only seen a few cases where I really liked the results — Neil Gaiman, Warren Ellis, you, to name a few. What was the transition like for you? Are novels easier or harder than comics for you?

C: The artists I worked with on comics either quit or got jobs with larger companies that paid well. So when I found myself without artists to work with — since I was writing scripts — I jumped to screenplays. *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* started as a screenplay. After a couple close calls with the screenplay, I decided to jump to novels since that's what I was always most interested in. I used the screenplay for *HCWWPD* as the outline for the novel. (My first.) I find comic books easier because there's more collaboration. I enjoy writing novels more than anything, though. I grew up in a family that loved reading, so to finally be skilled enough to write an actual book was a bigger rush than anything else I'd ever written up to that point.

S: Since we moved on to novels, there, let's talk about *HCWWPD*. I'm always fascinated by where people's story ideas come from. How did you come up with the story for this one?

C: Before tackling novels, I worked on short stories. When I started submitting stories, I started using the *Writer's Market Novels and Short Stories* guide for places to submit writing to. There was a small publication solely geared toward station wagon enthusiasts. I thought, "A road trip novel in a possessed station wagon would be cool," but it was a bigger story than they accepted. So it sat in the back of my mind until I was ready to write it. I grew up taking road trips with family and older siblings, and there was a certain hell to the trips that I now look back on with fond memories. I wanted to use the *Inferno* (the possessed station wagon in the book) to symbolize the hell that is cramming into a car with family for days or weeks on the road.

S: Like Sartre might say, “Hell is other people.” (OK, he did say that — and yes, the minotaur has read Sartre. He’s existentialist.) Anywho, one thing that really struck me about the book is how vivid the characters and setting come across. I could see these people, and see the places you describe. What’s your secret for making the settings and people seem so real in a novel that’s full of paranormal elements?

C: I try not to be too descriptive. I like giving a reader just enough to form what they’re going to see in their head whether I get too descriptive or not. I tend to observe more than take part, so when I’m in a place I think more about how it makes me feel instead of being a part of the place. So it’s never been too difficult for me to put a reader in a place. As far as the people... I used to be shy, but wanted to be more outgoing, so I really watched what made people click. Most characters I write are archetypes of some sort with a couple special things to set them apart from just being a stock character. Even though there are paranormal elements in HCWWPD, they mean nothing without the characters and the way they react to it all.

S: Indeed. I’m of the opinion that stories should be about people and their reactions to things rather than the things themselves. Now, one more character question: the mother and father in the book —James and Mary — are extremely well-drawn, which makes it, to me, a book anyone who was ever a kid can identify with. Anything specific that inspired those two characters?

C: Mary is the only character I ever really based on a real person. My mom’s mother loved Vegas and all kinds of tacky things, so there’s a little bit of her in Mary. Other than that, I wanted to make Mary almost cartoonish, but real enough so the times she shows love or does something that breaks away from the archetype that it’s believable. With James, I thought it would be funny if a level-headed, handsome guy married the Queen of Kitsch. Take that and make each character love their kids in very strong, but different ways and it all came together.

S: We’ll talk more writer stuff in a bit, but I feel I should tell you that the peak oil crisis hit while we were discussing Mary and James. Yeah, I was caught off-guard, too. The world is now a desolate, anarchist wasteland, much like the Australian documentary “The Road Warrior.” The Great Humungous is even tooling around out there on a dune buggy with his speedo and hockey mask. What is your survival plan? What equipment do you take with you as you head out into the world? Who do you team up with?

C: I definitely take my wife because she’s smarter than me. A dog is essential. Some smart friends who actually spend too much time seriously

thinking of this kind of thing would have to come along, too. Instead of doing battle on the highways where we're outnumbered, we'd find a secluded place and lay low. While others battle for oil and gas, we have a water source and track down books and other relics lost during the opening phases of the apocalypse. When the battles are over, we emerge from our fortress of solitude smarter and healthier than those who took to the roads.

S: Aha. The Lisa Simpson Plan. Dig it. Just don't let Stephen Hawking in on it — he'll just be sarcastic with his robo-voice. So, now that we've conquered the apocalypse, what's next for you? What are you working on?

C: Yes, the Zen of Lisa! As far as what's next: I'm currently shopping around a novel about a recently divorced celebrity chef who moves from Chicago to a small town in northern Wisconsin that doesn't live up to his dreams. While I'm doing that, I'm starting a novel about a female magician and her rise to fame in the 40s and 50s.

S: Final Question (the Minotaur looks frazzled at having been beaten): As a guy who writes novels (and screenplays, which is a conversation for a future post) and digs movies, who would you choose to direct a movie adaptation of HCWWPD?

C: Robert Rodriguez or Rob Zombie. I don't think it could get much more perfect than either of them at the helm.

S: Awesome! I'd dig either. Thanks for dropping by (the Minotaur says sadly as he points to a brightly lit "Exit" sign). Any parting words?

C: Thanks for some cool questions, Minotaur—I'm sorry you were the first creature that made me feel like a badass when I killed your brethren playing Dungeons and Dragons in the early 80s. Other than that, I hope HCWWPD puts a smile on people's faces. While it's a little different than some of the stuff I'm doing now, I'm still very fond of the story.

ESSAYS

In the spring of 2012, followers of *The Juggling Writer* and people who follow my social media feeds were asked to share road trip stories for the chance to win a Kindle Touch...and the obscure fame that comes with having an essay in the back of *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors*. People actually sent stuff, so hop in the backseat and hold on because here we go!

The Red Highway

“When you cross into Illinois, watch out for animals.”

That is the advice I received from four different people when they heard I would be driving north. My sister was going to spend the summer in Michigan, and I opted to help her drive and take a plane back. She drove most of the day, and when we stopped for dinner, I took over.

My sister could sleep through a death metal concert on top of a Marshall stack. Once she dropped off in the passenger seat, I was on my own. Of course I hadn't napped on the way up, as half my purpose was to keep her company. The other half of my purpose got more difficult as the night went on.

My first warning sign was the obviously erroneous feeling that the car was not moving. The speedometer said otherwise, but I would have to move the wheel slightly to ensure myself of our forward movement. Our path was surrounded by trees and the occasional field, so there were no cues from which to judge the road. As soon as I felt somewhat normal, the feeling would return: I was sitting in a parked car enveloped by white noise.

The yellow lane markers in the center of the highway blurred into one continuous ribbon, and I shook my head. This was the only visual clue I could latch onto, as the rest of the scene was whirring darkness. Around 3 a.m., those lines started to float.

Logically, I knew they were not floating. I calculated how long it had been since I slept, and determined that my eyes couldn't be trusted. My brain could, I was still aware that there was no real floating going on. But those little yellow dashes continued to pulsate and rise off of the pavement like ghosts, daring me to cross them. I stuck with the notion that if I wasn't fooled by a small optical illusion brought on by exhaustion, then there was nothing to worry about yet. However, anything else outside the norm would have to be evaluated quickly and with suspicion. This is the state I was in when I reached the bridge.

The bridge crossed into Illinois, that's what the sign told me. My punchy brain perked up: there was a piece of string tied to this event. I was supposed to be wary of some incoming hazard. A good twenty feet from the end of the bridge, I remembered. Watch out for animals. I hunkered down in my seat and curled my fingers over the steering wheel, slowing down. This game just jumped up a degree of difficulty.

The first thing I saw in Illinois was a color: a bright splash of red. I took a second too long to process the new data, then swerved to avoid striking my first animal. A deer carcass with the head almost completely removed lay in the middle of the highway. My headlights caused the red puddle to take on an almost neon quality, and I felt a bit queasy as I righted the car. No sooner had I returned to my lane, when another animal corpse forced me to the side.

This one was smaller, but much worse for wear. Its species could not be determined from the leftover evidence, but I didn't stare too long. In my limited view, I could make out another, then another, then three or four more. I checked my sanity and realized I really was seeing a grisly sampling of the local fauna. My first two minutes driving in Illinois was an obstacle course of bloody lumps, swaths of red crisscrossing the road.

After a few miles, the roadkill incidents became fewer and farther between. The lane markers stopped floating, and I drove until dawn.

— *Deacon McClendon*

Where She Stops, Nobody Knows

At Christmas 1972, Bill and I rescued a pregnant friend from having to drive her aging Renault from Toronto to Calgary, the only adult with a hyperactive toddler as her passenger.

We left at noon on Christmas day. Midnight saw us through the blizzard and unplowed roads in a motel room in Michilimackinac. We looked forward to sailing through northern Michigan's gorgeous winter forests the next day in the sunshine.

By contract, we had to be back in Toronto in four days. Our limited time necessitated taking the roads at maximum possible speed. That meant a few breath-taking curves and hills, but Bill was a highly skilled racing driver and I wasn't really worried. I gazed blythly about until he didn't slow for a curve.

Flattened against the passenger door by the centrifugal force of our turn, I gasped in horror as Bill smacked his foot repeatedly against the brake pedal. My heart pounded faster with each stomp. No brakes!

Northern Michigan was all high hills and forest with very twisty roads. Thank goodness the car had a standard transmission so we could gear down to reduce speed. Bill deliberately stalled the engine to bring us to a coasting halt at the next service station.

Which turned out to have a teenager on pump duty only. It was a holiday, after all. We tried about five more garages that day, but no-one was about who could help us.

The next three days were continuous strain.

A Bismark service station was our last ditch attempt for help in the US. Bill ended his plea for assistance with, "Won't you just take a look at it?"

The mechanic looked over his shoulder at our car waiting outside the bay doors like a puppy begging to come in, "I'm lookin'," he said.

When we finally crossed into Canada, we learned that the nearest dealer was back east along the TransCanada in Regina. Time didn't allow backtracking.

Grimly, I took the wheel. Surely the flat Prairie couldn't be too much of a challenge after all we'd driven through.

We called them Prairie Dog Mounds. Just enough of a rise that the little Renault picked up a whack of speed coming down the other side.

The eastbound lane was covered with long fingers of polished, compacted snow so deadly to vehicle control that the lane had been closed by the RCMP. Using it was out of the question.

To our right was a plow ridge about four or five feet high. Beyond the plow ridge, we could see only flat snow; no idea what was under it.

Trapped in the single westbound lane, we topped a prairie dog mound to see four vehicles ahead of us doing about half our speed.

The screaming was me, "What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?!" Bill growled, "To the right!"

I glanced at the looming plow ridge and doubted. Strongly.

Bill knew. "I'll help," he yelled as he grabbed the wheel. With our three hands steering, we drove up the plow bank—still travelling about sixty mph—over the top of it and down onto what I feverishly hoped was a wide, firm shoulder or a flat farm field.

The faces of the drivers we passed said it all. What kind of crazed maniacs were these idiots careening along on the wrong side of the plow ridge? Shocked jaws dropped and tongues wagged as we passed.

I remember that I kept yelling, "Can I go back now?" at Bill, who kept insisting that we stay driving in no man's land until we were well clear of the other cars.

Then, once again came the terrifying crunch of the plow ridge as we drove up and over it.

I know that I shook all the rest of the way into Moose Jaw.

I'll always remember Moose Jaw. That's where I stopped the car by driving around and around the gas pumps in a service station, until we'd reduced speed enough to stall.

I was also driving for the Calgary stop. I circled the parking lot at the motel until we'd slowed considerably. Then I plugged the nose of the car into a snowdrift, climbed out of the vehicle and refused ever to enter it again.

Later, friends asked why I didn't refuse to re-enter the car back in Michigan.

I've never really had an adequate answer for that.

— *Jan Wristen*

What Ever Happened to the Statue of Tomorrow?

My pal Jeremy and I have always made good traveling companions, since the first time we scammed a Camaro from a dealership for a "test drive" when we were sixteen. We tried to use the car to pick up girls, though we would have had no idea what to do if any actually took the bait. But we've been friends for more than half our lives, and even now, we travel to Las Vegas once a year. We might rent a car while we're there and take a road trip to Area 51, but compared to some of the drives we've done, that six-hour round trip barely registers.

In college (my second junior year, and Jeremy's senior year), we decided to finally take a Spring Break jaunt down to Florida. My folks lived in Tampa, and we were in Omaha, but taking a flight... well, that would have just shown weakness. Instead, we decided to make the 24-hour-plus drive in my leased 1998 Chevy S-10, and do the entire thing in one shot. The plan was to get to sleep early on Friday night, then leave around 6:00 Saturday morning. A plan—it's just a list of things that doesn't happen.

Instead, we stayed up until around 2:00 on Saturday morning, just bullshitting in Jeremy's room in our shared apartment. When we looked at the clock and noticed the time, we just decided "Well, fuck it. Let's just leave now."

I went to my room to grab my bag—growing up a military brat has turned me into an excellent packer. When I met Jeremy in the living room, he was scrawling a note in his nearly incomprehensible handwriting.

"I don't think we told Dean we were going anywhere," he explained, referring to our third roommate.

"Yeah. That might be a good idea."

We fueled up at the gas station next to our apartment building, and we were off. As we'd decided to take my bog-standard truck, there was no room in the tiny cabin for our bags, so we used some half-remembered Boy Scout knots to secure them in the bed of the truck, right behind the cabin. For the first couple hours of the drive, we both kept checking over our shoulders to make sure the bags were secure, and even at 65 miles an hour, they never moved a centimeter.

Our first stop was some tiny, no-name town in Missouri. Our fuel was nearing the quarter-tank mark, and we pulled off at a gas station that had huge, rusted above-ground tanks marked “unleaded” and “regular.” I went in to pre-pay, and the girl behind the counter informed me that the station didn't have any gasoline. I asked when she expected to get some, and she shrugged and said “Maybe Tuesday.” We found another station down the road, fueled up in the cold, and kept on going.

I only had one road-trip stop request, and that was the small town of Metropolis, Illinois, home of the world's largest Superman statue. We arrived sometime midmorning, passing an old-school grocery store on the way to the city center. Outside the store, there was a large statue of a mid-70s shop-teacher-looking fellow carrying a bag of groceries. When we saw the Superman statue...he was smaller than the guy offering to save us money on bread, eggs, and milk.

There were more odd stops along the way—the Applebee's in Perry, GA where all of the TVs were tuned to the same public-access *Bible* station, the hotel in the same town where an aging hippie tried to convince us that the Spring Break we really wanted was in the mountains of North Carolina. But all the odd roadside stuff aside, what I most remember is spending two days in the car with my best friend, talking for hours about whatever stupid shit popped into our heads. And even without the random stops, or the underwhelming Man of Steel memorials, it would have been the perfect road trip for just that reason. I spend far too much time in my own world, in my own head, and any chance to spend time with great friends...well, it's harder to find something that deserves a mark in the “win” column more than that.

— *Shawn Kupfer*

We'll Always have Mexico (or How Mexico Almost Always Had Me)

In June of 1969, I was a new mother with my first child who was all of 16 days old. My husband's work demanded that we had to be in Pharr, Texas so

that he could help build the PanAm College down there. He was a lather, which I am not sure too many people are familiar with, but they essentially put up plaster over what looks like chicken wire. It was very popular back then.

My husband's brother and wife went with us as Ralph was working on the same job. We settled in Pharr, though the college was being built in McAllen. We were there for about six weeks.

One weekend, we all decided to go across the border to Reynosa, Mexico. So we all got into one car and went.

We had a lovely time. We got out and hired a guide to take us to the shops and restaurants, and he directed us to a place that served authentic Mexican food. I remember it was really good and inexpensive. Later, we bought some coffee that was the best coffee I had ever had in my life. I bought several peasant blouses and dresses. It was a wonderful experience...until it was time to cross the border to go back to Pharr.

Did I mention that my husband was light haired and blue eyed, as were his brother and his brother's wife? No? I guess I didn't.

We were at the bridge and going through the checkpoint there, when the attendant took one look at them and another look at me...and began to ask my nationality. *Did I have any ID? Where was I born? How long had I been in Mexico?* I didn't have any ID with me. At that time I didn't even drive.

My husband said, "Look, this is my wife and baby. They are American!" He also said other things I cannot repeat.

The poor man looked confused, but finally talked to a supervisor who came over and asked us all again who I was. I thought they were going to keep me until we could prove I was not a Mexican!

Did I mention that my son and I are dark-haired, brown-eyed, and olive skinned? No? Well, that fact was behind my apparent problem. They wanted to keep me as one of their own! I was terrified, and the baby began to wail...and I was not far behind him. I guess the resulting noise finally convinced them to just let me go....

I will never again go to Mexico in a car full of blue-eyed blonds! In fact, I will never go to Mexico again period. It's just too hard to get out!

— **Anita Callender**

Candyquarium or Bust!

When I started my freshman year in high school, I was ready to write the story of how I spent my summer vacation—or at least how I spent one day of it. That year I finally had a good story to tell. But on the first day of school, my

English teacher didn't assign that essay. Instead, she told the class to write an essay on what we planned to do after high school! I don't remember what I wrote. But now, years later, I still think about that summer day...

It started out like any other of my summer days as a teen in Muncie, Indiana. I was in a bikini, stretched out on a towel in my backyard. But then a car pulled up in my driveway. It was my neighbor Resa, and her eight year-old sugar-addicted son Devin. She walked through the gate and tucked a ten-dollar bill under my arm.

"Hi, Cindy. Wanna take a drive to Kentucky to see some fish?"

Devin was an only child—a spoiled, sugar-powered, hyperactive hedonist. He required constant maintenance of his sugar intake. But ten bucks bought a lot of suntan oil in those days.

In the car, Devin was chewing a big wad of neon orange gum, and frothing orange foam.

"Your job is to keep an eye on Devin at the Newport Aquarium," Resa said. "I have a phobia of driving on the highway, so it should take about four hours of driving back roads. You two have your seat belts on?"

"Check and check."

One hour into the trip, Devin finished the last of his candy stash. Ten minutes later, his face went blank and slightly pale, then it became pink, then fully flushed, then vivid pinkish-red. His saucer eyes bulged on his bobbing head, and his lips curled away from his orange-tinged teeth. His nostrils flared, and his forehead and neck veins throbbed alarmingly.

Devin was low on sugar.

A minute later he exploded out of his seat belt and started bouncing off the rear doors.

"Devin, are you wearing your seatbelt?" Resa said.

"Candy-candy-candy!" he answered.

"Seat belt, Devin. The Sweet Tooth Candy Factory is coming up."

Devin chanted: "Sweet Toof. Sweet Toof. Sweet Toof." He started rocking.

Resa adjusted her rear-view mirror. "We'll stop at Sweet Tooth and get some sweets for your teeth if you put your seatbelt back on."

Instantaneously, Devin was back in his seat, belt on, arms stiff and straight by his sides, back pressed firmly against his seat, eyes straight ahead and unblinking. He continued, "sweettoofsweettoofsweetoof" under his breath.

Resa pulled into a crowded parking lot and winked at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Stay in the car, Devin, or you'll get run over and not get any candy," she said.

"Nooooo..." Devin wailed.

"Then stay in the car, D-man. And no yelling."

A strangled whimper strained from his throat.

"Howdy!" Resa said to a guy crossing the lot. "Say, you guys are closed, aren't you?"

"Pardon?"

"You're closed, right? Closed? As in 'not open'?" She nodded to the backseat. I was way ahead of the game—I had a piece of paper with the words 'SAY YOU'RE CLOSED' written on it, pressed up against the window.

The man stepped back, squinted at my sign, and said, "Say you're closed."

"Aw, too bad, maybe next time," she said, pulling back onto the highway.

Devin shrieked through his neon orange-stained teeth.

"Ten more, Cindy!" Resa threw another ten-dollar bill at me.

"I just remembered," I said, clapping my hands. "The aquarium has an even bigger candy factory than this one!"

Devin froze. "Bigger?"

"Bigger, taller, wider, and even deeper—with more candy than the ocean has fish!"

Devin's eyes glazed over, and he spent the rest of the trip in silence.

Eventually, he fell asleep, and by the time we got to the aquarium, he had forgotten about my promise of a sea-sized candy factory. Instead, he wanted to take home the jelly fish and keep them as jelly-producing pets. As a compromise, we stocked up on Smucker's for the trip home.

So that is how I spent one day of my summer before my freshman year in high school. I barely remember the aquarium, but I vividly recall the Devinator's neon orange-tinged teeth. Zigzagging across two states with an agoraphobic neighbor and her hyperactive son isn't so bad if you get to write about it, especially if you're twenty bucks richer and it's twenty years later.

— **CMStewart**

Heaven and Hell, by Train and Matatu

I was on the night train, somewhere between Nairobi and Kisumu, when I got the news. My wife called from back home in Kansas saying she needed emergency heart surgery. I'd barely arrived in Africa, yet had to turn around and go home.

My trip to Kenya to see our Peace Corps son had already begun badly. Although I'd arrived in Nairobi on schedule, my luggage hadn't. I was in equatorial Africa without a change of clothes. Nairobi, once a modern jewel, was gritty and run-down, stinking of exhaust. It seemed a circle of Hell itself. The food was passing through me with unwelcome speed, and the mefloquine I was taking to avoid malaria was spiraling me into a dark depression where I would remain for months.

When the call came, the train had already left Nairobi. At least a day would have to pass before I could reverse my steps and figure out how to get home. The train was as decrepit as Nairobi, with no electricity or running water, and we had to step over third-class passengers to move through the cars. We were served a white-tablecloth dinner, but the disparity between our elegant meal and the rest of the tables in the dining car left me feeling like a Western decadent.

We arrived in Kisumu late the next morning, passing through part of the Rift Valley, a land seemed dropped down from Heaven. Yet I had little more than the smelly clothes on my back, and it was Independence Day, so most businesses were closed. Since I couldn't change my travel plans then, we decided to press on to my son's village. But the three-wheeled tuk-tuk we hired didn't like the road or the load. It took us two hours to travel thirty miles.

My overnight in the village was pleasant. As an American I was a celebrity, and the people there couldn't praise my teacher son enough. I was to be feted at meals with all of the important people, but these plans were thwarted by my need to leave the next morning. We did our best to wash my ripening clothes in a bucket that night, but it didn't help much.

All the while I had no idea how my wife was doing. With the time difference and the spotty phone reception, I had to rely on hope that those matters were taking care of themselves.

To return to Nairobi, I took a matatu, minivans notorious for overloading and reckless drivers. The road was rumored to have bandits, and we were stopped at many checkpoints, where money changed hands and I made certain my face was seen by the heavily armed officers. After an all-day trek, we arrived in Nairobi and the driver dropped off his other fares; I was the only one going to the airport. He asked if I would mind if several of his friends rode along. The question was a formality since the friends had already piled in. Night had fallen. I believed I was somewhere in Nairobi. The men laughed and joked in their language. And I felt the certain terror that I was about to die. A lone

Westerner with a wallet full of cash. How easy it would be to stop along some lonesome stretch of road.

Yet I arrived at the airport safely. Since it was nighttime, it was only by chance that the airline office was still open. There was, of course, a large fee to change my flight, which was departing shortly, but what choice did I have?

By perverse luck, my luggage had arrived that morning, but I still had to get through security and didn't have a chance to change clothes. I faced a five-hour layover in London, and the flight attendants graciously suggested I use that time to slip out to a nearby hotel where I could get a quick shower. My luggage was stowed, though. I wouldn't see it until I got home, so that idea was a bust. On the last leg of my flight, people were moving to other parts of the plane rather than sit near me.

Nearly a decade has passed since this misadventure. My wife is hale and hearty. My son completed his tour and is back in the States. I've scrubbed off my stink and returned to routine, but in quiet moments I find myself wishing I was back in Africa, reliving one of the best, if briefest, adventures of my days.

— ***Paul Lamb***