

HELL COMES WITH WOOD PANELED DOORS

A Novel By

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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 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 like 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 could imagine. Hell, it does even *more* than everything you could 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). Somehow, though, Dad 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, 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...”

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 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 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 my old man 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 wanted 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, although I couldn't put my finger on it.

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," he 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 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. There’s something I need to get from the old car,” Dad said.

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 turned back 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 and away from the figure—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 fake leather 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 commuter mug; 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?” he said, pointing.

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 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 me and my younger siblings, 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, puffing on a Virginia Slim. Dad stepped out, 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”. All he needed to do was take one deep look into her eyes to see the intensity of her anger, however. The woman lived for complaining, but 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 simply loved my mother with all his heart.

“Isn’t it great?”

“No! Where the hell did you find such an ugly thing?” she said, smoothing the wrinkles in her flowered muu-muu, and blowing 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—she owned a small army of 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! There was no other way to explain the hell that man endured, but if it worked for them, I suppose that’s what mattered.

“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 sat back, noticing 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 at least 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 whenever 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 and the top of the heap of coolness, but 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 some bingo hall owner with slicked back hair and a cheap suit, with aspirations of becoming 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 second car, a '57 Nomad 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.

He was taking pictures along the boardwalk, where she worked in a hotdog stand. A morning snapping pictures of old hotels, the beach, and piers filled his stomach 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 soda. 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 about 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 the 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 sixty-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 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 turned his attention back to the Inferno. He stared at it like it was a newborn child full of potential, then said, “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 Tarpits, 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 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

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 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... 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, 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 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! I don’t know where you picked up that shit!” Mom said. 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, 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 just 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 are 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 getting the upper hand even on trips. I was glad when Dad pulled me closer to the map, hoping it would help me understand what he was about to say.

“It’s a big country, Michael. 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. It was after three before I finally fell asleep, 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 started filling with flames. 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 the 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 aren’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 and Olivia’s rooms. A cigarette dangled from her mouth and 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 innocently. 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. You could 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 you’re 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. “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, though, 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."

He 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 version. 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, defeated. “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 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, and 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 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 music 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'd bite 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'd all sing, talk, and play 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 got to me were his glowing red eyes!

He had 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 began glowing 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 found 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 to 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 was staring right at me. His eyes weren't glowing, but I knew he had something to do with it.

"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 Giants 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, 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 was a reminder of just how much they hated me; just how evil they were when they put their heads together.

“Are you okay?!” Dad said, 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 of each other, and in his book, this rated right alongside putting shaving cream in someone’s hand, then tickling their face so they’d scratch and make a big mess.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I said.

“What happened?” Mom said, turning around. She saw my face covered in marshmallows and shook her head.

“The twins happened,” I told her, 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 beauty magazines like *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.