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## Invitation of Echoes: Part One

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Invitation of Echoes: Part One

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Film, Theatre, & Communication Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

by

William Bain

B.A. Wabash College, 1993  
M.S. Indiana University, 1998

May, 2008

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## **Dedication**

For Rachael, Gabriella, and Katya. Te amo sempre.  
With apologies to Anne, Ginni, Pete, and Kathy for whom I've often been little more than an  
echo.

## Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to more people than I can remember. It's a sad condition of mine, and I hope that if I haven't thanked you here then I at least gave you my appreciation in the time we spent together. That said, my sincerest thanks to:

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Gilley.....	2
Chapter Two: Jesse.....	12
Chapter Three: Jason.....	22
Chapter Four: August.....	42
Chapter Five: Gilley.....	61
Chapter Six: Jesse.....	85
Chapter Seven: Jason.....	108
Chapter Eight: August.....	114
Chapter Nine: Gilley.....	142
Chapter Ten: Jesse.....	156
Chapter Eleven: Jason.....	160
Chapter Twelve: August.....	170
Vita.....	188

## **Abstract**

Four strangers are stranded in an old farmhouse by a winter storm. Gilley lives on the farm. Shadows move of their own volition on the farm, and Gilley talks to echoes and sees the dead reflected in mirrors. Gilley's husband, Frank, disappeared over forty years ago. Jason is a college student who seeks Gilley out for an interview. He agrees to help Gilley find Frank. Jesse is a young boy who finds his way to the house after an accident. August is a private investigator whom Jason calls for help in finding Frank. August does not have a shadow nor a reflection of his own, and he can't remember how he lost them. Each wants something that only the others can provide, but each wants to keep their own secrets.

Key words: fiction, invitation, ghosts, echoes, shadows, reflections, August LeVey, Grey Lands, winter, blizzard, stranded, Indianapolis, crows

## Introduction

And all with pearl and ruby glowing  
Was the fair palace door;  
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,  
And sparkling evermore,  
A troop of echoes, whose sweet duty  
Was but to sing  
In voices of surpassing beauty,  
The wit and wisdom of their king.

Edgar Allen Poe, "The Haunted Palace" (1839)

Long has paled that sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die,  
Autumn frosts have slain July.

Edmund Clarence Stedman, "Of *Alice in Wonderland*" (1895)

IN the grey tumult of these after years  
Oft silence falls

Rupert Brooke, "Hauntings" (1914)

## *Chapter One: Gilley*

Between the larger rotting structures on Gilley's farm, blackberries twined their thorny vines through piles of hexagonal wire and splintered boards. She thought of it as a farm out of habit, but the silos and feedlot had collapsed in '96 and no one had cut into the soil since that Mexican family rented the north field and stream bed in '92.

Gilley looked out over the porch railing and followed the rutted line of her drive out toward the county road. No, no one tends anything but the blackberries anymore, she thought, and to be honest, she preferred the scattered advance of sassafras and mulberry trees across the remaining fields to the regimented rows of corn and beans.

Shadows make good neighbors, she thought. Quiet. Discrete. They asked nothing but to be allowed to grow and tend their wild crops: blackberries in the bones of the chicken coop outside her kitchen window; morel mushrooms in the deep ravines south of the creek; pine cones in the quiet grove above Nolen's Hill Cemetery; mistletoe on the narrow finger of her property that pushed Mill Creek into a sharp curve, its wide, flat stones mute under a blanket of moss. The shadows did not consume their crops. They freely offered her the fruits of their efforts. Gilley visited the sites as often as the weather and her hip allowed. Any more, she could only make it to the pine grove. A narrow, rutted lane, maintained by the fire department and DNR, cut across the toes of Nolen's Hill, and she could still find the faint bed of gravel that led up to the cemetery.

The pine trees rose like vaulted columns on the north end of the graveyard. Their needles lay deep and soft under the wide boughs, to the exclusion of all other plant life. When Gilley last visited, just after the winter's first hard freeze, the shadows fell from the trees like heavy crows.

The hillside cemetery had twenty-three plots but only seven headstones remained standing—all but one unreadable. She counted all of them every time she made the hike up the hill. In the transition months, when the undergrowth had died off or had yet to re-sprout, she felt with her feet for the fallen headstones or the depressions left by unmarked graves. The headstones and the farm were some of the last remnants of her father's family. Only two life-spans were not complete in the graveyard.

Gillian Curan Garvey

Frank Wesley Garvey

1926 –

1920 –

I come to collect pine cones, she says to herself. The quiet.

The cemetery just happened to be there.

An echo rolled across the driveway. Its voice brought her back to the ice-limned porch eaves and the press of cold against her as she stood just inside the screen door. Gilley raised her right hand. She thought to call out to it but hesitated. The echo was unfamiliar to her. Probably one from the edge of the quarry. She didn't think it noticed her, as she stood silent behind the tattered screens and grey wood frame of the door. Her breath piled up around her head in the still air—grey and insubstantial as her hair. The echo seemed preoccupied. Happy. Humming to itself but moving with a purpose.

She would ask about it tonight when the echoes from the orchard came over for the Candlemas.

Gilley turned from the orange sky and stepped into the permanent twilight of her house. Pretty silly, she thought, waving to an echo. Might as well sing to a stone for all the applause it will get you.

As the door closed, she noticed the cicada drone by its absence. It hadn't been there for months, but it was only in this cold silence that Gilley felt their insistent chant so acutely. It was February second. The cicadas had long been silent and dead.

A strand of spider silk glowed golden in a weak shaft of light. Somewhere along the baseboards, something was chewing.

She took a few steps and perched on the edge of the piano bench. The dry wood protested a moment. The floorboards spoke in sharp consonants as they rebounded from her slight weight. She simultaneously twisted the ring on her right thumb and the matching band around her left ring finger. Twisting. Twisting. Two wedding bands. One for her. One for him.

“You have guests... you have... coming soon... guests... soon...”

Miriam's echo shuffled softly near the ceiling. It felt most at home in the dark corners, well above the floor. Unobtrusive. Wistful.

“Yes, Mims. The Candlemas.”

“Yes...” Mims' voice trailed away into the kitchen and then the pantry. “Yes... yes...”

Gilley took a breath and held it. This will stay mine, she thought. Light slowly crept from the room, inexorably fleeing to the wide sky and tangerine horizon. It is not mine to keep, and like a startled bird, the breath was gone.

She took a few more breaths to ease her chest. Gilley stood and strode quickly to the kitchen.

Mim's faint singing from the empty pantry accompanied Gilley as she set about preparing the three meals.

*How-dee-now said the leather-wing bat*

*I'll tell you the reason that*

*The reason that I fly by night*

*For I lost my heart's delight*

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*Hey hey heeeeyyyy*

*Diddle-lie diddle-low*

Gilley joined in on the next verse, taking up two lines behind the echo's lead. As she prepared the first plate for the meal—blackberry vines wrapped around a bough of pine and a sprig of mistletoe—their round spun out of the kitchen, into the dining room, the living room, and down the stairs into the cellar. The song fluttered with Gilley's insubstantial soprano but took flight with just the barest touch of Miriam's alto. Gilley paused by the oven as Miriam flowed over her shoulder to carry the song up the chimney flue and out into the February gloaming.

“Getting ahead of... getting... ourselves Gilley... Gilley...” came Mims' voice back down the chimney.

“It's been a long time since we sang together, Mims.” Gilley arranged a few pieces of

fruit on a second plate. She looked at the plate, added a few long carrots, wiped dust off the apples, and nodded in satisfaction. A third plate remained empty on the counter. She gathered all three plates with her hands.

“It’s been a... it’s... long time since you... long time... sang with me... sang... me...”

“Will *you* join us for Candlemas?” Gilley asked. She carried the plates to the dining room and arranged them around the table.

“I think... think... yes... yes...” replied the echo.

“Mims, will you carry my invitation to the echoes of the tree-line and the orchard?”

“Certainly, Gilley... certainly...”

“Friends, we gather around a table—a gathering of we friends.”

Miriam swirled around the kitchen appreciatively, the words of invitation tumbling around the room as if in a gyre. Gilley sighed as the echo faded through the window overlooking the chicken yard. The anagram was frail. Her capacity for word play had diminished over time—like her bones. Something inside. She wondered briefly how she appeared to others. Had she been crafted or worn by time? The backs of her hands were translucent except where spotted by thin scars and small cancers. She ran her fingers down her arm—plucked at her sleeve. She imagined her face.

It had been young once. When she could still see herself in the mirror, she had marveled at the fine creases and pores that appeared at close inspection of her face but disappeared when she moved back even the width of her hand. She imagined—hoped anyways—that she would age like her grandmother: cheeks growing redder and wrinkled, but not drooping; a faint wattle that still disappeared when she raised her chin; maybe her father’s high arched eyebrows and

narrow lids instead of her grandmother's heavier set. But after that first Candlemas, she would never again see how the years treated her face. Mirrors were no longer for the living. Gilley was pleased that her body had not slumped into a mass of wet clay like her father's had. Oh, but to see my face. She longed to retrace her profile from the corner of her eye, see what had become of that pale, sharp face...

Enough of this, she thought. You've gone this long without knowing.

The kitchen sank into night. Gilley sagged against the counter as the room and the world stepped out of time. Everything seemed to contract in the darkness down to one breath. The path from the kitchen to the dining room hadn't changed in fifty years. She could discern the outlines and glimmers of the dining room—the six cane-backed chairs, the walnut table with scrolled feet and one extra leaf, the walnut china cabinet in the corner—less from the weak light and more from the memory of every Candlemas for decades past.

Voices approached from the yard behind the porch. Miriam and the echoes from the feral orchard on the edge of the property were singing as they drew near the house. A gospel piece from the sound of it, but their polyphony obscured the words and left Gilley straining to discern even the basic melody.

The echoes passed through the back door when Gilley grasped the box of matches and strode into the dining room. She hesitated. The echoes ended their song on one beautifully harmonized note, just outside the room. They awaited their invitation to table. At any other time, they would not hesitate to enter and take up positions around the room, but Candlemas had its traditions. There were three invitations to table. The echoes were invited second.

At any other time, Gilley thought, Mims would be the only echo in the house.

The Invitation of Shadows always unnerved Gilley. The shadows were by no means threatening, and she certainly appreciated their stewardship of the blackberries, yet they evoked such strong instincts of dread in her that she imagined a time primeval when shadows cultivated and culled humans like they did the berries. With a steadying sigh, she struck the match to the box and held the flame to one of three tall candles on the table.

Shadows leapt from behind every feature of the spartan room. The table was set with a white lace cloth, three plates, a decanter of red wine, six crystal wine glasses, and burnished silver utensils with mother-of-pearl handles. The silverware was the only legacy of her mother's family. Gilley's empty plate was at the head of the table. To her left was the plate of mistletoe, pine, and blackberries, and next to that was a hand-wound record player. To her right was the plate of fruit and vegetables. Across from the record player were three of the crystal goblets: a different amount of water in each. A wine glass and silverware accompanied each plate. A wide frame, covered with a faded and patched quilt, obscured the last chair at the farthest end of the table. The quilt covered her mother's other legacy.

Gilley's hand trembled as she moved to light the other two candles. The shadows darted across walls and from under plates like nightmarish roaches, centipedes, rats, and everything else that scurries half-seen. When the third candle was lit, the room glowed golden; flame light glittered along the edge of the crystal glasses and polished silverware. Gilley glanced behind her where her own shadow fell on the wall. Her shadow wavered, stretched precariously across the room, and flowed over the cane-backed chairs until it came to the one with the plate of mistletoe and pine. The chair remained empty, but on the wall behind it, a human silhouette overlapped the

darkness imposed by the chair.

The candles guttered briefly as a cold draft escaped beneath the curtains. Black plumes of smoke rose on their tails toward the ceiling, chased by moth-shaped shadows. Gilley moved down to the record player for the Invitation of Echoes.

She lifted the mechanical arm and set it to the record.

Bach's *Fugue in C Minor*. From the library in town. A nice young man from the college had helped her with the selection. He had explained to her the fugue's intricate repetition as she sat at the small study carrel, oversized headphones engulfing her head. It was the first time she had left the farm in eight years.

With the first strains of music, the echoes came to table. Miriam's voice floated lovingly, longingly past Gilley's ear. A quartet of cellos played the fugue, and the echoes easily matched the almost human timbre of the instruments with their own resonant voices.

The fugue ended and three notes rose from the partially filled glasses to Gilley's right. As Bach's next piece began, the echoes improvised with the cellists and embellished the music with the sounds they coaxed from the crystal. The Invitation of Echoes was complete.

The room around the table writhed with the eerie dance of shadows and disembodied echoes. Gilley faced the quilt-draped frame. Tentatively she reached out to the quilt with her left hand. Candlelight licked at the wedding band embracing her ring finger. Shadows swept across her hands, her arms, her simple dress, like a flock of pigeons, but they never darkened the ring—they slid under the band, unimpeded in their flights from and back to the dark shape silent and immobile behind the plate of holly, blackberry, and pine.

“Gillian... Gillian... the music is... Gillian... exquisite... music...”

“Thank you, Miriam.”

Gilley had never heard her sister’s echo sound so joyous. The echoes at the table sang like wind and long chains. They sang like the breath of locust through the corn. Miriam’s voice exalted above it all.

Gilley pulled her hand back from the quilt.

“Will you invoke the... will invoke... Invitation of... invoke... Reflection... Invitation of Reflection... this year... year...”

“I’m...” Gilley twisted the ring on her thumb and held her breath.

“Perhaps he will... perhaps... be there... there...”

“How can I wish for that?”

“He would be old... he would ... old... it would be fitting... old...”

“Eighty-seven. Last month.”

“Invoke them, Gilley... invoke... the others have... have... been gone too... others... too long... long...”

Gilley pictured Miriam’s face as she last saw it in the Candlemas mirror. Young, as if they had never dreamed of college—as if Gilley had never married Frank. Miriam before the sores and opportunistic infection: a girl of nineteen, brown hair, wide smile, topaz earrings. Miriam surrounded by the dead. Their mother had been there too—dead before Miriam’s cord was cut by the doctor—waving briefly but serenely from the kitchen before wandering off into another room of the house. Jessica before the car wreck. Little Malcolm as a teenager, as if the fire hadn’t taken his face and arms and finally his life before his tenth summer.

Dozens, even scores, of faces. The dead appeared in the mirror as if they stood in an

identical room on the other side of a window, and their eyes never left hers. They gazed expectantly at her, and although they all smiled or made small gestures of affection, they never tried to speak. After a few moments, each dead friend, family member, and acquaintance would look away and walk out of the mirror's frame. New people might walk in, but these would not stay more than a few minutes. When one of the dead left the mirror, Gilley would not see that person again until she herself left the room and then returned.

She had yet to see Frank. Not a word in forty years and never in the mirror.

Gilley twisted the ring on her thumb a final time and pulled it free. She placed it before the mirror and carefully drew the quilt from the frame. She kept her back to the mirror as she walked to her seat. The shadows took their places away from the light. The echoes quieted to Miriam's single *sotto voce*. Gilley looked across the table to the cooling plate of food and the empty chair to the right of her own. The Invitation of Reflection was not complete. She sat down, her eyes fixed on her plate, averted from the mirror at the end of the table. She knew that the room was reflected in the mirror and that her chair would appear empty. She knew that when she looked up, the reflections of the dead would sit down to their place for the Candlemas meal with the echoes and shadows.

She held her breath and thought, *I will invite them when this breath is no longer mine.*

She held her breath as long as she could.

## *Chapter Two: Jesse*

Jesse knew he wasn't supposed to touch that bird. That old black bird with the broken leg and the bloody wing. Lice live in those greasy feathers and they'll burrow in and start laying eggs in your skin so you better not touch it.

But it was cold out and you never see bugs in the snow. And so what if Mrs. Jeffries' stupid son Ralphy got bit by a squirrel in the park. Ralphy liked to pull the wings off butterflies and the blue tails off those lizards that live on the Castle wall. Ralphy was mean and Jesse wasn't so there

So he poked the bird with a long stick, just to make sure it wouldn't poke back with its black beak and it just ruffled up a bit and blinked but that was it. Jesse pushed his hands deeper into his mittens. His fingers itched because of the cold and he had a hard time pulling the shoe box out of the trash can because the mittens were so slick and his hands wouldn't close tight. He had a hard time with the bird but that was because it tried to bite him when he poked it with his hand.

Inside the garage it was still cold but not as bad as under the power lines in back. Auggie had a bed under the chairs in the back corner and that was where Jesse dumped the black bird out and into another box. When it got cold Auggie would curl up in the box with some rags and stare out the window. She wouldn't like the bird but she wasn't back from hunting yet. She left last

week sometime and hadn't come back. Dad said she could be gone for a long time and that we'll see if Mrs. Hathaway has any kittens at her farm in the spring. Jesse shut and locked the cat door anyway—just in case Auggie came home—and turned on the light over the box of rags so the bird would be warm.

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Inside, Jesse's mother looks up from the paper and smiles as her son fumbles with the door knob. When inside, he squeezes the brass knob between both mittened hands and pulls the door to the garage closed after a few tries and then sets about shedding layers of nylon and wool. Mittens, scarves, a faded Pittsburgh Steelers stocking cap, and a half-dozen globs of snow fall to the floor where they begin to leak water between the tiles. He unzips his snow suit from throat to knee, unsnaps his boots, and tumbles out of them like a moth shedding its cocoon. She folds her hands around her tea and smiles down at her dripping, red-faced moth-boy.

“Did you leave any snow outside?”

Jesse shakes his head like a bean has come loose inside. Droplets of water stick to the wall calendar, streak the table top, and slide down the refrigerator door.

“Hey! Go change clothes. I'll fix you lunch and then we have to go to the library.”

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Jesse liked the library. He liked the plastic slide and the plastic building blocks in the children's area. The blocks had holes in them and were big enough to crawl through. He liked hopping from the green squares in the carpet to the blue triangles and then to each corner of the big yellow star. He liked the book with the dogs and cats going to school and the one where the lady rides across a big blue lake and then locks her castle with the orange magic dust. Mrs. Clay would read to them about stuff like a spider who traveled across the ocean or a thief trapped in a magical cave or rabbits and mice in a field of jagged stones. Then it would be nap time. Jesse liked that too. Today, Mrs. Clay read about a bunch of knights and horses and a magician and a king named King Arthur who lived in a castle and he pulled a sword out of a rock which was the heart of a dragon and then married a beautiful princess.

Mrs. Clay said it was nap time but Jesse wanted to hear more about the King Arthur and when did he fight the dragon? Mrs. Clay promised to tell him more later but now it was time to go lie down on his mat and rest. He really was tired but he liked Mrs. Clay and told her he found a bird today. She said that was nice. She said in England it was bad luck to hurt a certain bird because it held the spirit of King Arthur. The birds are called ravens and they are all that is left of the eyes and nobility of Arthur Pendragon—after his big battle with Modred. Jesse asked what a raven looked like and she said it was a big black bird.

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Mrs. Clay looks over the sleeping children. In these quiet moments she stares at their faces and muses on what might have been. Jesse's mother stands in the door frame with her arms crossed

over her stomach. Anything can disappear, she thought, or anyone. With that thought, Mrs. Clay smiles at Jesse's mother. Mrs. Clay walks over to the young woman and motions her out of the room.

"How are your pursuits, dear? Not much more than dust and mold in some of those archives, I imagine."

"It's slow work, that's for sure," says Jesse's mother. "At least Jesse really likes it here. I can get some work done."

"He's a bright one. Very curious about King Arthur and Camelot."

"I hope he doesn't work you too hard. I know he has his questions."

"Not at all," Mrs. Clay says, glancing over the young woman's shoulder. "I believe Mrs. Stone is waving for you."

"Take care, Mrs. Clay. The stacks are calling."

"Good reading, dear."

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Jesse left some bread for the raven that night and in the morning only a few crumbs remained but King Arthur still looked bad. Jesse brought more bread and some water every day and even poked around in the back yard to see if any worms might be about but he kept breaking his stick on the frozen dirt and his hands hurt from hitting it so hard. King Arthur moved only to eat and Jesse was scared he would die and bad luck would come because he didn't fix up King Arthur's spirit. Before and after he went to the library with Mom each day he would talk to King Arthur

about how he wanted to be a knight with a sword and that Mike Freeman could be his squire since they were friends but Jesse was taller. They didn't know any monsters or dragons or where they were because monsters always hid from the light.

On Sunday the library was closed so Jesse went with Dad to a hockey game. Dad bought him a big pretzel and some hot cocoa and on the way home they stopped at a supermarket to pick up some cream for noodles and some flowers for Mom which Jesse helped pick out but Dad got to write on the card. In the parking lot the snow and ice melted into steam and the black surface warmed in the sunlight. A couple of ravens pulled at something and jumped away if a car came too close but they always went back to the thing stuck to the steaming black surface. It gave Jesse an idea about what King Arthur might need to get better but right then Dad told him to get in the car and don't mess with roadkill or you'll get awfully sick.

When they got home Dad went in but Jesse asked if he could go play over at Stacy and Mika's house. Dad said it was OK if he'd be back by four so they could have an early supper and then go see a movie. Jesse was cold because he didn't have his snow suit on but his feet were OK in his big moon boots. He crossed the street and walked slowly to the house with 9211 on its door. Jesse knew Stacy and Mika weren't home but went and knocked anyway. The door stayed dark and closed. He ran around back and cut through the fence—almost fell while running down the path to the county road—and was real careful when he looked out from behind the big tree with the hole under its roots. They found a snake in that hole last summer and Stacy said it would crawl in their ears if they camped outside so they slept in the TV room where Stacy and Mika's Dad put up the tent. The snake wasn't there now and Jesse was looking for cars on the road. He didn't see any so he slowly kicked through a snow drift and then stomped the snow off of his

boots when he stood on the side of the road. He had to turn his whole body to look both ways because his hood was on and it was *really* cold out of the woods. No cars were coming so he turned to his left and started looking for roadkill.

The first car didn't scare him because it was on the other side of the road but the second one spun him around and scared him worse than the big dog out behind Cogwell's place. His head was down because of the wind and he was having trouble walking in the snow piled up beside the road so he kept moving closer to the white line. The truck seemed to explode into his face and he got dust in his eyes. It felt like the truck pulled him toward the road and he couldn't see and he was scared he would step into the way of another car by accident. He moved away from the road when his eyes cleared and kept looking up as he walked.

He didn't have to go far. On the other side of the county road another road jumped out from behind two snow drifts. Where it met the county road he was on Jesse could see stiff fur and brownish snow pressed up into the grooves left by a snowmobile. He swiveled a couple of times to check out the road and then crossed over to see if there was anything King Arthur might be able to pick off of the little frozen body. Jesse giggled as he thought of King Arthur—the one with the sword and the knights—licking the frozen thing on the ground like a popsicle. A meatsicle. The fur was pressed into the cement and was glued down with ice so it didn't come up when Jesse tugged on a tuft of fur that might have been a leg or might have been frozen skin but he couldn't tell. He kicked the matted thing with the toe of his boots and then with his heel. Little bits chipped off and then he got the head to lift up just enough that his hand fit under it and he could pull it. He gave a big jerk and the stiff flat thing on the road broke in half and sent him sprawling backward into the other road where it joined the county road.

Jesse had forgotten that cars use the other road. The truck coming now had just come over the last small hill before the intersection when he stumbled out from behind the corner snow bank. Jesse saw its wheels stop and the truck keep coming and the driver fought with the wheel and King Arthur needed that meat so Jesse held on but he couldn't move because his feet were frozen to the ground like the other half of the roadkill. The truck slid to the left and then back to the right and he didn't know what to do so he crouched down and tensed up as the truck passed him to his left and dropped into the ditch. Jesse stood up and looked at the back of the truck. The front door opened a crack but couldn't go any more because of the ditch. A big soft face pressed up to the crack and yelled "Hey kid!" and that's when Jesse ran.

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The man with the big, soft face pushes on the door again but backs off when he hears it scrape on frozen soil. He yells a few more times but the kid in the blue coat and the big silver boots crosses Route 11 and disappears into the woods.

"Shit."

He looks to the right and sees a young tree not more than a hand-span from his passenger side door. He is a big man—OK, fat, he admits to himself, and he lets go of a disgusted sigh as he thinks of all the times he meant to lose weight and couldn't find the time or wherewithal.

"Scared the shit outta that kid."

He laughs and pulls the driver-side door shut. He figures the kid is halfway home and won't play near this intersection any time soon. Behind the seat he unzips a satchel and pulls his cell phone up to his lap.

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Jesse felt sick all through dinner because he worried that the police would come or the fat man in the black truck would wait outside until he saw where Jesse lived. He saw the truck slide toward him during dinner and he kept staring at his plate like it was the truck's headlight as it missed his head by only a few inches. He pushed his noodles and green beans around his plate until his Mom asked what was wrong and said they couldn't leave for the movie until he had finished his meal. Jesse didn't really want to go out but he didn't want to talk about the truck or King Arthur or the dead thing melting on the garage floor so he stabbed at his food and swallowed it quickly.

It was a bad night. He fidgeted the whole way to the movie but couldn't see if they were being followed in the car because of the seat belt. He didn't feel like playing with the other kids down front so he sat with his Mom and Dad but he couldn't help but look behind him at the fat man eating with both hands out of a huge tub of popcorn. Dad said to stop staring and watch the movie but there was a car chase and he couldn't help thinking of the fat man in the black truck who saw him holding half of a frozen road kill. And then crashed. They left quickly after the movie was over and Jesse didn't get a chance to see King Arthur that night. He went to bed and slept in a tight ball.

Auggie found King Arthur two days later. Jesse was back at school after the winter break and Mom heard a noise in the garage. She said she found Auggie puffed up like a balloon and hissing like the air was coming out. When she looked under the chairs she found King Arthur trying to hop on one leg. He opened his beak wide and screamed. Pieces of fur and bits of bone surrounded the box. Jesse felt sick when they asked him what this was all about but it was like the time when he ate that whole bag of Oreos and then threw up on the babysitter. He hated not telling anyone about King Arthur and he felt a lot better when he did. They were mad but they were more mad about him touching the dead squirrel than they were about King Arthur. He told them about the truck and they were mad about that too but Dad said he didn't see how they could do anything about that *now* and he should NEVER go out to the county road without an adult. Never. Jesse got more scared when he saw that *they* were scared and said he wouldn't do it again—and he meant it—even if Stacy called him a chicken and threw his rock collection onto the road. Not again.

So Dad took King Arthur to the vet and the vet put tape on his leg and fixed up his wing so that it wasn't so red and bubbly. The vet also added a plastic tag to King Arthur's good leg. Mom let him give King Arthur bread and some of the skin off of the chicken she was fixing. Jesse couldn't leave the yard—he was grounded for a week—and road kill was out of the question but he carried King Arthur around the yard and showed him all the secret places he could live when he was better. He promised to take him to the Castle so he would feel at home but he couldn't leave the yard so they would have to wait. King Arthur let Jesse pick him up as long as he didn't touch his leg and as long as Auggie wasn't too close.

The vet said King Arthur would heal up quickly, probably three or four days more, and Mom said he would have to live outside by the end of the week. Jesse just nodded his head and made plans to visit King Arthur every day in the back yard

King Arthur didn't waste any time putting his freedom to the test. Jesse held his breath when he released the black bird from between his nylon mittens. King Arthur took several long hops and shrugged his wings open as if they were sheets of old folded paper in a heavy wind. He burst into the air and Jesse thought he looked like a pair of black shoes trying to fly. Jesse didn't cry. He let out his breath in one hard huff and watched King Arthur fight against the wind as it pushed through the pine trees in the back yard. The bird turned and swept over the roof of the house. He disappeared silently in the direction of the woods across the street. It was very warm for January. The rain from yesterday had washed the snow out of the drooping boughs of the evergreens and left grassy puddles across the yard to freeze over-night. Jesse curled up his toes in his shoes and felt some water squish out of his socks. The snow was heavy grey and it seeped into his shoes even though he made sure he was standing on one of the stones in the walk. Tomorrow he would be back at school but he was going to stand right here until it was time for bed. Maybe he could wait until the bus came in the morning. He was going to wait for King Arthur to come back.

### *Chapter Three: Jason*

Jason hovered around the circulation desk until it was time for Mrs. Clay to lead the evening story hour. After she cleared her desk and placed a sign that directed patrons to the front desk, she gathered her sack of children's books and walked briskly toward the reading room. Jason slid into her seat and entered his username and password into the circulation desk terminal. Nothing unusual in that. Although he had been off the clock for nearly an hour, he could use the full resources of the library at any time. He found this perk most useful during those weeks of midterms and finals when the college computer labs overflowed with his fellow Wabash students. His use of the circulation desk would never be noticed. Only Mrs. Clay or Mrs. Stone would raise an eye should they see what he planned to do, but that's why he waited for story hour.

Mrs. Clay and Mrs. Stone had lied to him. Not in any malicious or even unethical way. Not even explicitly—more a sin of omission—but they had lied, and lied in a way that suggested to Jason a secret. That, perhaps more than the odd encounter he had earlier in the day, was what set him set him so firmly on this ridiculous path.

As he waited for the small photocopier to warm up, he pulled a blank plastic library card from a stack and fed it into the card reader. In a few keystrokes it spit out the new, updated card. The photocopier chimed, and he set it to scan an image to the computer. A few more keystrokes and he had transferred the image of an old paper library card to the terminal and then moved the

file to his own flash drive. Going back to the copier, he made a few hard-copies of some maps and a poem. These he folded into his statistics text book for safekeeping. Everything—flash drive, text book, and new library card—went into his backpack. The old library card he slipped back into the desk drawer where Mrs. Clay had stashed it. He logged out, shut down the copier, and slung his backpack over his shoulder. With a few easy strides he moved out from behind the circulation desk and headed for the front doors.

Mrs. Stone sat at the check-out desk like an architectural afterthought. As he passed her on his way home, he tossed her a broad wave. True to her name, Mrs. Stone remained impassive behind the counter. Jason pulled his collar high around his neck and smiled as he stepped into the cold of February's first dusk. When he had first started work at the library, Mrs. Stone's expressionless face and impenetrable silences unnerved him, but after a month or so, he found a perverse joy in effusively greeting or taking his leave of the senior librarian.

Jason patted the head of the stone lion that guarded the library's entrance.

As he walked home beneath the bare limbs of sycamore, ash, and tulip poplar, the sun descended into a strip of open sky between the horizon and a low line of clouds. Much of the sidewalk remained draped in shadow, but thin stripes of snow and salted pavement glowed white where the light found gaps between houses and these tall, ancient trees that lined the streets. High in the trees, ice glistened in sheathes around thin branches. The branches clattered like bare teeth. Jason turned briefly toward the sun, but the wind and the glare brought tears to his eyes where the droplets quickly froze. He pinched his eyes with his mittened hand and continued on toward home.

His thoughts cycled between the events of the day and the semester project he had for his English class: an instructional narrative—teach something using someone else’s story. Interview required. Just this past week, Dr. Campbell had accepted Jason’s project proposal, but as he walked home from the library, Jason mentally drafted the letter he had to write his professor. He had to convince his professor that the story of an old woman and a lost library card was more compelling than the project he had already proposed.

Home lay on the other side of campus. By the time he reached the eastern boundary between town and the Wabash College campus, the sun had set and the low clouds quickly ushered in the night. Windows in the fraternities and dorms flickered as students passed in front of the hundreds of individual lights. Most of the academic buildings were closed for the evening, but some lights illuminated office windows on the upper floors of many of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century brick buildings. Jason noticed only a handful of others braving the cold as he crossed the white and brown plain of the central mall. The library and the student center glowed from the floodlights that seemed to ignite the brick from below the frozen ground.

Jason came to Wabash from St. Louis. Like most everyone he knew at the college, he had excelled in high school, possessed an easy if not lazy facility in both his writing and speaking, and lacked the financial means to attend one of his first-choice universities on either coast. On many days, Jason found himself stunned by the progression of decisions that brought him to this small, Indiana college with a male to female ratio of exactly 834 to zero. But they gave him a full ride, and he put the state of Illinois between himself and his family on the other side of the

Mississippi River. Not much of a buffer, but graduation hovered a few months away, and he would make another move east.

This time, he told himself, I'll put a bigger body of water between us.

Against his expectations, he had come to like Wabash. Within his first week he loved the brick buildings and the dark grounds of the arboretum. He made friends and, like most of the other students, joined a fraternity.

Jason glanced to his left at the fraternity house. The squat brick building hunkered down against the bitter cold, and felt the friendly pull the house exerted on him toward the warmth and noise and familiar reek he would find within. His friends would just now be sitting down to dinner and cards, petty feuds and running gags. Despite his strong desire to turn down the sidewalk and slip into one of the endless games of euchre or hearts or bridge, he turned his head away and let his feet lead him across the street and finally off the western edge of campus.

The houses he passed on this side of Crawfordsville sat far back from the street: a mish-mash of Victorian and post-war styles with broad yards, wrought iron fences, and massive trees—oak, maple, ash, sweet-gum—that had somehow survived centuries of logging, farming, tornadoes, ice-storms, and city planning. The neighborhood reminded him of how much had changed for him since his arrival four years ago. His first room had been in a fraternity: an eight foot by eight foot sleeping room sandwiched between two larger bedrooms. The college did not have enough dorm space for the incoming freshman, so in the first couple weeks, freshmen were assigned temporary housing in fraternities until they either pledged or committed to dorm life. Jason had shared that first room with another freshman named Ken Cameron.

Wabash did not seem much bigger than his room and only a bit more private. It was half the size of his high school, had one hundred percent fewer girls, and if Crawfordsville wasn't Dante's seventh circle of desolation then it was the interstate rest stop with the sign proclaiming "Hell Welcomes You to the Plains of Despair—Drive Safely!"

He and Ken pledged and joined the fraternity.

Jason never went home for more than a long weekend. Winter breaks he spent with Ken's family in Arizona. Summers he found apartments in Crawfordsville and worked with a canoe outfitter on Sugar Creek. He learned to appreciate the luxury of a slow float from Shades State Park to Turkey Run State Park on those humid, sunburned days. When he started his junior year, he took a part-time job at the Crawfordsville Public Library. He went into town more than ever, and although the townies all knew he was a Wally, they were generous and friendly, and they would tell him any number of secrets just so long as he complimented their choice of reading material and kept an eye out for their favorite authors.

The library. The image of the circulation desk and the two senior librarians reared up in his imagination.

Jason stopped and hung his head. Am I really going to chase this woman down, he thought, just because a couple of old women don't want to let me in on their little secret? He mentally rummaged through his backpack until he came across the image of the old library card. With that single memento, a flood of questions bubbled up. Jason realized that he wasn't after Mrs. Clay and Mrs. Stone—he wasn't exposing their lie. That wasn't the story. The card, the lie, the poem, the records, and that voice—Jason marveled at the disquiet that gripped him when he pictured the old woman's face and heard the otherworldly sound of her voice that did not seem to

come out of her mouth so much as from the space in front of it. She's the story, he admitted. She's the mystery.

He looked up and continued down the street. In the middle of the next block he paused again in front of a tall Queen Anne Victorian house fronted by a long yard and ringed with a low wrought iron fence. Jason rarely went home once he got to Wabash, but early in his senior year, home came to him.

"Fuck," he grunted as two men appeared in the window of the formal sitting room. He considered slipping around back, but snow and ice and slush surrounded the house, and he was too cold already. He released the latch of the iron gate and walked quickly down the cleared cement path, across the porch, and up to the front door—key in hand.

As he kicked off his shoes, Jason's father stuck his head out of the sitting room. "There's Chinese carry-out in the kitchen. Bob and I ate already."

Jason peered around the doorframe and tossed a relieved wave to Bob Wenkins, his dad's business associate. They would drink and talk shop until Bob finally stumbled off to his car and Jason's dad drifted off to sleep in his recliner. "Thanks Dad," Jason said. He motioned to his backpack and added, "Lots to do. I'll take something upstairs with me." His dad nodded and went back to his seat across from Bob.

Raymond Burnell, Jason's dad, managed resources for a consortium of light industrial manufacturers. When asked what his job entailed, his dad would draw two boxes, place a coin in one box, and then slide it to the other. If this happened at a party or a social event, his dad performed a sleight-of-hand routine in which each time he moved the coin between the boxes, the coin's denomination increased until he picked up a silver dollar and blew it into a two-dollar

bill. The consortium sent Jason's dad from St. Louis to Indiana as part of a vanguard field office as they looked to expand into the state.

Crawfordsville and Montgomery County received this delegation of salespeople, lobbyists, and bureaucrats as if they were members of some long absent and lamented nobility. Jason's dad reveled in the attention. He attended literally dozens of engagements every week. Scores of politicians, investors, and business reps hung on his every word. Gifts and promises appeared at even the rumor that he would be reporting back to the home office—rumors, Jason knew, his father gleefully slipped into the flow of industrial and social gossip.

Jason's dad saw the move as a promotion to be exploited. Jason saw it as an invasion.

White carry-out boxes in each hand and a third sandwiched between them, Jason ran up the stairs. On the landing to the second floor he stumbled, lost his grip, and the middle box fell to the floor. Rice tumbled out like grubs as the box slid across the wood floor and stopped against a closed door. Jason held his breath and waited. Into the gap between the door and the hardwood floor two narrow shadows slid with a faint slap of bare feet. A viscous brown fluid dripped from one corner of the box and the cloying aroma of garlic, soy sauce, and hoisin filled the hall. Jason opened his mouth wide so that he could breathe silently. On the other side of the door, his mother dragged a fingernail or perhaps a pencil across and down the wood panels. She scraped a series of arcs, one above the other. After the fourth arc she paused and began tapping the door. As she tapped, she spoke, and Jason couldn't tell if her words were meant for him or someone inside the room. "He's here," she said casually, "he wants to meet you. He's so alone." With that, the shadow of her feet padded away from the door, and Jason heard the rustle of paper falling to the floor.

He turned and climbed the stairs to his attic room without a sound, the spilled carton of Chinese food left like a spirit offering.

Jason pushed the empty carry-out boxes into a battered grocery bag and then up-ended his backpack on the bed. As he pulled out the items that he brought back from the library, he reviewed the day. He would have to distill the events into words and then commit them to an argument Dr. Campbell might feel compelled to accept. He looked at the photocopy he had made of the old library card. How much could he reveal to his professor? He put that question off for the moment and examined the image. The scanner had captured the paper card's rough edges and much of the mottled green surface texture. What it lacked was the surprising density of the card. It had felt as if it had absorbed something from every hand that ever handled it. Typed on one side, beneath an old seal and title of the Crawfordsville Public Library, was a name and date:

Curan, Gillian

Issued: 1936, May

He wished he had taken the original card, but that seemed like stealing once Mrs. Clay had tucked it deep into a drawer behind the circulation desk. He wanted to measure the weight of that paper card against the plastic one he had made as a replacement—the one he intended to present to the old woman when they met again. How much does seventy years weigh?

In the end, Jason didn't need the old card. With some patience he was able to pull the important information from what existed of the woman's file and a little research in the local public records. Gillian Curan: born 1926; issued the card on her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday; married in 1952—

last name changed to Garvey; same box address on Rural Route 3 and same phone number; no records after 1962.

Jason grabbed a pen and a notebook from his bed and wrote on the first page, *How much does seventy years weigh?* It could be the place to begin, he thought. He put down the photocopy of the card. As he revisited his hours at the library, he made notes of details that he might need to include in his letter to Dr. Campbell.

He met the old woman in the cramped corner of the library where they kept the LPs and 16mm film—a niche he called the Dead Media Center. Jason had been on his way to the employee's break room when he saw the old woman. She reminded him of his own grandmother: long, heavy skirt; wool sweater over a wide-collared blouse; high leather riding boots with a low heel. Thin—her face drawn and pale but almost shimmering as if her flesh had lost opacity as well as color. Whereas Jason's grandmother kept her hair short and wore what she had like a wispy, starched helmet, this old woman had let her hair grow long, but she gathered it at the base of her skull in a tightly wrapped bun.

She pulled an album from the rack and squinted at the back.

She was humming.

Maybe that's why he stopped. The humming filled the area and hovered on the edge of actual words. Hands tucked into his pockets, unsure why he felt compelled to take time away from his break, Jason walked up to the rack of LPs beside her and asked if she would like any help. She looked over at him and the humming died as if lost among the shelves behind them. Jason noticed her long, brittle nails and her grey eyes. At the time, he blamed the absence of

color on the fluorescent lights they used in the Dead Media Center, but the more he revisited the scene in his memory, the more convinced he became that the old woman had no color at all.

Better leave that part out when I write this up, he thought.

She asked him if he could describe a fugue, and she pointed to the word where it appeared on cover of an album. In her hand she held a collection of Bach fugues as performed by a string quartet. Jason explained how a musical passage is repeated and interwoven to make a fugue. Like a round, he told her, and she sang a few lines of “Twinkle, Twinkle” with a smile. Jason nodded and asked if she would like to listen to the record. Against the wall were the old record players, and Jason led her to the listening stations where the headphones engulfed the sides of her head in cracked grey foam. “Thank you,” she said to him and then turned away as the needle descended to the vinyl disk.

When Jason returned from the staff room, the woman was gone.

*I could start by telling you how I first met the woman, Jason wrote in his notebook, but that is a detail. Not the story. Not the story that drew me to her so that I would need to remember our first meeting. Not the story I want to tell.*

He read over the sentences and tried to read them as his professor would. Dr. Campbell had told Jason’s class that all stories have beginnings. Beginnings are everywhere. The writer shouldn’t be concerned with the beginning. Create an entrance, he told them. You’ll unearth the beginning when it’s needed. Jason crossed out the sentences. *Redundant*, he wrote in the margin.

When he got back to the check-out counter after his break, the old woman was standing in the shadow of the doorway which led to the Dead Media Center. She held the record—the Bach collection—and several others. Jason asked if she would like to check out. She seemed

startled, but recovered quickly, smiled, and apologized for being lost in thought. When Jason asked if he could see her library card, she handed over the surprisingly heavy paper card. He flipped it back and forth in his hand and then said, “Wow. I’ve only seen the new ones.” The old woman smiled again and said, “That card is older than you.” He couldn’t argue. He told her he’d be right back and then walked back to the circulation desk to ask Mrs. Stone what to do. He felt apprehensive—so much so that he didn’t bother to ham it up in front of the taciturn librarian. When he showed Mrs. Stone the card, she gave him a long stare, but in a few terse sentences told him how to get to the manual data screen with the check-out terminal.

When he got back to the front counter, the old woman was gone. He walked to the main doors, but she was not walking on the street or sidewalks. He looked down several aisles and glanced into the Dead Media Center where he had first met her. By this time, both Mrs. Stone and Mrs. Clay stood behind the front desk. He joined them. Mrs. Clay asked for the card, and Jason handed it over. After a long pause, Mrs. Clay handed the card to Mrs. Stone who began to type at the computer.

Mrs. Clay asked, “Did Mrs. Garvey leave anything else?”

Jason cocked his head to one side in confusion. Mrs. Clay retrieved the card and asked again, “Did she leave anything else?” He told her he didn’t think so, but he could check around. “Do you know her?” he asked. Mrs. Clay said no. Mrs. Stone swiveled away from the computer monitor and cleared the screen, but not before Jason saw that Gillian Curan was a maiden name. Her married name had been—and perhaps still was—Garvey.

*Until that moment, Jason wrote in his notebook, I didn't have a story. I had anecdotes and a token of an old woman I had no reason to see again, let alone pursue. Mrs. Clay lied. She lied to me about this old woman. The card became an artifact. It became significant.*

Jason lifted his pen. The card had become significant, but that hardly seemed a sufficient description. The card had become a fetish—a talisman that drew him back to the old woman.

He didn't write that down.

Mrs. Clay never saw the computer screen. She had only seen the card and the name on the card was Gillian Curan. If she didn't know the old woman, how did she know to call her Mrs. Garvey?

He told Mrs. Clay and Mrs. Stone that he would check the Dead Media Center and the listening stations. He walked slowly through the low display shelves that held the library's collection of obsolete recordings: LPs, 16mm film reels, cassette tapes, even a small stack of 8-track tapes. A series of shelves stood empty as the library readied them to hold the VHS collection. He found nothing at the LP racks, but at the listening station where he had left the old woman, he found an open collection of poetry that he did not remember from before.

Jason read the open page of the anthology. He closed the collection after noting the poem's author. Book in hand, he returned to the check-out desk where Mrs. Stone stared out at him like some Peloponnesian monolith. I can keep a secret too, he thought as he gave her an exaggerated shrug. He stuck out his bottom lip and arched his eyebrows in what he hoped was an over-the-top caricature of a frown. Nothing to see here, he thought even as he gripped the collection of poems a bit tighter.

Before he left, he photocopied the poem at the circulation desk and dropped the collection into the night return box.

In his room, Jason got up from his desk to pace. He grabbed the poem from his bed and read as he walked:

William Blake, "The Clod and the Pebble." 1794  
from 1957 Keynes collection

"Love seeketh not itself to please  
Nor for itself hath any care  
But for another gives its ease  
And builds a heaven in hell's despair"

So sung a little clod of clay  
Trodden with the cattle's feet;  
But a pebble of the brook  
warbled out these meters mete:

"Love seeketh only self to please,  
To bind another to its delight  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."

Jason couldn't decide how to tell Dr. Campbell about the poem. He had kept it to himself rather than share what he found with the librarians. He couldn't be sure how the opened book had been intended, but he didn't think it was complimentary. The clod/pebble and Clay/Stone connection seemed too clear.

In his notebook, Jason wrote, *Odd last stanza*. He read the last stanza a few more times and then wrote the poem's last word into his notes: *Despite??????* Up to the last word, Jason followed Blake's symmetry as the pebble held a dark mirror up to the clod's altruistic depiction of love. But *despite* was virtually synonymous with *despair*, and in that last word Heaven lacked the stark contrast with Hell that Blake had so carefully constructed in the previous lines. Jason thought that *respite* worked semantically, but that diluted the rhyme...

Frustrated, Jason let the poem drift down to the floor. The poetry would never convince Campbell. Jason went back over the story and made a list of things to leave out.

Don't mention the poem—too tangential and maybe unrelated.

Don't speculate on Stone and Clay—not their story.

Don't call the card a fetish.

Don't mention the lack of color—that's your memory playing tricks.

Don't mention her voice.

The old woman's voice disturbed Jason. He could remember her voice. He could picture the movement of her lips. He could not synchronize the two. The fragile sound seemed to project from a point behind her head or the air in front of her lips. The singing bothered him the most.

When she sang “Twinkle Twinkle” nothing seemed incongruous at the time, but here in his room, these few hours later, Jason would swear that her mouth never opened.

Jason checked the time. It was late, and he still had to turn his notes and memories into a convincing proposal. If he was going to pursue this story, if he was going to abandon the proposal Dr. Campbell had already accepted just this past week, he would need to convince Campbell that the story was worth it. Jason needed to infect his professor with something of the wonder and compulsion that drew Jason back to the card and the old woman’s other-worldly voice. Without sounding crazy. Crazy doesn’t compel, Jason thought, it just makes people speak slowly and say “Oooh – Kayyy...”

Knowing his friend would be awake, Jason called Ken. They both had the class, and English was Ken’s major. Campbell was his advisor.

“Jason,” Ken answered on the second ring.

“Ken. I need your help.” Jason told him that he planned to change his project proposal.

“You know it’s Friday, right?” Ken asked.

Jason agreed with his friend and then waited.

“You could be over here. Doug’s sister is here with at least a half-dozen of her friends.”

Jason remained silent.

Ken sighed. “You’re going to work on this now.”

“Yup.”

“Did your grandma die?” Ken asked. Jason’s accepted proposal centered on his grandmother’s stories of Germany in the years before V-E day and the occupation. The project

required Jason to conduct extensive interviews with his grandmother who still lived in St. Louis. Ken had helped Jason narrow his focus and find some compelling angles to pursue.

“No,” Jason replied and then went on to tell Ken everything about his experience in the library.

“So this is more interesting than your Nazi grandmother?” Ken asked. “Nazis still sell, and a Nazi grandma screams banality of evil.”

“She’s not a Nazi,” Jason said louder than he had intended. He pulled the phone away for a moment to rub his ear.

“Didn’t know the party gave people much of a choice,” Ken said, “but that wasn’t my point. You got all fired up when I called her a Nazi. Do you care that much about this card?”

That took Jason aback. He had seen pictures of his grandmother and grandfather, even some of his great-grandfather. The men stood ram-rod straight with stern faces above their black military uniforms and silver Nazi insignia. His grandmother, although she did not wear any of the swastikas or eagles for her portrait looked every bit the Nordic ideal with her light hair, fine features, and her Spartan teaching uniform. Her husband and father fought and died for the Reich. She taught in its schools. Despite the pictures and the fragments of family history that he knew, Jason only thought of his grandmother as German—never as a Nazi. It occurred to him that survival in Germany probably meant being a Nazi by necessity. When he conceded this, he knew his grandmother could not have been the only German to be swept up in the circumstances of survival and social insanity, and that hateful label blurred.

Jason hadn’t reacted against Ken’s use of the term *Nazi* for the sake of his grandmother. He couldn’t judge her, let alone the entire nation of Germans who had lived through those years.

Jason denied Ken's label for his own sake. He might not be able to clearly understand what it meant to be a Nazi in war-time Germany, but he knew what it meant *now*, and he rejected it as an abomination.

After he explained this to Ken, Jason said, "I want a story that's not about me."

"Not sure that's possible," Ken replied.

"But approachable," Jason insisted. "When Clay and Stone lied, it wasn't because of me. They would have lied to anyone. Their lie is part of this card and that woman. My grandmother might lie to me. She might not tell me everything. I think I even understand why she would. This is the same woman who refused to speak German to her daughter, my mother, when they came to the States."

"What about your mom?" Ken asked softly. "She's why you live at home now."

Jason sighed. Ken didn't ask it lightly or carelessly. He knew more than anyone else outside of Jason's immediate family, but that wasn't much and Jason imagined Ken's curiosity must be as voracious as anyone else when it came to a woman who never left her room.

"If I ever tell that story," Jason said, "it would turn into a story about me. And who would I interview for the narrative? Mom? My dad?"

"Sorry," Ken said. "It's just so interesting for those of us looking in. Living it is probably another thing."

"Maybe you can write about it," Jason said with a laugh, but in the breath before Ken answered, Jason hoped his friend would agree.

"Nah. Got my own crazy family," Ken said. "My uncle avoided 'Nam by joining a traveling circus. That shit writes itself."

“So what do you think?” Jason asked. “What do I tell Campbell?”

“You can find her?” Ken came back.

Jason could. Part of his time at the library had been spent tracking the address from the library’s records. It had been difficult at first, but once he found how the old Rural Routes had been converted to a grid system for emergency response it was a pretty simple matter to locate the house with the internet. Jason had printouts of driving instructions, area maps, and even satellite images. “Say what you will about Big Brother,” he told Ken, “but he can get you from A to B.”

Ken remained silent for a moment. “It’s a weird tale, that’s for sure. I’m not sure how you can meet all the project requirements with it, but he’s a sucker for a good story. Hook him with the lie. Hint at something sordid. I’d leave out the stuff about her voice and the colors, or at least tone it down so that it seems like your memory is playing it out as some surreal movie.” After another brief silence Ken asked, “What do you hope to find?”

Jason ticked his answers off on his fingers. “I want to know why she still uses a library card that is almost four times older than me. I want to know why the librarians lied about her. I want her to tell me about Heaven’s despite.”

“Stick with the first two,” Ken advised, “and let the third come out in the telling.”

They chatted a bit more. Ken and some of their other friends wanted to take weekend and go ice fishing, maybe some snow-shoeing. Jason offered to hook them up with some equipment and a private lake. His summers working with the canoe outfitter had earned him access to a lot of interesting places, as well as storage crates full of outdoor gear for all seasons. He thanked Ken, and they made plans to meet at the fraternity house after dinner the next day. After he hung

up, Jason made a note to grab his winter camping gear out of the garage. He grimaced when he remembered how he had packed it away after that last miserable caving trip in late November. He'd have to run it through the laundry a few times before he could even think about putting those clothes on, but at least he could show Ken the kind of gear they'd need.

Jason made a few more notes and then powered up his laptop. The two senior librarians lied to me, he wrote as his opening to Dr. Campbell. I don't care about them, but the woman on the other side of the lie, this strange old woman I met by the vinyl records, she has a story that captured me when I picked up her ancient library card. The lie isn't the story I want to tell. It's just the finger that pointed me in the right direction. It's the catalyst that disappears once the reaction is done. Jason told Dr. Campbell about meeting the woman by the LPs. He methodically chronicled the events, occasionally making brief speculations he hoped would pique the professor's curiosity—speculations he could resolve when he interviewed the woman. He told Dr. Campbell how elements of the event seemed surreal upon reflection: her voice, her disappearance, the poem, the old card. Jason didn't try to provide reasons or justifications for how he felt. These mysteries just made his compunction that much stronger. He hoped Dr. Campbell would understand.

With only a cursory proof-read, and before he could change his mind, Jason emailed the document to his professor.

As he picked up the bag of carry-out trash, Jason realized that he had not written the email as a request. Even if he had, Campbell could refuse to accept Jason's new project. That hardly mattered. Jason was going to the farm. He was going tomorrow, and he would get his answers. At that moment nothing seemed more important.

He checked the weather online. Winter storm advisories. Again. During December and January there had been three such warnings and none of them had dropped more than two inches of snow. There had even been a few days at the end of January that had been warm enough for the college boys to break out shorts and tear up the mall with some raucous football.

Hands full of trash, eyes blurry from exhaustion and staring at the computer screen, Jason shambled down the stairs to dispose of the garbage and brush his teeth. The grandfather clock on the landing told him it was well after two in the morning. He shrugged in the knowledge that it was already Saturday and he could sleep in. The only light for the hall seeped from beneath his mother's door. The box he had dropped earlier was gone, but the spilled sauce remained. An imprint of bare toes had dried at the edge of the spill. Jason shivered as he thought of the fading but sticky trail that must lead for a few steps across his mother's floor.

As he passed the door on his way to the silent ground floor, he heard the unmistakable rasp of sharp scissors as they dissected sheaves of paper.

## *Chapter Four: August LeVey*

Somewhere behind the dull silhouette of the city's skyline, god's nicotine stained fingers ground out the sun against the horizon. Even on the clearest of days, Indianapolis protruded from the floodplains of the White River in tones of grey. Dull like the edge of a cinder block. Dull like a tin can peeled of its label.

August LeVey watched the clouds engulf the sun's last cherry embers. The streetlights hovered inside halos of mist. Rank brown water leapt out of potholes in the alley and left oozing trails down the windows of August's basement apartment. A stain crept up the corner of his kitchen, and August could hear the constant bubble and churn of water behind the cinderblock walls.

The first of January had brought heavy snows but now, weeks later, only the tall piles left by the plows remained—grey and dirty like translucent slag heaps. It was foolish to imagine spring now. Foolish but inevitable. August, like everyone else, had had enough of the grey skies, the ruts of ice and dirty snow, the blinding wind. There was more to come, but every season erased all trace of all previous years from the collective memory. Roadway accidents traced the city's yearly learning curves: first rain of spring, first bright rush-hour of summer, first frost of fall, first snow. The city suffered from amnesia and a faint but persistent despair that something important had been lost but even the name of that something had been forgotten. There had been

almost a week of sun and a breeze. It was almost February, and the city had been granted a reprieve. The last few days made everyone think of March. No one remembered the storms and ice and slush from every previous March. March held out hope. In a city that had history but no memory, hope was a curse.

He had a client coming in a few minutes, but it had slipped his mind. He slouched in the tan cushions of his couch, eyes fixed, but unfocused, on the window at ceiling level. A paperback collection of pulp detective stories straddled his left knee. Daydreaming took up a lot of his time.

The rain had finally brushed aside the mist and descended with the night. August's eyes briefly flicked across the windows, but in his daydream, LeVey looked in shock at a severed head that Dan Turner had just dropped onto his couch. The head was clean and pale. A single bullet hole in the forehead. No blood.

Turner paced silently in and out of the small pool of light that escaped from LeVey's reading lamp. LeVey glanced away from the window. He could see Turner out of the corner of his eye. Turner was a big guy, and he moved from wall to wall with seven or eight steps—a ponderous and violent motion that reminded LeVey of the Kodiak bear at the zoo. When LeVey looked up, the big man started muttering with each lap between the walls: "What the hell. What the hell. I've seen some screwy things in this town. Someone's watching. Damn. I'm as cooked as Arkle if I don't cook them first."

"Get it together, Turner. You bring me a head and then go and lose your own? Tell me about this guy again. Fatty..."

"Skinny," Turner didn't stop pacing but he straightened up a bit. "Skinny Arkle. Actor. Big player in Hollywood until this skirt, Norwood, dies at one of his parties. He beats the murder

rap, but the trial was a barn-burner. Now he's damaged goods and no one wants to be in his circle. Still haunts the sets. Still has a few friends. Married another actress, Kitty Calvert. He managed to hold on to a pile of scratch, and she's loaded. Kept him set up in new cars and old scotch."

It was a damn sight. Clean and white. No blood. LeVey wanted to think he had seen it all, but you drop a head into a man's lap and he'll still squirm like he's on fire. Rain slashed the windows like a cutthroat.

"You going to have a look at it?" LeVey asked.

"I've seen enough," Turner snapped back. He pointed his finger and thumb at the head, wiggled his thumb, "Boom!"

"You lost your nerve."

Turner reached into his coat. LeVey gave him a cold eye and a colder smile. The big dick backed down and went back to pacing the room.

LeVey reached for the head...

...but August couldn't decide where to grab it. Arkle didn't have that much hair, and that move seemed too brutal. The nose? Too silly. The ears? In his indecision it looked like August was giving the head a facial. He massaged the scalp. He brushed at the nose and under the jaw. He pretended to wave a fly away from the ears. Finally, with two hands, he pressed on each temple like he was working to relieve Skinny Arkle's tension with light circular motions. He tilted the head so that he could examine the wound at the neck. When he picked up the head he realized that he had no idea how much a human head should weigh. Probably more than a balloon, but that's how Arkle's head felt between his hands.

Turner was still there, still pacing. With each step he punctuated “What – the – hell.” Turner was a creation of Robert Leslie Bellem, prolific pulp author of the early ‘30s. Dan Turner, Hollywood Detective. Tough, lurid, worldly. He was new to August so he looked a lot like the ones August had read before—noir anti-heroes like Sam Spade and Mike Hammer. Loose suit-coat. Fedora. Suspenders. White collar and dark tie. Cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Unlit. August didn’t let his daydreams smoke in his apartment.

August tossed the head of Skinny Arkle back to the couch and went back to reading. After a couple more pages, Turner thought he heard a sound outside the door. He drew his gun and turned to August.

“Expecting company?”

The realization that he actually was expecting someone—a potential client—punched August in the chest. “Shit. I’ve got a client at eight. What time is it?”

“I’m your secretary now? Grab a gat. Maybe this one brought friends.”

August put the book down, and Detective Turner flickered like the end of a film reel. The severed head evaporated. So did Turner. The windows near the living room’s ceiling were dark. August couldn’t see his clock, but he knew it must be close to eight. The only light in the apartment fell from the flexible reading lamp he had clipped to the back of the couch. He wore a pair of plaid boxers and a green t-shirt. He had to get on some clothes and turn on the lights.

All of the lights.

He bounced off the couch and ran down the hall to the apartment’s only door. He didn’t have time for Turner’s world, but he had to be sure. August glanced out the peep-hole. No one yet.

Her name was Stulls. Eight o'clock. When had he made this appointment? He couldn't remember. It didn't matter. Turn on the lights. No reflective surfaces. Put on some clothes.

After he slapped on the hall light, he turned back to the rest of the rooms. August lived in the smallest apartment of a three-level, yellow-brick building on Washington Street. His apartment huddled in the basement, under the stairs, and was probably a converted storage space—the farthest point from the street. The floor: a slab of concrete with a worn layer of beige carpet everywhere except the kitchen and the bathroom. All the interior walls: thin sheetrock partitions. The exterior walls: painted cinderblock.

August turned on the lights to the living room—long fluorescent bulbs, recessed into the ceiling, refracted through sepia rectangles of plastic. He walked to the bathroom, propped open the door and turned on the lights, even the ones over the sink. Back in the living room, the hum from the fluorescents served to mask the bubbling of melt-water that dribbled behind the exterior walls. The couch, his desk, some grey file cabinets, and a metal folding chair were the only pieces of furniture in the room. August examined these carefully. There were no visible shadows. The room contained no reflective surfaces. Good.

As he stepped up to the bedroom door, August caught a whiff of his t-shirt and peeled it off with a grimace. He tossed it into a plastic basket at the foot of his bed. The bedroom resembled the living room in that it had no wall coverings and only a few pieces of secondhand furniture: a single bed, a low bureau. No mirrors. Four long cardboard boxes covered the top of the bureau. A white shirt, dark tie, and grey slacks hung from the doorknob to the walk-in closet.

Comic books and detective paperbacks filled the boxes on the bureau. He spent days reading them and allowing the plots and narration to bleed over—leech into the crevices and

voids in his memory. Detectives and scoundrels like Dan Turner and Sam Spade turned up, Batman swept in through the windows at inconvenient hours (usually wounded and in need of sutures), Luke Cage came to shake him down for information on occasion, and he had once suggested to Frank Castle that the little voice that urged Castle to put a bullet through the Punisher's head was probably right—fucking psycho.

August lived most of his life in those boxes. He wanted to live in a world of hard-boiled detectives and superheroes, but not out of any desire to be one. He didn't need his life to be any weirder than it was. He didn't have a driving desire to fight for justice, make that last big score, or talk in exclamatory phrases. There were no bright costumes or hidden passages, and he never thought of his apartment as a lair. He didn't own a trench coat. He needed the world of superheroes and hard-boiled dicks because he so desperately needed context.

August LeVey did not have a shadow. He did not have a reflection. By some instinct, he knew that he had once possessed these attributes, just like everyone else, but he could not remember the moment in which he realized they were gone. At that precise place in which his shadow and reflection disappeared, a hole opened in his memory, and the closer August approached the edge, the more he could feel the terrible gravity of that emptiness pulling at the rest of his mind. He had been bereft of shadow and reflection for just over two years, but the precise time and circumstance of the disappearance had been consumed by the chasm that marred the fabric of his memory. What terrified August was the fact that he had continued to lose memories, especially little things he needed every day. Sometimes he forgot how to do simple actions. Sometimes he looked at an object and had no idea what it was. Last week he had been startled by the rumble of a large white box in his kitchen. He relearned lost things quickly, but if

he could forget what the refrigerator was, he reasoned that there had to be other vacancies he had yet to discover.

It came as little comfort that he could feel a distinct sensation when a memory disappeared—like a metronome that missed a beat. If he imagined that his memories and the rest of his subconscious ticked away behind the surface noise of his daily thoughts and sensations then a brief mental silence accompanied the memory as it dissipated.

August stood in the doorway of his bedroom, naked except for his boxers. The lights from the living room behind him cast a bright rectangle on the otherwise black floor. Where his silhouette should be, only the dark rectangle of his boxers cast its shadow. The light could pass through him, but it could not go through his boxers.

August slapped the switch and the disembodied boxers vanished under the bedroom light.

“What kind of man is afraid of his drawers?” Turner’s smirk took up most of the room. He was leaning against the wall at the foot of August’s bed as if he had never been in the living room.

“What kind of man still calls them drawers?” August shot back.

“I should call them panties when I see them on you. You’re still frightened of shadows.”

“That was cheap.” August crossed to the bureau and pulled out a white undershirt. “Oh, I left Arkle’s head on the couch,” he told Turner. “Shouldn’t you figure out who sent it to you and why?”

“Don’t change the subject. The head’ll keep.”

“Sciotophobia,” August said. “Fear of shadows. I don’t have it.”

“You’re a shrink now, professor?”

“Internet.”

“Yeah? Gotta get me one of those. Good for fishing.”

“I’m not afraid of shadows. I just... I just don’t want anyone else to know.”

Turner made a snort and rolled his eyes.

August didn’t have to lie to the detective. It wasn’t a lie. He didn’t fear shadows and, although he couldn’t look in the mirror to see his appearance, he was pretty sure that the effect was disconcerting. August borrowed shadows from his clothes. He lived in darkness whenever he could, and when that was impossible or (as was the case when he had a client) impractical, he swept away all shadows in a flood of indirect light.

Of course Turner, now just a faint outline, knew that August wasn’t telling the *complete* truth. August didn’t fear shadows. He feared one shadow—his own. It was out there. Somewhere. It had its own agenda and its own designs—it had its own topography, independent of August’s silhouette and the interplay of light and object. August missed his shadow even more than he missed his reflection. And as much as he longed for the return of that intimate darkness, he feared the reunion even more.

She was late.

August had finished dressing—white shirt, grey slacks, black leather shoes over grey socks—and made nervous circuits around the couch. When eight-thirty came and went, he stopped pacing, dropped into the couch, and picked up his book. He wanted to finish Bellem’s story and start on an Elmore Leonard or a Walter Mosley.

Turner had just grabbed the chink maid, and August felt himself blush when Turner tore open her dress—August didn't like Turner, but he kept reading. When he heard Turner's voice say, "She fitted against me like tissue paper. Warm, soft curves were touching my chest, and she was offering me her lips—" August thankfully dumped the book on its face when the buzzer rang.

On his way to the door, August noticed the kitchen lights were out. He continued on to the door and thumbed the intercom button.

"Mrs. Stulls?"

"I... yes..."

"Did you come in the back?"

"Yes... I... Yes."

"Go down the stairs as you come through the door. I'm the first door on the left."

August released the security door and walked back to the kitchen. When he turned on the lights, a small pool of water glistened on the floor, creeping out from under the sink cabinet like an amoebic appendage. The apartment walls were porous in places, and when the water table rose significantly, the same was revealed about the floor. August stepped onto the linoleum. It rippled under his foot, and he heard the whoosh of displaced water sliding between the linoleum and the concrete underneath. He backed out of the kitchen and crossed the hall to his bedroom. From the laundry basket he retrieved a terry cloth robe and tossed it at the puddle. He hoped it would at least slow the trickle of groundwater that skulked up through whatever holes lurked beneath the plumbing.

LeVey cursed the dark and stormy night in the city. The rain flushed the rats out of their sewers and into the streets. Into the houses. Turner showed up with a head under his arm, and now this broad had appeared. She'd bring rats with her—that was for sure. Maybe the city was cleaning house. Stopped up the drains and let the water fill until the sleeping people and frantic vermin were drowned or swept away.

When he went to crack open the apartment door, his footprints lingered behind as damp, dark tracks in the beige carpet. Footsteps slowly descended the stairs above his apartment so he retraced his soggy footprints, ignored the slowly submerging kitchen, and planted himself behind his desk in what he hoped was a professional manner that exuded confidence and concern. On the desktop, two halves of a bagel cultivated vast empires of mold in the cracks formed by the dried cream cheese. August couldn't remember when he had eaten last, let alone when he had brought out bagels. When was his last job? At least a week... maybe—had it been there that long? Forget it, he told himself. The top drawer of the file cabinet made a convenient disposal for the bagel, plate, and mold cultures. From the lower drawer he pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. The pad shed a sprinkling of crumbs and desiccated cream cheese.

“Hello?” A woman's voice crept through the crack in the front door.

Turner materialized by the couch. “Are you afraid of your brush and comb too?” He chuckled and plucked a match from a paper book like he was pulling the leg off a spider.

August pushed back from his desk and pointed at the detective, “Don't...”

“Should I... should I stay out here?” Mrs. Stulls asked from the hall.

Turner laughed but didn't strike the match.

“No,” August said too loudly. In a softer voice, “I'm sorry, Mrs. Stulls.”

August stood and crossed the living room from his desk to the couch in three fast strides. As he passed the hallway he caught a glimpse of a white raincoat and pink shoes where he had cracked open his door. He had to get his hat, forgotten under his reading lamp. He missed his shadow for existential reasons and his reflection for practical ones. He had no idea what his hair looked like. It felt shaggy and unkempt. He hoped his face was relatively free of scabs from shaving. The hat's soft band slid over his thick hair and he hoped that it cast something of a shadow across his features. It wasn't a fedora, more like a fishing hat, but it had enough of a brim that its shadow should help blur his features.

He stepped into the small slice of the living room that Mrs. Stulls could see if she had stepped into the hall.

Mrs. Stulls stood just outside the apartment door under the dingy stairs. The light from his apartment didn't reach much above her waist.

"Please come in, Mrs. Stulls."

"I didn't know if this was... if I had the right place." She pushed open the door with a gloved hand, and LeVey drank in the frail as if she was a fountain in the desert. She was blonde and tall, a flame settling briefly in a dark corner of the cold city. Blue eyes flicked out from under lashes that curled like nervous wings. That was enough. The room leapt a few degrees warmer, and LeVey could feel the sting where her glance had brushed across the bridge of his nose, his cheek, his angular jaw. He saw a dame who wasn't sure if her next step would take her into the arms of danger or the arms of an unexpected lover...

"Mr. LeVey?"

August shook his head. "I'm sorry. Please come in."

“She can sit over here with me.” Turner perched on the back of the couch. He patted his thigh even though he couldn’t see her from where he sat.

“I’ll get you a chair, Mrs. Stulls.”

August opened the utility room and pulled out a thinly padded folding chair. He walked around his desk to set the chair down. She had moved a few steps into the hall. As he returned to his seat behind his desk, she stepped forward and stood beside the chair.

“Ah hell.” Turner stopped patting his thigh and stood quickly.

She was blonde and tall, but the rain had dampened any flame that might have been there, and August noticed that the wick of her hair grew in a lot darker than the ash-blonde ends. Her eyes were set close together, and they protruded slightly, giving her the facial expression not unlike the opossum that lived in the building’s dumpster. Her raincoat gaped open below her waist, missing several buttons. Spots of mud speckled the sides of her shoes. She was probably in her forties, but she could easily pass for sixty if she wore the right hat.

Her eyes were intensely blue.

LeVey played it cool with this number—stole some glances when she lowered her lashes over those bright blues. They were eyes to remember even if the rest of her wasn’t, but she turned away—looked anywhere but at LeVey, like some mouse too far from its hole. She had what he needed—money and a name. He wouldn’t play cat— yet. He needed her to feel at home.

August indicated the apartment with a wave of his hand, “It’s not much of an apartment, but then again, I don’t need much for my work. I’m not in it much.”

“I’m a little nervous about this.”

LeVey smiled. Again, her eyes flashed hot for a moment, and damn if they didn't make LeVey burn! But he had a job to do. Turner wouldn't leave until LeVey did something about that head, and there was the question of how LeVey would make rent this month. Bums like Turner didn't pay in anything but headaches. The dame here had a case, and LeVey needed to hear it so he could put paid to his debts. There were other ways he could get the geetus, but LeVey wasn't ready to scrape that low. Not yet. Not again.

“Would you like some coffee?”

The words escaped his mouth before August remembered the incipient flood beneath the sink. Or that the water seeping up from the floor was probably cleaner than the water that sputtered out of the tap. Or that most if not all of his cups were steeping in a fetid pool of tap water that he'd been meaning to empty with a bucket ever since the drain stopped performing a week ago. Or that the damp conditions present in his apartment had facilitated the transformation of his instant coffee into a single crystal from which he could break smaller portions with the help of a flat-head screwdriver.

Brilliant.

August resigned himself to an awkward but mercifully short conversation with Mrs. Stulls. She wouldn't be the first client who had apologized for wasting his time and then scurried away after a brief interview. But she might be the first to never sit down.

To make matters worse, Turner moved away from the couch and ambled over to sit on the corner of August's desk.

“No. Thank you. It's just... when... outside... I'm just very nervous in strange places.”

“We can go somewhere else if you like.”

“No,” she replied. “No. I... I just got very nervous hearing you say my name. Upstairs. On the intercom. I don’t... Anyone could hear, you know?”

Turner chortled.

August had never thought about it. It made sense. He ran a low rent investigation business in the basement of an apartment building. Not five minutes ago, he had announced the name of a potential client over the public intercom. Anyone on the first floor could hear the intercom despite their closed doors. His heart sank a bit. Again, he had the impression of others, potential clients, who never returned after their first meeting.

“I’m sorry, Mrs.... uh... Ms. S. I understand completely. Your privacy is safe with me.”

She sat down.

In a loud stage whisper, Turner said, “You were just handed a miracle there.”

“This is all very strange to me,” said Mrs. Stulls.

“Maybe she’s got a mirror in that purse and you can show her just how right she is.”

August ignored Turner and pushed aside the paper and pencil. “Well, why don’t you tell me what you need a private investigator for, and I’ll see what I can do.”

She kept her coat on. She perched on the edge of the seat and brought her elbows into her belly. Her likeness to a rodent intensified as she curled her hands tightly around the handles of her purse.

Sleet rapped at the window. August looked up from his computer. After Mrs. Stulls had scurried back up the stairs, he had run a few checks on the information she had given him. He rubbed his eyes and stretched in his chair. His foot kicked the desk, and an empty ravioli can and a fork

clattered to the floor leaving a red smear on the dingy carpet. All the lights still burned in his apartment. Turner was nowhere to be seen. August stood and turned out the torchiere lamp.

He had done a few infidelity cases before, and this one seemed straight forward enough. Mr. Jerry Stulls and his wife, Pamela. Married fifteen years. No children. They both owned an office building on the north side of Indianapolis that was home to several real estate agencies, brokerage firms, and lending institutions. Jerry managed the property, and Pamela worked as a paralegal for a small law firm downtown.

August carried his notes with him as he moved through the rooms, extinguishing the lights. He saved the kitchen for last. Shadows reclaimed the apartment. The reading light, the one clipped to the couch, he left on. August looked over his “office”—a collection of battered pieces arranged to box off one corner of his “living room.” The computer monitor stared back from the corner with its bright blue eye. He could feel the quotation marks condensing around other aspects of his “life.” The Stulls reminded him just how incomplete he was. They had jobs and homes and cars. They had friends. They had reasons to fight. They had intrigue and passion. They had memories and shadows and reflections. They did not need quotation marks.

He stepped into his bedroom without bothering to turn on the light. Well, maybe they need some around “marriage,” he thought. He kicked off his shoes and quickly slid out of his grey slacks. The bedroom was almost completely dark. The computer screen shut down automatically. The scant illumination blew through the bedroom like a faint breath. It moved nothing. August couldn’t help but look down. It was even too dim for individual shadows—at least to his eyes. At the soles of his feet he supposed some deeper darkness began where his socks interfered with the meager light.

Even in the near-perfect dark, August could sense that there were gaps where his shadow should be.

August quickly pulled on a pair of jeans.

He went back to what he knew about Jerry Stulls. Mrs. Stulls had provided August with Jerry's social security number, date of birth, his driver's license, their bank account numbers, and their credit card information. Every time he asked for more information, Mrs. Stulls bulged her eyes and stammered, "I'm... well... Is that necessary?"

Every fucking time, he thought. There has to be a better way to get that information. Maybe I can do it with just his social security.

When she left, August heated a can of ravioli in the can and ate with a battered fork as he searched the professional online databases. Jerry Stulls had a credit card that didn't have Pamela's name on it. The billing address was the office building, and it wasn't a business line of credit. The card had not been used very often. It was less than a year old, and the charges were limited to a hotel, some restaurants, gas stations, and supermarkets. The hotel and restaurants were all in Crawfordsville—about forty miles west of Indianapolis.

August tied on a pair of running shoes before searching around for his winter coat. He found it in the utility room. He patted down the pockets of the heavy coat where he discovered a fresh roll of film in one of the pockets as well as some batteries that had bled their acidic contents onto the nylon fabric. He threw the batteries in the trash, washed his hands, and then checked the batteries in his flashlight and camera. The flashlight had some corrosion on the bulb contact, and the sides of all the batteries were damp. "Fucking walls."

He cursed the entire time he dug through his drawers for more batteries and a fresh bulb.

August was happy.

Infidelity work was the most depressing, time-consuming, and dangerous type of investigation in his experience. If he gave the clients what they expected, they hated him and their spouses. If he didn't find anything, he made a handy whipping boy for all of their doubts and self-hate. This investigation would have no happy reunions. No relieved sighs or self-deprecating chuckles. Just the fact that Mrs. Stulls came to him at all meant things weren't going well.

But it was work.

Work gave definition to his days. While he worked, he could remember beginning and ending each day. He had memories of clients and old cases, lists of names and phone numbers and addresses. The hungry void in his mind never consumed the memories he collected from his work, but it could take almost anything else: shoes, for instance. He had lost all memory of shoes for almost a week. He did not wear them, could not even recognize them, until he eventually left his apartment and saw them on the feet of other people. Even then he had to relearn how to tie them. He had lost and relearned other things over the past two years, and August suspected that many more memories, personal memories, had been lost and he had yet to notice.

But right now, he had a job. The present was safe.

He was happy.

The money helped. He'd be able to eat for another week or so. Maybe I won't have to go scumming for a while, he thought as he carefully checked his gear. It can't be worth the risk—that place steals more memories from me every time.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” came Turner’s voice from the hall. “You aren’t going to be paid by that bimbo for a few weeks at least.”

“I got an advance...”

“Of a hundred bucks. How much does that give you now? Total?”

“A hundred bucks.”

“That’s what I thought. And it’s the end of the month. You still pay rent at the end of the month, right?”

August checked each coat pocket to make sure they were fastened. He tugged at the camera around his neck.

“Just let me enjoy this for a moment.”

“Sure. But while you’re out for a sneak and peek on that skirt’s husband, you might as well dig around for enough cash to keep us afloat.”

August nodded. *Us*. Right.

From the top drawer of his bureau he hefted a Leatherman’s tool and slipped it into his coat’s inner pocket. He took off his fisher’s hat and pulled a balaclava over his ears, leaving it rolled up so that it looked like a fleece stocking cap. If it was still sleeting outside he would appreciate the warmth, and it made for a quick mask if he needed it while scumming.

I’m not scumming. I’m not leaving the glasside.

“Hey,” Turner said as he made a half turn. “Good hunting. I’ve got a friend. I’ll give him a call. Maybe he’ll have something for us about that head when you get back.”

“Sure.” That *us* again. August made a mental note to move on to the Mosley novel when he got back. Turner had overstayed his welcome.

If I have a place. August knew only one way to get enough money, but scumming meant that he would have to enter the Grey Lands—he would lose more memories. His heart hammered seemingly to the ticking of his thoughts . The hole in his memory curled upon itself as if in anticipation. Turner was right. August could not stay glasside, but the price terrified him.

August looked away from Turner. He heard the detective lumber off into the living room. I can look in on Stulls from the greyside, August rationalized. Faster than taking a cab. He raised his hand to the doorknob of the bedroom closet but didn't turn it. He didn't turn the knob for several breaths.

Reluctantly, August opened the door. It swung wide, revealing the dark space of his walk-in closet. The wide, full-length mirror that hung on the inside of the closet door reflected everything in the bedroom except August. He reached into the closet and turned on the overhead light. He took a few steps back to the bedroom door and turned on those lights as well. Bright light made finding the bedroom easier when he came back. He stepped up to the mirror, and although he stood less than a foot from the gleaming surface, he had an unobstructed view of his bed, bureau, and bedroom door directly behind him. He did not appear in the mirror at all. Not even his clothes. He scuffed his foot against the carpet. The only indication that he was in the room was the slight flattening of the carpet fibers under the impact of his invisible shoe.

He glanced down at his notepad. It held a list of places Jerry Stulls might be found over the next few days and nights.

August looked back at the mirror, sucked in a breath, and stepped over the mirror's frame—forward through the glass and across the barrier between glasside and greyside.

## *Chapter Five: Gilley*

Gilley looked up, rubbed her thumb along the edge of the kitchen table, and willed the house to coalesce against the steady pressure of winter and darkness. The kitchen was pitch black, and without her sense of sight, the house seemed insubstantial—incomplete. The wood-burning stove clicked with expansion beneath the frantic cry of the wind. Windowpanes shuddered. She stood in the total darkness, bent to gather her skirt, and stepped forward to open the stove’s heavy iron door. The room brightened in the moment that it took for her to stir the coals. Plates perched on the edge of the sink. Wine glasses glistened behind the plates. Something crouched next to the faucet, invisible but not transparent. Something clung to the ceiling above the back door. Layers of blackness, each one a living thing. This one feline but too long. This one a mass of millipedes, carpeting the floor in front of the door, a silent orgy of legs and chitinous segments. Doorframes embraced black rectangles. The hallway that led to the front door was nothing but a chasm at her back. Nothing existed outside the kitchen.

The shadows had come to talk.

“I forgot how bright the stove can be,” Gilley said to the shadows. “I’m not being a good host am I?” The iron door fell closed. Darkness clamored back. Silence followed.

Gilley let go of her skirt and groped for a moment with her free hand. She found the edge of the table and pivoted back to her seat.

What are the shadows saying? “I don’t understand,” she spoke aloud.

Her eyes would never adjust to this darkness. She focused on the pressure of her hand on the wooden table. To her eyes, there was no table no floor no room. There was motion and correspondence and topography. Her arms tightened, and she could feel her shoulders and back constrict. When they gathered like this, the shadows could create unnatural patches of darkness that resisted all but the most direct light.

She chided herself for waving to an echo and talking to a shadow. You are senile, old woman. She turned in her chair and stood again, facing the wood-stove. In the absolute darkness she listened to the scrape of her shoes against the wooden floor.

The shadows needed some light. She stood and shuffled forward until her toes felt the uneven rise of the flagstones that ringed the base of the stove. Her legs felt the intensity of the heat radiating from the black iron. Gilley placed her hands in front of her and pushed against the heat, as if to placate the silent stove. The metal had reached a steady temperature, and it no longer clicked. Somewhere close there protruded a wooden handle, the only thing she could touch on the stove. Everything else about this darkness offered only pain and shock, injury and threat, as it crouched in front of her.

She held her breath.

The stove had been in this same place for almost fifty years. Gilley exhaled and let her hand and arm do what they had done that whole time. Her fingers closed around the wooden handle, and she lifted the lid that covered the front burner just high enough that she could feel the flare of heat from the exposed coals. Air flowed into the gap and the fire purred. She left the lid

askew so that a sliver of light rose through the darkness and settled as soft crescent on the ceiling.

With the dim light from the fire, the shadows told her stories as they played across the ceiling and the walls. The shadows filled all the doorframes and windows so that no light entered the kitchen save from the stove. They contorted their edges into any number of shapes and manipulated the light so that it shifted from pale yellows to the deepest reds.

A man ran through a forest, pursued by something that might be a bird with thin wings or a bull's head.

A murder of crows spiraled over a forest. Their trajectories tightened until the black circle burst in every direction and only the silhouette of a farmhouse remained.

Her house.

A silhouette appeared on the hill below the house, and when it turned to walk up to the barn, it was Frank's face turned in profile, as if startled from behind. Another figure appeared: Gilley. The man and the woman faced each other as they had fifty years ago—youthful and smooth. Gilley's profile approached Frank's and melted together. When their bodies separated, her shadow form reached up and pulled his head down to her breast and then arched her back until his head disappeared between her thighs. Her head rocked back, her mouth opened, and he rose above her until their outlines merged at the mouth and hip, their arms thrust over their heads.

A man stood in a doorway. He might be Frank, but before she could study the face, he lifted a long duffel bag over his shoulder and walked away.

The crescent of light from the stove reformed, and the shadows retreated to the doorframes and windows. Before Gilley could reach out to them, the shadows dissolved from the windows and doors. The morning sun crested the trees on the ridgeline and spilled into the kitchen. For several moments, Gilley stayed in her chair, her eyes fixed on the brilliant bright square of light projected against the kitchen wall. When no shadows moved to block the light or play out scenes on the walls, she rose and stepped into the warm light.

The shadows had nothing more to show her.

The sunlight disappeared. Clouds returned the world to twilight. In the diffused light, there were no more animate shadows. Only objects and darkness.

Singing drifted from the dining room, and Gilley followed the sound.

*I said the blackbird sitting on a chair*

*I once courted a maiden fair*

*She proved fickle and turned her back*

*Ever since I've dressed in black*

Mims' voice was silent when Gilley approached the doorway. Gilley stepped into the dining room. It was not without effort. She tilted her head to the side and pushed her way into the room. When she tried to leave the kitchen, it felt as if a layer of dead skin was being stripped away, and some insistent force pulled at the remains of this layer when she crossed the boundary

between kitchen and dining room. It seemed as if every motion she made was absorbed by the cold, a general feeling of decay that pervaded everything, informed every thing.

The room was spare and much narrower than it had seemed in last night's candlelight. An arch split the room into two unequal spaces: a small sitting room by the front windows and the longer dining room with windows along an adjacent side of the house. The windows in the sitting room allowed Gilley to look over the long walnut dining table and out through the screened front porch. Three brass candle holders in the center of the table held only blackened stubs of wick. The mirror spanned the width of the table. A portable record player occupied a place in front of the mirror. Gilley stepped up to the table but remained behind the mirror. The quilt she had removed for the Invitation of Reflections huddled under the table. She crouched slowly, extended her hand as if to a wounded animal, and pulled the quilt into her lap.

The mirror was as wide as the table and as tall as her torso. As the quilt clung to her lap Gilley admired the simple and elegant supports that kept the mirror upright. Frank had modified the original frame so that the mirror could stand freely on any flat surface. It could be hung on the wall. It could stand horizontally, as it did now, or it could be turned vertically and used as a wardrobe mirror.

With the quilt in her arms, Gilley stood but made no move toward the table. She refused to approach the mirror. She sang the chorus for Mims.

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*How-dee-now and a diddle-la-day*

*Hey hey heeeyyyy*

*Diddle-lie diddle-low*

“Do you remember... remember... remember...”

Mims’ voice slid from beneath the table, swirled behind Gilley’s back, and settled above the mirror. Slow and soft. So lethargic and halting that Gilley wondered if the echo might be hung-over. Gilley laughed and walked down the length of the table, always keeping the mirror at her back. She did not look into the mirror until she pulled out a chair at the opposite end of the table. In the reflected room, the chair turned and retreated as if it scurried away from the table on its own.

“I don’t remember you ever crawling from under a table if that’s what you mean.”

“No... no... no...”

Gilley sighed and looked away from the mirror, looking for anything other than the emptiness she found there. The chair in which she was sitting was pulled away from the table, turned clockwise a few degrees so that the mirror reflected the weave of the cane backing and through it, as if Gilley did not exist at all, the rhythmic ebb and flow of the grey morning sky. It had been twenty years since Gilley had seen herself in any mirror. In all that time, only the dead appeared in the mirror. She existed on only one side of the glass. The dead inhabited the other.

“You mean before this.” Gilley turned her chair a bit more and waved to encompass the entire room. In the mirror, her chair moved of its own accord, and the sky brightened to a sheen of fine silver.

Mims remained silent, and Gilley found herself casting about the room for any visible sign of the echo. Foolish, she thought. The echoes never disrupted anything. At the Candlemas, the echoes sang and coaxed haunting melodies from the crystal goblets. They flowed in and out of the wineglasses, their voices layering tones and harmonics that hovered just on the threshold of words. The water in the goblets never rippled. Gilley shivered and realized that not once in the years that Mims had kept her company, had Gilley felt the slightest puff of breath or the merest tremor at the passing of her sister's echo.

Gilley stopped searching for Mims and settled her eyes on the mirror frame.

The echoes could seep in the smallest crack and fill a room in an instant. They did not move in the sense Gilley did. Mims was not above the mirror; the echo created the illusion of location and movement by the volume and direction of her voice—merely a courtesy to Gilley. The echoes, like the shadows, were terrifying in their true nature: boundless, malleable, incorporeal, omnipresent.

“Why do you suppose no one is in the mirror today?”

“Sleeping it... sleeping... off... off...” Mims voice joked from above the mirror.

“I do think about the past,” Gilley admitted quietly. “More in the evenings than in the morning, I suppose. It's hard to break all those years of habit. But the night still comes so early, and I don't sleep as much as I used to. Not nearly as much as I want...”

“Do you dream... dream...?”

“No.” Gilley lied. “Not anymore.”

“What do you... you... remember... remember...?”

Gilley wondered why she had lied to the echo. It was as if she had sensed some hunger in the voice of her sister— an eagerness that frightened Gilley because she could not recall ever hearing anything but faint humor in the voice of her dead sister. Now this echo seemed to be guiding her into some isolated room where it could pull her apart, word by word.

“I remember you in the hospital.”

Gilley never had to repeat herself to Mims. Even now, when her voice barely rose louder than the light falling through the window, Mims could hear.

“I was dying... dying...” Mims prompted.

“You were dying. Everyone knew it by then. No one wanted to talk about it, of course. Oh, they had plenty of words for me: secondary infection, viral load, lymphocytes, and sarcoma. Prognosis. I would giggle at that word. They must have thought I was hysterical or holding in the sobs. I had been a nurse, for Christ sake. But I just kept thinking about your nose when they said it. Proboscis. They had so many words, and they meant so little. More words than I could ever bear. But it was all a way to sterilize the obvious: you were dying, and they just couldn’t keep up with everything attacking you.

“I’d have given anything for one of those nurses to just say, *We can’t spend any more time on this whore.*”

Mims’ laughter filled the room with the rich tone Gilley remembered from her teens. When Mims died, no one who looked at them would have believed that Gilley was the older sister. Gilley was nine when Mims was born, and although Gilley never warmed to her step-mom and never forgave her father, she doted on her baby sister even as it became clear that whatever burned in Mims would quickly outshine Gilley. Mims, although much younger, had so many

mannerisms that seemed to belong to an adult—it shocked people to hear her laugh or ask questions, prepare a meal or answer the phone.

Then Mims left. She had lived with Gilley and Frank for almost nine years. Without warning, Mims dropped out of graduate school and moved to Las Vegas. For twenty-five years she shared only letters and the occasional phone call with Gilley until the spring day when Mims appeared at the farm—51 years old and less than a year from death. Her voice, once deep and clear, rattled in her throat when she spoke. She still sang beautifully but reluctantly.

Now the echo's laughter was young and vibrant in a house of brittle webs and dry wood.

“Is that what... that... they thought of... they... me... me...?”

“It seemed plain at the time.”

“Is that what... is... you thought...you... of me... me...?”

Gilley felt as if the room fell away from her. She slammed her hand down on the table but it made only a feeble slap. She wanted eyes. She wanted her sister's eyes, or the nurse's eyes—someone to hold her gaze. Something other than a voice. Something other than the empty, grey room facing her in the mirror. Her own voice shocked her. It flowed over the table as rich and warm as Mims' echo, as if Gilley had borrowed some of its quality even as she felt the world dissolve around her. “Never. Never. Never.”

“They were scared... scared...”

“We were all scared,” Gilley countered. “You know, of all the words that they used, I don't think anyone said AIDS once. I can't remember when I first heard it that word. Maybe it was there. Maybe on TV. Maybe after you died.”

Gilley glanced at the empty chairs reflected in the mirror and asked slowly, “Mims, why don’t you come around to the mirror now? Why won’t you let me see you?”

Gilley had seen Mims in the mirror over the years. She always looked the same: college aged, long, heavy hair like dark curtains parting to reveal her shoulder or long neck or cherry-brown eyes. Her protruding collar bones pressed out against her white t-shirt— flat stomach, flat chest but small nipples prominent against the thin fabric. Jeans loose around her narrow waist and tight at the hips—boy jeans and army surplus boots. Gilley felt a pang at the memories. She wanted to search those brown eyes for something to ease the fear, the sense of predation, that she felt in the echo’s tone.

But Mims’ echo only seemed to retreat further behind the mirror.

“When did you... when... bring the mirror... mirror... to the hospital... hospital...?”

Gilley slumped back into the chair. The same chair in the mirror wobbled a bit but otherwise remained unchanged. The sky had taken on a steady white glare.

“You had another spell of pneumonia.” Gilley said. “Those were always bad, but this one. This one ate away everything.” Gilley had seen enough cases of pneumonia at the VA hospital to recognize the fatal ones. Mims wasn’t leaving the hospital. She would never leave the room. When Mims coughed herself into unconsciousness and then slipped into a coma, Gilley broke down in the hall outside the room. All she could say was *thank god thank god thank god* until she couldn’t bear the absurdity any more. She had been carrying around two conversations ever since Mims had been hospitalized. When the coma claimed Mims Gilley knew what she had to do, and one conversation, the thankful one, won out.

“Thank god she has this big isolated room.” Gilley told the echo. “That’s what I wanted to say. But I knew why you had that room, and it had nothing to do with your treatment and everything to do with your sickness—your disease.” Gilley had never had much use for doctors. At the VA their arrogance rankled, and their detachment encouraged her to take liberties on behalf of the soldiers, and in Frank’s case, to take liberties *with* the soldiers. At least at the VA she could respect their skill, but when Mims lay dying in her hospital bed, the doctors and nurses merely went through their ceremonial motions like white-clad clergy. They could only see the disease—not the patient—as it drowned Gilley’s sister. They recited their diagnoses and placed Gilley in a secure cell, as if she contained some malevolent spirit that had to be starved of human contact—caged away until they could safely strip and burn that room.

For the private room, Gilley had been thankful and spiteful simultaneously. It was too much. “I hated myself for even thinking that some good could come out of it,” she said.

Gilley left when no one was around. She drove the pickup back home and loaded up the things that bound them as family. Only four things connected them to their common father: the mirror, the leaded crystal, the land, and the graves on Nolen Hill. Gilley grabbed the things that could fit in the truck—the crystal and the mirror—and covered them with the quilt she had received as a wedding gift from Frank’s grandmother. When she got back to the hospital, she hauled that big mirror up to Mims’ room and went back for the crystal goblets. No one stopped her. No one was around to notice.

“After you slipped into the coma, I knew there was no one but me to see if you would make it back. I set the mirror on a cabinet at the foot of your bed, wrapped you in the quilt, and filled a wine glass with water in case you woke.”

“I did... did... awaken... awaken...”

“Yes. For a moment. You drank. You closed your eyes.” Gilley changed the subject.

“Something has happened to Frank.”

“How do you... how... know... you...”

“The shadows.”

Mims sang the last line of their favorite song. Her voice held little substance this morning. Last night it had been the most beautiful sound Gilley had ever heard.

*Diddle-lie diddle-low*

“Now it sounds... now... so hollow... hollow... and frail... frail...”

“Something was different last night,” Gilley agreed.

“You invited the... you... reflections... reflections...”

“Before that,” Gilley insisted. “I’ve never seen the shadows quite so... alive. For years, only The Silhouette has appeared...”

“It has brought familiars... has... before... familiars...”

“Yes. One. Maybe two. And they would perch in some corner or over The Silhouette’s shoulder. They rarely moved.”

Like a line of rain approaching across the roof of the forest, Mims voice seemed to swell above the table until it filled the room.

“Where did they... where... take you... where...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Frank was not here... Frank... is not here... here... and shadows... not here... do not speak... speak...”

“They showed me a man,” Gilley cried. “He left with his army bag.”

“Where do you go... where... when you sleep... sleep...?”

“Here. I was always here.” Gilley stood and moved to the nearest window in two rapid strides. She pulled the curtains apart to reveal the twisted softwood forest. She did not remember sleeping, but it made sense. The shadows often visited her in her dreams. Sometimes, she even felt as if she could leave the farm. A steady wind drove heavy flakes into the earth and trees and structures. The snow built up quickly throughout the cold world. Despite the wind’s force, the storm silently engulfed the house in snow. Silence enfolded the world. A strong draft of cold air wormed into the room. Gilley wrapped the quilt around her back and shoulders. The room brightened slightly, but it gained no color.

There were no shadows outside.

“What happened, Mims?”

“You cleared the table... table... the record ended... ended...”

“I was always here,” Gilley interrupted. “In the kitchen.”

“You never... never... came back until... never... now... morning... now...”

Gilley remembered clearing the table—carrying the dishes into the kitchen. The music lifted from the record player, joined and amplified by the choir of echoes. Shadow forms chased each other over every surface; The Silhouette remained placid and unresponsive in its place against the wall.

“The record ended... record... ended...” Mims sank the floor and moved along the baseboard. “You were gone... gone... you ended... ended... no sound... no sound...”

Turning her back on Mims, Gilley rushed back into the kitchen.

“What did you mean?” Gilley demanded.

“Only an emptiness... emptiness... here... emptiness... here...”

“In the kitchen?”

Mims coiled around the wood stove, her voice reverberating through the hot iron surfaces, “Everywhere... everywhere...”

Gilley sank into her chair at the kitchen table. The horizontal slats at her back, the heavy legs and supporting frame, the simple scroll work along the top—all worn smooth, polished by her hands, nervous feet—all edges darkened and worn away. The other three chairs seemed taller and maybe they were. They had sharp edges and the wood was a uniform blonde. Gilley thought of them as unrealized chairs—they were chairs only in form and ideal, unburdened of any weight save their own. Largely unmoved. Untouched.

“Something was different last night.” Gilley repeated.

“Now you sound... sound... like me... like me...”

Gilley snorted and let the chair take all of her weight. “I’m old. I don’t have to care about repeating myself. You should probably get used to it. I’m not getting any younger.”

“I’m not sure... not... that you are getting... getting... older...”

“Now you’re making fun of me.”

“Who came... came... to table last... came... last night... night...?”

“And you’re changing the subject!” Gilley proclaimed.

Mims seemed to slide into the chair to Gilley's right. "You've always been... always been... mature... mature..."

"I heard that pause," Gilley exclaimed. She batted her eyes and mimicked, "Mature... mature... mature..."

For a moment, their laughter mingled across the kitchen table.

"Tell me... me... about last night... night..."

"Let's put aside The Silhouette and shadows for now," Gilley said with some frustration. "I can't begin to understand what I saw last night and this morning. The shadows were there. Let's leave it at that. And you brought the echoes. The ones from the orchard and the quarry. Is there a new echo? I heard one before dusk yesterday. One I didn't recognize."

"The orchard... orchard... the quarry and... orchard... the hay barn... quarry... hay barn... No one you... no one... haven't heard before... no one... before..."

"See? I am older. I'm forgetting everything and everyone I knew."

"Are you changing the... changing... subject... changing...?"

"No."

"Who sat at table... who... in the mirror... who... mirror..."

There were still dishes to be washed from the Candlemas. Gilley sighed as she drew the hot water. Be quick, she thought, and then she listed the dead who had appeared in the mirror.

"There were several this year," she said. "More than I've seen in a while." When the dead appeared for the Invitation of Reflection, they stood around the table or sat in some of the seats. They never sat in the seat occupied by the Silhouette. They never sat in her seat although it did not appear to be occupied in the mirror. Jessica and Wilma stood behind her chair. Winston sat at

the table, and Malcolm stood at his shoulder. Holly and Brian sat in two other seats. Eloise was behind the record player. Gilley felt bad that she hadn't moved the record player. It didn't have to be on the table., but her deceased friend just smiled and watched the record turn. She looked up and smiled like all the others. And like all the others, she left.

“Those are the ones who were there when I pulled the quilt away.”

Mims asked, “Was I there... there...?”

Gilley paused but only so long to push the fruits and vegetables onto the counter and lift the plates into the hot, soapy water. “Yes, but Mama wasn't.”

“Does the mirror... mirror... face... mirror... the kitchen... kitchen...?”

Gilley shook her head and then remembered to speak. “No. I changed it this year.”

“Were there others... others...?”

“Many,” Gilley replied. “They all came and went. Mrs. Lederman appeared. She held Malcolm's hand. She looked just like that first day she moved into the north forty.” Gilley scraped the pinecones, mistletoe, and blackberries into the trash. The plate went into the dishwasher. Mrs. Lederman and her husband had rented the small cabin on the northern edge of Gilley's property. They were the first tenants in that house after Mims died in 1988. They stayed for a year.

“I did not expect... expect... her for many... expect... more years... years...”

“She looked well. But then they all do. You all do.”

“A pleasant surprise... pleasant...?”

Gilley lifted her hands from the dishwasher. “Not that pleasant,” she said. The plates and wine glasses needed to be rinsed. She turned the faucet to the other side of the sink, ran each

piece carefully under the hot water, and stacked the dishes on a wire rack. “I wish she could have been an echo.”

“She would still... still... be dead... dead...”

“Yes, but we could still hear her Irish brogue. Ah well. It used to be so pleasant to visit with her.” Mrs. Lederman seemed ageless. Gilley had no idea how old she was. Certainly older than me, Gilley thought, but maybe not by much. Given her age, Gilley couldn’t be too surprised that Mrs. Lederman had appeared in the mirror, but the Irish woman just never seemed to move in the same hours as Gilley did. Time hurried Gilley along, but Mrs. Lederman was never rushed, even when Mr. Lederman collapsed and they had to move away.

“I thought I’d be there before her,” Gilley said.

“Who would be... who... here to see... see... you... see you...?”

Gilley had no answer. There was no one to see her now. Or so she thought. Mims had said she disappeared after the Candlemas—walked out of the dining room and into an emptiness that Mims could not penetrate.

What happened last night, Gilley wondered. For that matter, what happened on the other side of the mirror?

“...flesh... in the flesh...”

“What Mims? I’m sorry.”

“Most pleasant would... pleasant... be for Mrs. Lederman... pleasant... to be here... Lederman... in the flesh... pleasant... flesh...”

“Of course.” Gilley had never considered this. She grabbed the silverware and the carving knife she had used to trim the blackberries and mistletoe and dropped them below the thinning layer of bubbles.

“And for Frank... Frank...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you prefer... prefer...”

“No.”

“...prefer... Frank in the... Frank...”

“No.” Gilley interrupted.

“...in the mirror... prefer... or in the... Frank... flesh... mirror... flesh...”

Gilley carefully pulled a fork out of the dishwater, pulled a soft dishcloth between the tines, and placed the fork in a plastic basket. Another fork. A spoon. Her hands disappeared below the surface of the water.

Through the window, the evening light of a summer burned away forty years of February mornings.

She finished writing checks for the bills at her desk. She was happy: a very simple feeling, something in the way she held the pen when she wrote and the way the paper felt soft under her fingers. The land was theirs. The farm kept the taxes and farmhands paid, food in the pantry, and the equipment in repair. The news out of Brazil and Mexico, Russia and Europe, the plains states, all pointed to a seller’s market. It would be a good year.

The days had been dry. The particles of dust and pollen chased the slant-light of evening as it climbed the trees behind the house. To the south and west, Gilley could make out copses of trees by the shadows they cast across her fields and those of her neighbors. She wrote a letter to her sister and another to a friend in Lafayette. When the sun was just a sliver above the western trees, the light seemed to burst from everywhere all at once. She put down her pen and walked down the hall to the kitchen.

She stood by the table and looked out the window to her right. Through the window over the table she could make out a slim corner of the chicken coop as it slid off into the evening shadows. The chickens were quiet. The equipment barn was quiet too. It was the newest structure on the farm: less than two years old, and the red paint gleamed so that the trees behind it seemed grey. As the sun set, the side facing the house caught the last light and the red wall, the white trim, the stone-grey roof seemed to unfold from the forest, as if the trees receded and the barn became a flat apparition that hovered against the background of leaves, grass, vine, and shadow. They kept the largest tractor and baler just inside the cavernous entrance. The massive doors opened to the south and were invisible from the house. A smaller sliding door, just wide enough for the pickup, faced the house and marked the middle of the barn. Frank had a workshop in the back—its door stood open. In the evenings he did small engine repair for the neighbors, part of the economy of favors and shared skill that kept farms alive.

She was acutely aware of the silence.

Instead of starting dinner, Gilley opened the back door and crossed the open yard in the last direct sunlight of the day. Her shadow leapt ahead of her and entered Frank's workshop before she was half-way there.

Anticipation licked at the flesh inside her lower lip. Last night they made love on the stairs, climbing down each one and down each other until they climaxed on the floor, their legs and back and forearms bruised, gravity triumphant but not without a fight and at least one brief release.

Maybe they could continue the fight out in the barn.

She did not call out.

The air was alive. It swarmed with invading motes of dust and pollen from the outside—bits of the gravel drive, tilled soil, cow shit, and corn sex flowed through the door and into the domain of sawdust, cobwebs, baled hay, and petroleum. Two incandescent lights dropped pools of light from the ceiling. On the workbench, a chainsaw lay on its side, the blade disassembled and the case splayed open like a cadaver displayed for an anatomist. A neat line of wrenches, sockets, and screwdrivers were arrayed beside the eviscerated chainsaw. The smell of gasoline and engine oil, grease solvent and ozone rose from the workspace. Under the other light, water dripped every few seconds into the ceramic basin. The sides of the sink were still wet, and the bar of pumice soap oozed a slow green trail toward the drain.

The truck was in the barn. The car was in the drive.

Frank was gone and, although she didn't know it at the time, the last traces of him were being pulled out the open door to disperse into the darkness.

“Are you thinking of... thinking... him now... now...?”

Gilley gasped but kept her hands under the water. A sharp pain and Mims' voice brought her back to the present.

“No,” she replied.

“But you were... you... last night... night...”

When she lifted her hands out of the water, she could see the blood beginning to well up just under her left thumbnail—a small cut. She pressed her index finger to the point where the blade had entered. She held the small paring knife in her right hand.

“Only because you mentioned his name.”

“And yet you have... yet... not invited the... invited... reflections for years... reflections... invited...”

The exquisite pain replaced the coldness that had grown in her all morning. “I’ve been thinking too much of my own death,” she told the echo.

“You never answered... you... my question... never... never...”

I won’t give you this pain, Gilley thought to herself. The blood formed a drop, but Gilley turned her wrist and watched the thick crimson fluid roll down her thumb and into the palm of her hand.

“I did. I don’t think of him.” You can’t pull me apart.

“But you refuse to see... refuse... the reflections... reflections... when did you... when... fear the dead... dead...”

“I have no fear of the dead.”

Gilley knew the echo couldn’t see the blood. If the shadows can keep their secrets then I can keep this, she thought.

“Mirror or... mirror... flesh...flesh...?” Mims asked again. “Would you prefer... prefer... to see Frank in... prefer... in the mirror or... Frank... in the flesh... flesh...?”

“I can’t wish to see him in the mirror,” Gilley murmured.

“In the flesh... flesh...” It was not a question.

“No.”

“Which do you... you... prefer... prefer...?”

“I’ve not considered his death. Only my own.”

“It doesn’t matter... matter... if you are alive... if... or dead... dead...” Mims persisted.

“You have only... dead... only preference... preference...”

Gilley held her breath and howled in every way but aloud, her hands clenched in fists—one around the knife and one around her blood. She understood. She believed. And in her belief she had an answer for Mims. The echo had manipulated her into this position, and the echo knew Gilley had made the choice. Gilley could keep it to herself for a while, but the echo had won and Gilley’s silence would curdle into spite and tacit defeat. But Gilley continued to grip the knife and her blood, and the howl opened into something more like joy.

This she would keep to herself. This the echo could not expect, even when Gilley broke down and spoke her preference aloud. In this exhilaration Gilley pulled the years back to the summer she walked into Frank’s empty work room. She knew the time for spite was long past. That kind of hatred was something you had to nourish over time, and Gilley had never felt wronged. She felt resigned and sad. She was lonely. She missed the wake he left in his passing, the currents of air and dust and gasoline she could trace with her fingertips in the summer heat.

His passing.

If he died now, it would be another passing, another trace across her senses.. The dead often came and went with little recognition of Gilley’s presence and absolutely no regard for her

wishes. If Frank died away from the farm, she would see him on the dead side of the mirror, but he would never speak again. He would look at her like all the others, friendly and patient, and then move out of the frame. That she could not abide. He would not walk away from her again. Not without some words.

He is returning, she thought. The shadows told me so. She feared his arrival as much as she feared his betrayal, but she had a secret this time. There was another way he could stay. When they met, it would be in the barn. Of this she was sure. He will want to see his workshop—the place he spent so much time. This time when she walked into the barn, there would be no dispersal on the wind. No careless breezes to wipe away his passage. He would remain. He would stand, hands thrust deep into his pockets and turn, like he did when he became distracted, chin digging at his collar bone and eyes restlessly tracing the geometry of things in the room. He'd turn and crane his neck in the slow circle, his mind now gripping whatever task had slipped into place—running over its surface, inspecting it for minor flaws and irregularities. The pollen and dust and gasoline fumes would gather around the two of them. He would smile and lean in to smell her hair.

Oh, she would see him in the flesh. Long enough for part of him to stay.

And her joy swelled as she stood at the sink, lost in her vision. It suffused her face in the barn as Frank stepped back, his one hand across his neck, the other caught in her own. She beamed at him from where she stood just under his surprised eyes. She would follow his head with her gaze as it fell to the side, dropped below the level of her shoulders, and bounced lightly on the rough cement floor of the equipment barn. Gilley allowed herself this moment of bliss,

even as she knew it would be swept away by her own horror and revulsion. She looked down at her hands: at the knife in one and Frank's blood in the other.

“Stay with me,” she said to Frank as his echo lifted from the ground and whispered her name.

## *Chapter Six: Jesse*

Crow Boy. That's what Jesse became to everyone at school. And not just because he told them about King Arthur. He stood in front of the class and explained how he saved King Arthur and how he also had to feed him and keep him warm because his leg was broken and his wing was all bloody but he didn't get sick or anything even when King Arthur started pecking pieces off of the frozen squirrel with his beak and the hard brown body got all soft and dark on the garage floor. All the kids made *yuch* noises and Anne Feldman looked a little sick. Then Jesse got the giggles. Mrs. Leary got them all quiet and asked Jesse if he had anything else to share that wasn't gross and inappropriate before lunch. He tried to stop giggling and almost did but Ralphie made a sound like he was throwing up and Jesse felt like he had to bend over or the laughter would tear him in half.

Mrs. Leary sent him to his seat and had to count to seven before everyone got quiet. Jesse raised his hand and told her that he had to fight off the monsters because he was a knight and he hoped the dragon didn't know that the sword was gone or the world would shake and the castle would be knocked down like a house of cards. Everyone was quiet for a moment and Jesse felt like he just told them he was a Mothman from under the bed but Ralphie broke the quiet. He asked if Jesse always talked to birds and Jesse almost answered but Ralphie burst out laughing and called him Bird-Boy and Jesse knew he had said too much. All the other kids laughed at

Ralph when he put his hands to his shoulders and flapped his fingers like wings. *Bird-Boy!* *Bird-Boy!* He kept getting louder until Mrs. Leary pushed him down into his seat and told him he would go to the principal if he kept up the name calling.

Jesse left the class at lunch bell feeling like he was walking down the hall in his underwear. Everyone talked and laughed around him and he didn't look at anyone because he knew they were talking about him. In the gym he found a seat at the end of one of the big folding tables and he picked at his sandwich, made up stories about the dinosaurs on his lunch box and tried not to listen to the babble of giggles and whispers and clattering lunch trays. When the bell rang he let the stampede of kids push past him so that he was one of the last to get his coat and line up to go outside. He saved a large crust of his sandwich and put it in his oat pocket.

At recess the swings were full and the four-square court had a dozen other kids waiting to jump in. A red blur whistled over his head and then got wedged between the school wall and the metal bars of an abandoned bicycle rack. Jesse took off across the concrete. He ignored the shouts from the kick-ball field and jumped over the icy puddle separating the hard top from the grass field. He made his way to the stone fence that formed the edge of the school yard. The grass had little pockets of ice where the rain froze and ice coated the long blades of grass like the trail of some cold winter slug.

The fence still had pockets of snow in the joints between stones. Icicles bled from cracks and holes. Jesse began to chip at the ice on the lowest rocks with his boot toe. He was alone and far-removed from the crowd of bright hats and scarves and mittens and coats all pushing and shivering and laughing at recess. He was always alone but it was rare that he had the stone wall to himself. Even the kick-ball outfielders huddled close to second base. Occasionally a *Bird-Boy!*

bounced off of the houses behind the stone wall. He ignored these and worked at freeing cracks and joints from the encasing ice. He found a beetle frozen in a clump of moss and put it on top of the wall. He kicked little sticks and old leaves away from the base of the wall. A small twig helped him pry more moss from between two big slabs of orange sandstone. He tried not to think about the secret he should have kept to himself in class.

A tapping behind him made him spin around. Black wings beat at the top of the wall and then rattled up into the branches of a sassafras tree. The frozen beetle was gone from the top of the wall and King Arthur cocked his eye toward Jesse and opened his mouth in a silent, *Hello* from a low branch. Jesse caught a glimpse of the orange plastic tag. He was excited and forgot to take off his mittens when he dug in his pockets for the bread crust he stuffed there in at lunch. He couldn't feel anything and when he pulled his hand out to take off his mitten the pocket lining came with it. Bread chunks and a dozen or so small pebbles fell over his shoes and into the grass. Jesse stepped back and moved to recapture the shreds of the sandwich but King Arthur floated down from the tree before he could and speared a thumb-sized ball of the crust.

Jesse slowly folded up into a crouch and tossed bits of bread toward his friend's hungry black beak. King Arthur cocked his head up when Jesse put a crumb on his knee. King Arthur jumped with a loud snap of his wings and Jesse thought the bird was going for his eyes. He fell back and scrambled like a crab away from the bird and then he lost his balance and fell over his hands and onto his back. He got an arm over his eyes and kicked out with his feet. When nothing poked at his arm and chin he lowered his head and peeked out from under the shelter of his elbow. King Arthur stood a few yards away. The bird pecked at the ground and looked sideways at where Jesse sat in the half-frozen mud of the far outfield.

Jesse looked around for some of the bread but what was left was too small to pick up with his mittens on. He patted down his pockets until he found the lump of a candy bar he got for being the best listener during Story Month. He tore open the wrapper with his teeth and pinched the candy into two gooey sticky pieces. The chocolate and caramel stuck to his mittens and the peanuts poked out of the mess like splinters of bone. He held one half out to King Arthur and flinched only a little when he felt the black beak stab through the chocolate and into his finger. King Arthur swallowed the candy whole and then launched himself into the air like a newspaper swirled up in a gust of wind. Jesse watched him go and then shook off the remaining peanuts and chocolate stuck to his mittens. He smiled and scanned the white sky for the familiar black spot. He was thankful for the silence.

It was the quiet that made him turn around.

There was a hole behind him—as if the things out of sight had slipped away and left him alone and forgotten. A heavy quiet hung like a blanket over the back of his neck—clinging and suffocating—and as he turned he knew it was worse than the quiet of being forgotten and alone. This was the quiet of being watched. The whole school yard stared at him and strained to see past shoulders and under elbows. Jesse stared back. He glanced from face to face but more faces kept popping out and some slipped away and they were *all* there. Even little Kevin and Kassie Nichols who were twins and the most nervous kids in the second grade. Jesse dug his toe into the frosted grass just to break the silence but it flowed in after each crunch and crack. The silence remained heavy unbroken.

It took Mrs. Leary's whistle to shatter the air around the school yard. One shrill voice repeated *Crow-Boy* every few seconds and soon there was a small chorus chanting over the shrieks and cries of children forming a line.

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Mrs. Leary stands by the door. Her face is a map of shadows and folds where thirty years of strong emotions lay dormant for the moment in tight lines and sharp turns. She wears her mouth and forehead in their neutral holding pattern, the lines and wrinkles less abrupt but only barely concealed. As the children file in from the cold, she lets her smile come freely. She is proud that it comes so easily, those grooves well worn by the years.

As she turns to close the door, Jesse, her quietest student, slips into the room. His head is down, his mittens covered in what looks like mud or worse, and the seat of his pants is wet. There is some laughter from inside the classroom when he enters. She turns with disapproval chiseled over the smile—another easy transformation, after all these years she thinks. The laughter stops when she steps into her room and closes the door, but the vacancy it leaves is just as loud.

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Mom said not to take things out to the birds unless he asked first but she was busy and King Arthur wouldn't stay around long if Jesse didn't feed him and he had brought friends again.

There were crackers behind the big bag of rice and Jesse knew they had been there for a long time. And how did the twisty thing on the bag of crackers get so tight? It came off after a few tugs but the crumpling and crackling was awfully loud and Jesse quickly shut the cabinet door and scurried into the den. King Arthur never came alone any more and Jesse couldn't tell them apart very well, except for King Arthur since he had the tag on and the big one with the white spot under his eye which was probably a scar. Jesse called him Lancelot. Every day there were more birds waiting in the trees in the back yard. They seemed to sprout from the dark insides of the pine trees and out of the gutters over the patio.

Jesse's stomach always jumped up a little now that all of King Arthur's friends were waiting in the trees and he walked real careful. He stepped on each stone in the garden path as if it might sink and he'd be stuck in the frozen mud surrounded by a million hungry birds. He was scared they would swoop down on him before he put the food down. Cogwell's dog had chased him last summer because he had a sandwich Mom had made for him to eat on the way to the Bullard's house. They lived by the water tower and Jesse had to climb up on that tower to get away from the dog and then he threw his sandwich in a bush so the dog would go after it and he could get back down. He wasn't hungry anymore anyway because he was so scared.

He didn't like the caws and the thumps and the scraping sounds jumping around the pine trees and in the bare limbs of the one sugar maple and he didn't see King Arthur so he shook the crackers out of the long wax paper wrapper, kicked at some to spread them around, and quickly backed up to the screen-porch to wait. He kept a few crackers in his hand and he stuffed these deeper into his coat pocket so the others couldn't smell them and chase him like Old Cogwell's mean, loud dog.

Jesse looked all around and stared real hard into the pine branches but he couldn't find King Arthur's orange plastic leg band. Shadows screamed down at him from the dark trees and he pushed his hands deeper into his pockets until he crushed most of the crackers into dust. They were for King Arthur and it was Jesse's yard so if the other crows didn't like it they could go back to eating worms and trash out of the frozen corn fields. Auggie was missing again and Jesse wished she would slide out from behind the wood pile. The crows wouldn't laugh so much then. They didn't like the cat and when she was around they yelled and croaked like someone had them by the tail feathers. Jesse meowed as best as he could but the birds were all taking to the air and they didn't seem to hear because of all the noise their wings were making in the trees. They hovered in a cloud above the house and trees and then Lancelot fell out of the sky and landed a few feet from the pile of crackers. Lancelot hopped over to the nearest one and broke it with his beak. He gulped down the hard bits that could fit in his mouth. There was a sound like rain on Jesse's hood and the rest of the flock pounced to join Lancelot.

The whole thing was over in a few minutes. There was only a little patch of yellowish dust on the ground where the crackers used to be. They didn't fight as much this time— not like school yesterday when Jesse only had a few sausage links he grabbed off of a tray that someone left at his table. The kids still stared at him but since there were so many birds they stayed a lot farther away. Shana Perkins tried to feed them too but Jesse threw rocks at her until she went to tell the teacher. The rocks scared the birds away too but they came back the next day and Shana played four-square with Ralphie and some third graders. King Arthur would eat from his hand and several of the other birds came pretty close but they would jump away if he moved too fast or threw food near them.

Jesse walked out to where the frozen grass had been discolored by the cracker dust and looked around for King Arthur. His stomach still felt like it had little marbles rolling around in it but they were slowing down now that the flock had left. All he felt was the hot stretching his face did when he was about to cry. He went over to the pine trees and kicked some of the lower branches and when nothing moved or flew out he started to walk back to the stone path where his shoes wouldn't get so wet and cold. He remembered the crackers still in his pocket and when he pulled them out the crumbs scattered onto the wide foot stones. His hands had been sweating and little flakes of bread stuck to his fingers like paste. He found a clear space and wiped his nose which had become hot and tender like his eyes.

Jesse didn't leave the pavement for the next week at recess. By Friday it was snowing again and the teachers were yelling at anyone who ran to slow down or they would fall and bust their head open. The four-square marks were covered so everyone was either playing kick ball or chasing each other with snow balls. Jesse got hit in the face which filled up his nose and eyes with ice. When he tried to brush it off Ralph hit him again from only a few feet away. If it wasn't for Mike Freeman he would have gone inside and read in the bean bag beside Mrs. Leary's desk but Mike shoved Ralph down and then helped Jesse find his hat before Ralph knew who had hit him.

Mike and Jesse went and tried to build a snow fort but there wasn't really enough snow so they took turns making blocks of snow they could destroy with karate chops. Shana came over and asked if she could play karate and the three of them went off to look for the snake hole Mike said was under Mrs. Leary's window. By the time the whistle blew it was hard to see the swings through the snow and they were soaking wet from running and getting snow under their coats.

Mike asked Jesse to spend the night on Saturday and Jesse said he had to ask Mom and Dad and if he could they could go sledding on Sunday over at the Castle and Bridge Park.

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“Did Mrs. Freeman say it was OK?”

Jesse nods with his mouth full of soda bread and hot mint tea. His mom looks across the table to where his dad is patting down the last two mounds of soda bread dough before they go to the oven. He glances up and with a, “Hunh? Oh yeah. It’s OK with me,” lifts the flat cookie sheet over Jesse’s head and in to the oven.

After Jesse runs off to pack up some clothes and his tooth brush, his mom sighs and gets up to put her arms around his dad’s waist as he stands at the counter pushing the last scraps of the dough and flour into the sink and the disposal. “I thought we were going to have to bribe someone into taking him for a night.”

His laugh comes quickly. “Maybe we don’t have anything to worry about. At least he seems to be playing with kids his age now. Mika and Stacy are getting too old for him. In a few years we’ll be calling on them to babysit.”

“I don’t want to think about it,” she says, and again they laugh.

“He’ll be fine.”

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The snow fell all night and through the next morning. It snowed that evening when Jesse went over to the Freeman's and the radio said it wouldn't stop until morning. Jesse was up when everything was grey and blue and the trees were faint shadows behind the thick flakes of snow. Mike was just a lump on the futon next to the TV. They had played video games until Mr. Freeman came in and said it was time for bed or they would be too tired to go sled on the hill in the morning. They were too excited to sleep so they giggled and whispered in the darkness until they heard someone walking in the hall upstairs. They got used to the dark and crawled around by the light of the video recorder clock and the night light above the stove in the kitchen. Mike pulled out a game of Life but the dial was too loud so they just raced the cars around the board and pretended to be millionaires out to own the whole country. Jesse had to go to the bathroom and got lost in the dark. He got scared and felt his stomach get tight and his crotch get hot and prickly from holding it in. He almost wet himself but when he pushed against a door that he had passed at few times he saw a night light peering out from behind some toothbrushes. He missed when he first started to go but it was only a little and there was no way he could stop once he got started. He washed his hands and Mike was wrapped up in his own sleeping bag on the futon when Jesse got back to the living room.

Jesse crawled into his sleeping bag and closed his eyes.

White slowly replaced grey. Blue light gave way to yellow and the vague shadows became solid and brown as the snow trailed off and the clouds moved away in a pink line. Jesse heard foot steps on the stairs so he pulled his blankets up to his shoulders and pretended to be asleep. After Jesse heard the refrigerator door open and close he rolled over and watched Mr. Freeman pull a

skillet out from under the stove and set it on one of the burners. Jesse didn't get up until he could smell the heat from the stove blend in with the aroma of peppered eggs and bacon. Jesse crawled over and shook Mike before going to the bathroom. The floor by the toilet still had a wet spot and it seemed a lot bigger than Jesse had thought in the dark so he stood on the opposite side of the toilet and left without washing his hands. Mike was up and being tickled by his father when Jesse walked in to the kitchen. He laughed when Mr. Freeman turned Mike upside-down and then had to run around to the other side of the table to keep Mr. Freeman from doing the same to him.

They ate quickly and Jesse felt a little sick from all the raspberry jam he put on his toast but after they rolled up their blankets and sleeping bags and put their games back under the TV he was thinking too much about how fast the hill would be to notice. Their boots as well as their snow suits had been left by the register all night. All of their clothes were stiff and warm and made little sparks and crinkly noises when they moved. Mike showed him where they had sleds in the garage and after Jesse pulled out the blue plastic saucer they both ran back in to wait for Mr. Freeman to get his coat on.

They walked out to the road and kicked their way through drifts that came up to Jesse's waist. Mr. Freeman led most of the way. When they arrived at the entrance to Bridge Park they had frost lining their scarves and hoods as well as snow creeping into their boots and Jesse felt his jeans riding up under his slick snow suit. His feet were still warm and when he and Mike heard the sound of shouts coming from the other side of a huge pile of snow they ran. Jesse gripped the blue plastic saucer by its short tow-rope and tried to ignore it as it painfully banged into his shins and legs.

Jesse had to slow down when he came to the mound of plowed snow at the edge of the parking lot. His feet sank with each step toward the crest of the pile and he needed both hands to keep his balance but the sled was in one hand where it twisted and bumped in painful ways. Mike caught up to him and pulled him by the back of his snow suit so that he fell on his arm which held the sled. Mike yelled for him to *come on* and disappeared around the edge of the snow pile.

Jesse hated following Mike. He hated having to follow anyone. Even in the haunted house he went to last Halloween with his mom and dad. The walls glowed with ugly orange and green pictures and flashing lights made you move like a robot toy. He had wanted to be first and he didn't want anyone grabbing on to him but Dad said *he* would go first because the floor was uneven and the black lights made it hard to see although Jesse could see just fine. Now he had to follow Mike who knew where the path was. Jesse took off running as soon as he could and Mike had to duck as Jesse passed to avoid the sled flopping behind. They passed a few picnic tables cluttered with blankets and coolers and old people and then jumped the benches circling the fire ring. They came to a sudden stop at the crest of Vernon Hill. It was named after some guy who died out here and Jesse knew that he probably died while sliding down this hill which made it a lot more exciting than the hill by the school where no one had died and didn't have a name.

The ranger looked up from the fire he was making in the fire circle and told them to show him their sleds. They held them up for inspection and Jesse made faces behind his until Mike laughed and the ranger said they could put them down and they might want to start over more to the left since they didn't have any way to steer.

The clear part of the hill dropped down what looked to Jesse to be more than a mile before making a sharp turn to the right and disappearing behind a thick patch of trees and sticker bushes. It was very wide and the park had bales of hay along the left side of the turn so people wouldn't fly into the woods and the poison ivy but most people went down the center of the open area and never came close to the edges. A handful of figures already dribbled down the white slope. Two older boys with inner-tubes took off on their stomachs and raced each other to the big oak at the beginning of the turn as Jesse walked across the top of the hill. A skier worked back and forth like a zipper down the right side of the hill where the sledders never go. Jesse held his breath like he was about to jump into the deep end of the county pool and let the hill pull him toward the bottom as he sat Indian-style on the blue disk.

He screamed.

He didn't mean to but it was a *lot* faster than it looked and the saucer didn't let him keep his eyes where he wanted them. The snow had been thick and soft at the top of the hill, but as his disk found the grooves made by all the other sleds the surface became hard packed and even a little bit icy on top. Jesse fought just to keep his head down and his hat on in the wind that battered about his ears and eyes like the snap of a towel. He got a chance to see where he was when his back was to the wind and then that scream poked out again and he was on the turn. Bales of hay blurred on his left and then retreated on his right as the saucer spun him around but stayed within a well-worn groove. The curve in the sledding hill narrowed near the bottom and the ground flattened out for a space about the size of the parking lot.

Jesse knew that The Gulch began after the flat space.

Most people stopped before the Gulch because it was a long walk back up and the Gulch was twice as steep as the first part—almost vertical—and every year someone broke an arm or leg at the end of it. On his next full spin Jesse saw the tops of trees ahead and the hill dropped out of sight where the Gulch began. He put out his feet and held on to the plastic handles even as the saucer flipped out and on top of him. It was all he could do to keep the snow out of his mouth and nose.

Jesse stood up and almost fell over from the dizziness. Mike and his red plastic sled bumped and lurched past the last of the hay bales. Jesse tried to move out of the way but the ground was still spinning and he stumbled into Mike. The two boys who had raced ahead of them turned and laughed. Mike groaned “...yard sale...” and they both laughed until they were back at the top of the hill.

They took several more trips down the hill. They raced once and Jesse lost because he hit a bump and bounced out of his sled. Mike and Mr. Freeman went together in the red sled once. They always stopped before the Gulch. The snow on the hill packed down hard as toboggans and saucers and inner-tubes crowded the hill but the surface of the Gulch remained powdery and unbroken.

Jesse and Mike held their hats over the Ranger’s fire with sticks and tried to knock the other’s off into the coals. Jesse’s came off first but he grabbed it before it burned and then they both laughed at all the snow they had in their pockets. They compared their best “yard sales” and then talked in crowded whispers about the fat guy on the picnic table who had limped up the hill after his sled broke in two. Mr. Freeman came up and asked if they were ready to go and both of them

jumped to their feet like their boots were melting and shouted *NO!!* He laughed and then blew out all his air when he sat down by the fire. Mike ran off to the porta-johns and Jesse stayed by the fire— alone with Mr. Freeman.

Jesse began to think that maybe he *was* a little tired and the fire made him realize how wet and cold he was even inside his snow suit. Mr. Freeman poked at the fire with Mike's hat stick and Jesse watched as sparks jumped out of the ashes and traced crazy loops in the air. He hoped for Mike to get back so they could go home but then some big kids came by rolling an inner-tube taller than Jesse. They were laughing and punching each other and the girls smelled a little like the place in the middle of Penney's where the white haired women polish glass cases and twist their rings on their knobby fingers. The boys shouted and sometimes used words that made people turn and look at them with their mouths squeezed in a straight line.

Mr. Freeman glanced up once and then went back to stirring the coals in the fire. Jesse tried to ignore them and concentrate on digging the snow out of his boot buckles. Big kids like them could be mean and staring was a good way to get them to see you but they were too loud to ignore and Jesse had a feeling they were after something that was his. He hated and feared them and didn't even know who they were but their bright jackets and their tractor inner-tube threatened Jesse and he couldn't pull his eyes away. Jesse heard Mike jump on Mr. Freeman's back but when Mike said he was cold and wanted to go home Jesse didn't move for fear of missing one thing the big kids said. He heard his name but it came from far away and then he heard one of the big kids say "Gulch."

He picked up his sled and was walking toward the top of the hill when Mike ran up beside him and said, "Let's go home." The big kids piled onto the inner tube. All seven of them

tried to find a place to hold on and balance with the girls squirming to get in between two of the tall boys who insisted on being on the bottom. Jesse wasn't a chicken and he had meant to go down The Gulch earlier but Mike wanted to have that race and Jesse had fallen off. The big kids were still arguing over how they should get stacked up on the tire and all he had to do was run over to the top and jump on his saucer. Jesse felt a tug at his arm and found himself spun around with his back to the hill and the big kids.

Mike repeated something about home. Jesse looked at him through the fog of his breath. Mike's red hair sprouted out from under his midnight blue hat like fall leaves in an over-stuffed plastic bag and his teeth chattered between blue-lined lips. He was fading and falling away like someone across the room you see in a dream and Jesse found it hard to keep him in focus.

"I'll be right back," Jesse heard himself say—muffled inside his own hat and hood like his mouth spoke from another room. "We gotta do just one more." He turned back to the top of the hill. The big kids were still there but the last two found their spots when Jesse reached his starting point. He looked back at the fire and saw Mr. Freeman calling to Mike who stood where Jesse had left him.

Jesse was ready as the last of the big kids tried to push the pile of them over the edge of the hill. As Jesse dug his hands into the snow to push himself off King Arthur drifted out of the trees and onto the snow beside Jesse. The bird pecked at the ground and then took off in a smooth glide down the hill right as the last boy jumped on to the others stacked on the inner tube. Jesse felt his stomach turn. He shoved as hard as he could against the ground and joined the race.

The inner tube began to shed riders after the first few seconds. Jesse bit his lip when his saucer lurched across a groove. That wasn't so bad. The inner tube had lost the top two boys.

One of the girls was dragging her feet and screaming. Jesse still had to cross their path sometime or he wouldn't make it to The Gulch and if one of them came off and landed on him—well that would be bad—and if he got in front of the tube with the rest of them still on it then that would be *really* bad. Jesse ducked lower in the saucer and clamped his hands around the thin handles.

Jesse was still behind the inner tube as he passed the first hay bale and too far left to make the turn. Another bump forced his stomach up into his mouth and he went airborne. His scream cut off when he resumed contact with the snow. Two girls from the inner-tube tumbled off in a tangle and spun to a stop. His sled tipped and the edge dug into the packed snow. He almost capsized. The saucer spun like a dime on edge and Jesse felt one of the handles snap off. Another bump and he was thrown forward but the tumbling had stopped and he cut a diagonal path across the hill. He picked up speed again and approached the turn in a groove that would keep him well away from the bales of hay.

The older kids weren't so lucky. Even with only a few left they still had too much speed and no way to steer. Two of them abandoned ship at the last second. The last boy looked up in time to see the edge of the inner tube rise above the corner of a hay bale and then flip up and to the side as the rest of the tube slammed into the barrier. Jesse couldn't laugh. He could see the end of the hard-pack snow and the place where the foot prints turned back to the top of Vernon's Hill.

The trees at the bottom of the Gulch shivered and rose up in front of him. Black forms jumped and fell between the tangle of branches. Jesse shifted his weight and craned his neck to look over the crest which marked the point of no return. He felt the hill fall away and the walls of The Gulch rise up on either side.

Hundreds of crows took to the air from the trees at the bottom of The Gulch.

Jesse didn't see most of the ride. He closed his eyes after the first plunge and waited. Dad always told him to keep his eyes open when he was catching a ball or when they were on the bumper cars or when he was jumping into the pool but he just couldn't—not then and certainly not now. He heard the plastic scrape on rocks and roots under the snow. Crow wings above him snapped and fluttered like ribbons. There was a sick moment of free-fall and Jesse opened his mouth to cry out. He had reached the bottom of The Gulch but forgot to stop before the bank of Mill Creek.

When he hit the first boulder, there was a burst of raw laughter from a wall of trees. Jesse opened his eyes as the sled tipped back and shattered on impact with a second and third boulder. The sky filled his eyes and the third boulder cracked against his head. He still clutched a fragment of his saucer even as the sky and stones went black and silence swallowed the voices of the crows.

His head hurt and there were red and green blobs swimming around in the corners of his eyes. When he blinked the colors flowed across the rocks and ice at the bottom of The Gulch and then drained back to bubble around the edges of his vision. Jesse sat up and tried to cry but he had something moving around in his stomach and if he cried it would spill out all over the rocks. He got to his knees but kept looking real hard at the small pebbles frozen to the bottom of the creek bed. The colors didn't dance so bad if he looked at one thing and looking down let him always know where his feet should go. Something landed in the creek bed behind him. He heard a couple quick taps and then the scrabbling of sharp claws on smooth stone. Jesse shuffled around

on hands and knees and lifted his eyes away from the stable ground carefully so that he didn't upset whatever was moving around in his stomach.

King Arthur twisted his head so that one eye stared out at Jesse like a head light. Jesse smiled and straightened up. His friend was perched on top of a tall boulder that stuck out into the creek, just to the left of the path that led up into the forest. Laughter and shrieks echoed out of the trees and from between the steep banks. Oily colors dripped off of King Arthur when he moved and the sunlight through the clouds sparkled off of his beak like one of those sun catchers Mom had hanging in the window over her computer. Jesse thought that the others might be worried about him and that he better get back up there so Mike and Mr. Freeman don't go home without him and—

King Arthur spread his wings and jumped into the air which left a trail of color behind him like the waves coming from the back of a speed boat. The best way to the top of Vernon's Hill from here was up the side of the Castle and Jesse realized that the Castle was probably where King Arthur had been for the past week or so and that Jesse should have been coming to visit him. The school yard wasn't the place for King Arthur to send people on quests or have meetings with Lancelot and Gawain and Jesse. He could cut through the forest and end up at the foot of the Castle where the stairs went up to the old road.

His balance improved a little and the things in his stomach twisted around much less but the colors still smeared the outlines of everything so he felt he was in the middle of a tunnel with walls that ran with water colors. King Arthur watched from the top of the creek bank and when he saw that Jesse was slowly working his way out of the creek he opened his beak wide and fanned out his wings as if he were asking Jesse to follow.

Jesse found a wide path when he crawled out of the creek. He remembered it from when he came here in warmer weather. Snow blanketed the path even though the branches made a thick roof. At times the snow drifted over his knees and Jesse had problems keeping his balance. The trees blurred together at the edges of his sight. Strangled caws and screams surrounded him and crows drifted in and out of the dark trees.

Jesse stopped and looked back down the way he had come. He had walked more than he thought so the creek and The Gulch were a dim glow behind him. The crows jumped from one side of the trail to the other—three or four at a time. When he turned back toward the Castle then no birds crossed in front of him although they laughed and called to each other above his head. Jesse felt trapped but he didn't know what else to do so he stumbled forward again.

Mr. Freeman would be mad about the sled and would tell Dad about it and Jesse wanted to be there to explain what had happened and could show them how the handle had broken and that he couldn't steer and miss the rocks. He hoped they hadn't left yet since it was getting so dark and then Jesse remembered he didn't have the sled and that it was still down at the bottom of the creek bed in a couple of pieces. Well he could still tell them if he could get out of these woods without the birds attacking him. He started to run but the thing in his stomach slithered around and his head hurt bad. Bright colors leapt out of the trees until he slowed down. The caws faded. His breathing drowned them out.

The trail took a sharp turn to the right and then back to the left and he was at the bottom of an opening in the forest cover. The light dazzled him for a moment but then he looked up at the Castle.

The Castle was a tall tower of mossy stones and cement. It stretched out of the side of the valley to the left and ended at the edge of the creek to the right. Stone stairs climbed the side of the Castle wall. Jesse came here to hunt for salamanders during the summer when the sun cracked the soil and drove the creatures into the shade. When the water rose after heavy rains he would come here to throw rocks at the water striders and minnows. On top of the Castle an old road led back to the park's maintenance trail. A heavy gate with a rusty lock and a *Keep Out* sign blocked people from driving the road anymore.

Jesse started to climb the stairs but was careful to keep his left hand on the Castle wall and his eyes on the steps. He could get to the parking lot from the maintenance trail and then he could go home. He wouldn't try the Gulch again. Mike was right. They should have gone home. His hands were cold and his head felt really hot where he had hit that rock. Sweat made his shirt stick to his back and he could feel his pants stiffening up from the sweat and water freezing even under his snow suit.

The birds jumped from tree to tree all around the Castle now and Jesse wondered if they held their meetings up on the old road. Jesse turned the last corner on the stairs and saw King Arthur perched on the wall where the stairs ended under a stone arch. King Arthur jumped on top of the arch and then flew out of sight across the road. The other birds swirled about the top of the Castle and croaked in sloppy unison. Jesse ignored the pain and the dizziness. He pushed back the riot of colors that threatened to blind him and took the steps two-at-a-time as he ran for the arch. The meeting was starting. The knights had been called.

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Rick Grainger keeps his right hand on the wheel and his left on the toothpick he is clenching tightly with his back molars. Out of the corner of his eye, Sabrina Connor squirms and tries to find a new grip somewhere on the slippery vinyl seat, the passenger-side door, or the gun rack bolted across the back-window frame of Rick's truck. Rick guns the engine and she shuffles back as far as she can.

“Rick!”

He drops the truck a gear and throws snow in a thirty foot arc as they pull into the remains of the old Wallace Bridgeway. The pavement is obscured under the fresh blanket of snow. On either side of the truck, the valley slopes down toward the creek bed, the tree trunks thinning into a maze of limbs, branches, and the occasional patch of tenacious dead leaves, as the road remains level on a mound of dirt. The road is bound on the left and right by a stone wall, parts of which have long since tumbled down the steep embankments and into the forest below. Ahead, Rick sees a break in the canopy of trees.

Grey light creeps into the cabin of the truck as they approach the anchor pilings of what used to be the old Wallace Bridge. His old man says the bridge had been built back in the '30s when there wasn't nothin' to do but build bridges and stadiums and schools for the government programs. The road and the bridge linked up Wallace and North Wallace so that when the spring melt flooded the valley, the smaller town of North Wallace had a way to get people in and out when all the other roads were neck deep in water. Ten years later, Highway 234 came through the county and both Wallace and North Wallace had quick access to Crawfordsville and other larger communities. After two more years, a twister damaged the bridge span, the county closed

the road, and Rick's old man helped dismantle the bridge—all but the castle-like anchors on each end of the creek.

The snow is level and unbroken here. It exerts a steady pressure and even the air is held close. It feels to Rick as if the sound of his truck exists only in the cab. If he were to step outside, the silence would be absolute. The old road ends about a hundred yards away. They are on a slight downhill slope. He gives the old engine some gas and grips the wheel. Gotta get the excitement back, he thinks. Chicks love this sort of thing.

The trees blur and a dark cloud rushes over the edge of the road from all directions. Sabrina flinches back from the passenger window and for a moment Rick thinks she is choking on a scream. Dark wings thunder by and he catches a glimpse of yellowed feet rising over the windshield. The sound he thought was Sabrina's terrified scream is actually the caws of hundreds of crows. In a second they are gone, retreating into the tops of the surrounding trees like black leaves returning from where they fell. He turns to look out the back window at the dispersing flock.

Now Sabrina screams. They are no longer accelerating, but Rick has time only to snap his head around and instinctively slam on the brakes. It is too late, and the brakes are too soft. They don't hold. There is a muffled bump in the vicinity of the driver-side headlight. Fifty yards from the end of the road, going thirty miles and hour, the truck swings to the left and slams into a little boy caught full stride between the truck and an arch in the stone guard-wall. For an infinite second Rick sees the small figure suspended above the still virgin snow. Soundlessly, it disappears over the edge of the road, lost to view as it falls into the valley and the ancient forest, some sixty feet below.

## *Chapter Seven: Jason*

His car gathered snow around itself like some injured, burrowing animal. He had pulled it as far to the side of the road as he could, but it still protruded into the throughway. In the thirty minutes of driving, Jason had watched, at first with wonder and then with alarm, as the snow steadily climbed the banks on either side of the winding country road. By the time he thought to turn around and get back to campus, the snow was scraping at the floor boards. He sighed. It didn't make much difference, he thought. The car had coughed twice and choked off before he could find a place wide enough to turn around. Jason had the presence of mind to pull over immediately, even as he checked the fuel gauge. The warning light had never come on.

Thank fucking goodness I had my gear, he thought as he sat in the dead car and pulled on musty, mud-encrusted layers of socks, wool, fleece-lined jeans, nylon snow pants, various thermal shirts, and finally his ski jacket. Perversely, he reconsidered his thanks, realizing that he should give thanks to his laziness—had he unloaded his gear and cleaned it properly after his November trip then he would not have grabbed all of his gear boxes. He would have only grabbed a few pieces from each box to show Ken, and he'd have very little to protect him from the frenzied blizzard just outside his windshield. Jason snugged his wool stocking cap around his ears and laced his hood so that it formed something like a lined face mask.

The clothes had been stored in his parents' garage so it had been a chilly affair to pull them on. As they warmed, they released the stink of that long, miserable weekend. The sticky

clay from the cave loosened and spread against his skin or froze and flaked off, releasing its own peculiar stench. The box also held many of his water-proof bags. These he cleaned as best he could and set aside for his electronic equipment. Inexplicably, he had left his heavy lined snow boots back in his room. His old hiking boots barely fit over the layers of socks, and they would have little or no traction in the snow.

In the car, Jason grabbed up as many armloads of clothes as he could fit into his duffel bag. The green canvas duffel had been his grandfather's, and although the leather handles had rotted away—Jason had sewn on nylon replacement handles himself—the bag remained the toughest and most versatile item in Jason's possession. The bag had accompanied Jason's grandpa from Indianapolis to Texas and from there across the Atlantic Ocean on the Queen Mary to various anti-aircraft emplacements in England and France. Jason didn't have any adventures like that, but if could take only one thing as he set out for Gilley's farm, it would be this bag. As it stood, he packed in the clothes and gear just like he suspected his grandpa did every time he got the orders to move the guns.

Jason stepped out of the car when it seemed like he might get frozen in by his own breath. He slung his grandpa's duffel over his shoulder and onto his back. It bulged with dirty clothes and anything he thought might help him survive until he made it to Gilley's house. He knew where her house was, and from what he could tell from his maps, it was the closest shelter from the storm. He took some additional precautions with his electronics and notebooks. He sealed his laptop in a waterproof bag. Another dry-bag contained his camera, notebooks, some pencils, and a digital voice recorder. He had sacrificed some clothes for his recording gear. In his

pockets: a Swiss army knife, his wallet with less than twenty dollars in crumpled bills, his cell phone and charger, a couple sticks of gum.

He glanced around and took stock. Behind him: his car, *sans* gas, and beyond that, about fifteen miles as the crow flies, his college. Before him: County Road 3400N—an old wound through a long stretch of forest that roughly paralleled the flow of Mill Creek; the road rapidly scabbing over with white, irregular drifts. To either side: thick forest obscured by blowing snow.

Don't know anyone that actually froze to death, he thought. Probably happened in St. Louis and Indianapolis—anywhere people lived without shelter. Homeless. Derelict. Could happen out here. Won't be me, Jason said to the wind, but at the back of his mind a county coroner stood over his frozen body and proclaimed, "This boy died of stupid."

He struggled to breathe. As he battled his way up the road, he feared that the wind would drag him down by the heavy duffel cinched tightly around his back and chest. It wants to kill me, he thought. It will pull me down and fill my mouth with snow. My eyes will freeze. It will kill me if I fall.

Jason had lost feeling in his feet soon after he lost sight of his car. He laughed at first at the mixed blessing. Before they went numb, his feet felt as if he had filled his socks with staples and thumb tacks and then wrapped them in boots with Teflon soles. Traction wasn't any better now, but the pain had stopped.

A break in the trees marked the beginning of Gilley's narrow drive. Through the break, he could see the wind dragging the snow across ragged fields as the land sloped away to the

right. The drive curved uphill to the left, and in that direction, Jason heard the brittle and rhythmic crack of wood on wood where a door or unsecured shutters flailed about in the wind.

Lungs as numb as his feet, eyes nearly blind by wind and ice, Jason turned toward the sound and made sure to secure each step before making the next.

Jason closed the screen door behind him. Angry, the wind ripped it out of his hand and battered it against the porch. As Jason had struggled up the long drive, the sound of the door against the house had given him a renewed sense of purpose—of hope. As he stood on the porch, each explosive slam jarred his nerves. The porch offered almost no respite from the blizzard. Snow, no longer large quiet flakes but rather hissing shards of ice, scraped across the faded wooden siding, raked his face, and flew back into the building storm.

Gingerly, he touched his nose with a mittened hand. Ice came away, but he felt nothing. The porch was sheltered from much of the wind and snow, but the cold did not relent.

Not much light left. It'll be colder come night, he thought. The cold will numb my arms and legs next. He had spent a lot of time outdoors and even more learning about all the ways you can fuck up in new situations. Underestimating a force of nature topped the list. He knew the physiology of hypothermia and the deceptive lethargy that accompanied long exposure to cold. It will crawl into my chest, he thought, until I just want to sleep.

He pressed his forehead against the window next to the front door. For a moment he could make out pieces of furniture: an armchair, a claw-foot buffet, a grandfather clock; but a gloom seemed to rise out of the floor and obscure the room. His hood peeled away from the glass with a brittle snap. The porch darkened as if a great wave had arisen behind the house.

Jason took hold of the doorknob and shook it.

I can kick it down.

Darkness filled the porch as if it spilled from the windows and through the cracks in the door. He could barely see the door, and his hand still gripped the knob. The winds renewed their assault on the house. On the porch, the lee side of the house, Jason felt the storm as a rumble beneath his feet. The windows rattled, and at that moment he heard the singing.

Someone approached from the drive. Just a voice. At times the voice disappeared below the wind, as if swept into the trees, only to return, a bit closer and then fading again. Jason moved to the edge of the porch. She's singing, he said to himself. It's *Amazing Grace*. He took a breath to call out but hesitated. The yard was brighter than the porch, but true night was close and the storm reduced visibility to almost nothing. I'll wait until I can see her, he thought, don't want her to feel stalked. He almost believed that lie—*he* was scared. Jason was unnerved by the incongruous singing, the creeping darkness at his back, and the fierce storm. He waited for someone, anyone, to appear through the snow, but the singing slipped away and no one materialized.

The yard quickly dimmed, and Jason realized that he had missed the singer by not calling out.

Jason turned away from the drive and stepped back into the restless darkness of the porch. Blindly, he placed his hands on the nearest window pane and slid them up along the glass until his fingers found the edge of the frame. They're not latched, he breathed. It rattles because it's not latched. He pushed, and the wood shuddered up a few inches. Hooking his mitten-awkward fingers into the new gap, Jason lifted the window enough that he could step through.

Darkness rushed by, flowing out of the window now open behind him, as if he had released a black wind into the storm. Whatever had blotted out the meager twilight dispersed. Jason could see again. The winds and snow persisted. Singing swirled just outside the porch, but Jason shut the window and then turned to scan the dim room in the relative warmth and silence. He stood in a parlor—a sitting room—that opened through a wide arch into a longer dining room. He left the parlor for the hallway just inside the front door. He figured he had a few minutes of twilight, unless the darkness swept back.

Hide, he thought.

And then what?

It took everything he had to drop his grandpa's duffel to the floor and place his back against the wall of the narrow entry hall.

## *Chapter Eight: August*

August stepped through the mirror with no sensation of change: no tingle of electricity, no sudden gust of wind, not even a shiver. If he treated the mirror like a doorway into a very similar room, he could step through quite easily. He touched the glass with his hand and then led with his foot. Never head first. Experience had taught him that this prevented painful encounters with the mirror's glass reality.

But nothing ever truly prepared him for the Grey Lands.

He kept his back to the mirror and swept his gaze in a slow circle. The Grey Lands offered little to see. No ground. No sky. The color grey in all directions. The grey changed in intensity and tone over time, but never so quickly that he could detect the change occurring. Patches of texture, patterns of lighter and darker regions, gave the illusion of distance, perspective, and scale, but such patterns morphed like drops of ink in still water. August extended a finger and traced the vague contours of a dark cavern below his feet. A line of lighter hills and charcoal spires resembled a horizon as if seen from across a wide lake. Indeed, the Grey Lands behaved much like a fathomless ocean, and August sensed the presence of vast entities passing just out of sight—their very presence altering the mathematics of this place. August avoided staring into the distance for fear of what he might discover looking back.

Soon after he lost his shadow and reflection, August discovered he could move objects through the mirror with a coffee table and a Styrofoam cup. The table had a mirrored surface and the cup rested there as its twin dangled below in defiance of gravity. He touched the lip of the cup, and the dangling cup in the mirror vanished. When he removed his finger from the cup, the reflection returned. No surprise there. He might be able to borrow shadows from his clothes, but not their reflections. When he touched things, they stopped reflecting as if they became a part of him.

He touched the cup again and the reflection vanished.

Again.

And again.

As he watched the reflection disappear and reappear, he tapped a finger on the table top and noticed that the reflective surface didn't look like glass when he touched it. The mirror ceased to be a reflective surface and became an opening to another room. He pushed on the Styrofoam cup and both the cup and his fingers disappeared into the coffee table as if he had dipped them into a pool of mercury—mercury that did not dimple ripple at his touch.

In the Grey Lands, August patted the pockets on his jacket. The rustle of fabric and the clatter of his camera engulfed his sense of hearing. The sounds did not extend any farther than that. He had never heard the sound of wind or any other external sound in the Grey Lands. There were no echoes.

After that first cup passed through the mirror, he moved other things through the glass. More Styrofoam cups. Plastic spoons. A deck of playing cards. Two halves of an apple. The knife he had used to cut the apple. A pair of socks. A roll of toilet paper. A small flashlight.

Body parts came next. His fingers. His arm to the shoulder. His leg to the groin. Both legs to the knee. His face. He looked for the objects he had passed through the mirror. He stepped through the mirror.

He learned to move and navigate despite the impermanent medium of the Grey Lands.

He never found any of the items he pushed from glasside to greyside.

It took many trips before he realized that there was a price every time he moved from greyside to the mundane world of the glasside. He lost a bit of his memory every time, but only when he left the Grey Lands.

August pulled his eyes away from the cavernous abyss below his feet. The only features that broke the monochrome backdrop of the Grey Lands were the mirrors. August turned back toward the way he had entered and stared into his bedroom. He had left all the lights on so the room would be clearly lit, but very little of the light filtered into the Grey Lands from glasside. The edges of the mirror emitted a bluish opalescent glow, but otherwise, the scene looked less like the view through a window and more like a dimly lit poster.

August leaned back so that he could see the glow of a few mirrors in the apartments above him. In the distance, a large rectangle shimmered like the wall of an aquarium. He knew that was the east side of the Avalon office tower. With that as a landmark, he turned to face Washington Street. Dull clusters of mirrors traced the thoroughfare in a straight line to his right and left. At this time of night, he would have trouble finding many of the ones he used for navigation. He had to be careful. Even though mirrors in the Grey Lands corresponded to mirrors in the physical world, they shifted subtly as they obeyed the unstable geometries. August needed many reference points to avoid getting lost.

With the Avalon tower to his left and his own mirror to his right, August had enough of a bearing to explore his apartment building. He made a final pocket check. Anything dropped in the Grey Lands would linger only so long as he did not move out of sight of the object.

He stepped away from his bedroom mirror.

Greyside movement resembled glassside walking in that he put one foot in front of the other. At that point, the correspondence to the glassside came to an end. If he needed to go up, he envisioned climbing stairs or a ladder and his feet found appropriate support. If he needed to descend to a lower point, he placed one foot below the other until he reached his destination. It was no more difficult to climb than it was to descend. Jumping was meaningless, and running rarely resulted in anything faster than a brisk walk, because the bounding was negated, and it didn't matter how hard he pushed with his muscles. With each step, he could cover the length of his gait and no more.

August followed a ritual spiral through his apartment building. These were the mirrors he visited every time. They were the ones he relied on to give him a sense of distance and scale.

The ritual kept some of his fear at bay.

J. Selig. Apartment 1H. His immediate neighbor. J. Selig had a mirror over the bathroom sink and a Green Bay Packer marquee in the bedroom. There was another mirror in the closet, but August could navigate by just the yellow-green pulse of the mirrored marquee.

Up one level.

A. Pointer. Apartment 2H. A massive oak four-post bed with an equally large mirror above the headboard. A body length mirror on the bedroom door. One above the double sink in

the bathroom. Another narrow yet tall mirror by the front door. A mirrored coffee table in the living room. A. Pointer, as usual, had left all of the lights on.

Where were these people?

A. Pointer was never home.

Occasionally, August heard J. Selig come in and out of his apartment. August caught fragments of conversation as J. Selig spoke on the phone while unlocking his door. Beer bottles appeared and changed brands on the shelf under the bathroom mirror. J. Selig lived in the apartment.

A. Pointer could be a man or a woman. A. Pointer kept an immaculate apartment. The carpets looked like wheat fields at harvest—the soft fibers arranged in an undisturbed pattern of parallel lines. A Zen garden maintained with a meditational vacuum cleaner.

No one slept in that bed.

August peered down on the bed. Three decorative pillows along the headboard—earth-tone. Brown walls. An intricately patterned bedspread—perhaps Indian or Arabic design in ochre and cream. Taut. Undisturbed. August wanted to touch the sheets below that bedspread.

Just a look.

No scumming.

August extended his leg out of the Grey Lands and stepped on the bed, just below the three pillows. He had to stoop a bit to fit through the mirror, but it was plenty wide.

As he stepped into the room, he felt as if someone silenced a distant radio—a song he didn't realize was on until it cut off. A memory lost.

Colors, muted when he was behind the mirror, leapt out of the fabrics, the walls, and even the wood grain. The ochre bedspread actually transmuted into filigreed gold, and the walls shimmered like polished bronze. The decorative pillows were covered with an intricately woven pattern of indigo, mahogany, copper, and a deep, flat green. The oak furniture gleamed almost independently of the recessed wall lamps, and August noticed that thin lines of the grain had been delicately removed and inlaid with veins of gold, copper, and some ebony metal.

His weight puckered the bedspread, compressed the comforter beneath, and depressed the mattress—probably for the first time ever.

If he climbed back onto the headboard and escaped through the mirror, he would never be able to erase the bed's disarray.

What made this seem like a good idea?

His cheeks broke out in a hot flush. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck and behind his knees. A. Pointer's apartment was much warmer than his.

I can't go back.

He slowly crouched until his hands touched the bedspread. With his weight pushed forward onto his hands, he carefully lifted one foot and set it on the Zen carpet as if he stepped into a Zen minefield. His second foot followed. Now standing upright at the side of the bed, August set about pulling the bedclothes and pillows back into formation.

Good enough.

He took a step toward the bedroom door.

Oh, just let it go.

The chest of drawers was made of the same inlaid wood as the bed, the window frames, and the door. In the middle of each drawer, there protruded a round onyx pull, as if it had grown from the wood and been carefully preserved by the artisan.

A. Pointer might be a man or a woman.

With a step, August stood in front of the drawers and pulled on the top left one. It slid silently as if by his thought alone: panties, brassieres, and stockings—all white. August smiled and slid the drawer closed. Female.

Let. It. Go.

He slid out the drawer on the right: boxers, briefs, and calf-length socks—all black. Male.

August closed the drawer in defeat, sank his hands into his pockets, and walked into the living room. The mirror beside the front door was narrow but very tall. He turned sideways and squeezed back into the Grey Lands. Before his head slipped through and the light from the apartment dimmed, August glumly noted how his feet had scarred the manicured carpet, leaving a trail from the bedroom to a spot just to the left of the front door.

Back in the Grey Lands, August left the apartment building and made only cursory visits to his next few landmarks:

The bathroom at the corner convenience store.

Cross Washington Street: the security mirror mounted outside the door to the Gas-n-Go.

Move west, toward downtown: the window display at the florist.

August muttered the destinations under his breath. The mirrors were well lit, and the only people glasside were far in the distance. He had two more landmarks to visit, and then he could set off for the unfamiliar locations on his list.

Shaky the Whore was in her apartment. She lived in an apartment building that could have been a reflection of August's building if Washington Street was a mirror. Her building's yellow bricks and narrow profile resembled his building, but at that point it seemed as if the mirror had been kicked and smeared in blood and shit. The windows on the first level were boarded over, and many of the windows on the second floor were cracked or covered in shredded plastic. Graffiti wrapped the brick like tattered skin. Broken glass, butane lighters, and stained paper bags littered the front steps.

August found Shaky in her room toward the back of the building. The bare mattress on her floor was covered in cigarette burns and little squares of foil. She held her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth at the edge of the mattress. Her toes stretched to the floor, and her eyes remained locked on a pile of shiny clothes by the door.

August moved close to the mirror.

The light in the room must be coming from a bare bulb dangling somewhere above the wall mounted mirror. The mirror had scrolled edges, like something lifted from a child's dressing table. At some time, Shaky had pulled a chair up to it, and August often found her staring into the mirror.

She uncoiled like a pale, bruised finger. August pulled back and looked away so he wouldn't have to see any more of her naked body. The light filtering into the Grey Lands from

her mirror dimmed—almost vanished, and August felt how she stared into her own eyes, her lashes almost brushing the glass surface.

Confident that he was invisible to her on his side of the mirror, August turned back and met her gaze. She could not hear him, but he said, “Stay in.”

He moved away.

One more stop and then Mr. Stulls.

After turning away from Shaky the Whore, August glanced at her building’s sparse arrangement of mirrors. He then moved along a diagonal to Washington Street, heading west and north to Grant. From Shaky’s apartment he counted five hundred and fifty steps. In the last twenty steps, he recognized the distinctive pattern of mirrors that marked Scumlord’s place.

On the glassside, the building was a squat blue house sandwiched between two others of similar vintage—an old four-square Victorian with two floors, basement, and an attic: each floor divided down the middle for apartments and the basement used for storage. In the Grey Lands, the building was like most others: a shimmering constellation of angular holes—haphazard and dim like the few stars visible through the city’s glare. The porch made the house unique—at least in the Grey Lands. A wide cement porch spanned the front. Facing the street and parallel to the ground, some contractor had set diamond-shaped mirrors every six inches along the edge of the slab floor. Only where the steps from the sidewalk met the porch slab did the pattern break.

August ascended greyside to Scumlord’s apartment on the second floor. He found the bathroom mirror and peered in. Through the open bathroom door, August could see the kitchen that Scumlord used primarily as one of his labs.

Scumlord stood over his kitchen table and packed a large blue duffel bag with small, meticulously wrapped blocks of methamphetamine. Scumlord wasn't the only dealer in the neighborhood, just like Shaky wasn't the only whore. August knew of a dozen small distributors and labs scattered among the houses and trailers parks off Washington Street. They had their territories and hours of operation. Dealers and whores worked the bars along Washington Street, 10<sup>th</sup> Street, and English Avenue. The more organized whores worked in shifts to greet the men coming off their own shifts at the foundry, power plant, and warehouses to the south. Enterprising dealers staked out territories near schools and parks.

A nearby racetrack provided enough noise when the weather was good so that at least two chop-shops worked all night to carve up any vehicle the Mexican and Skinhead jacksmiths rolled up to their doors. The money from the cars usually found its way to the dealers and whores. A part, if not all, of their money—the choppers, the jacksmiths, the dealers, the lab-rats, the whores—moved through Scumlord.

August watched Scumlord finish packing the bag. On several occasions, August had followed him as he distributed the bricks at drop sites scattered across the city. Scumlord entered any territory, at any time, and met nothing but nervous smiles or quick nods. He moved deliberately—quickly but without haste. He moved like a predator that barely perceived the other hunters who scrambled to get out of his way—something that hunted and fed in waters deeper, older, and darker than these, and yet he still swam through the shallows as a reminder to the others.

After he zipped up the bag, Scumlord lifted a silver and black handgun, inserted the clip, levered a round into the chamber, and tucked the gun into a holster at his side.

August moved on.

When he finished snooping around Jerry Stulls, it was close to dawn. August found some places on the north side of town that looked promising for scumming, but he dreaded losing any bit of his memory in an unfamiliar part of town. He returned to hunt in more familiar locations. August had been stealing from the criminal element for a long time. He had always called it scumming. He didn't know if he had called it scumming after "meeting" Scumlord or if he had named Scumlord after the practice. It didn't matter.

He had rules for scumming: nothing on Washington Street; nothing within five blocks of home; nothing less than twenty dollars, and nothing more than five hundred; if it's in the open then it's fair game; if it's in a stash then don't take it all. Take from the dealers, jacksmiths, and chop-shops first. Take from the johns before taking from the whores.

Scumlord was in a category unto himself. August maintained only one rule for Scumlord: take small.

He started with the chop-shops.

August noticed the snow when he stepped through a NASCAR mirror and into the petroleum darkness of a quiet garage. The ticking of his subconscious missed a beat as he felt something slide away. Another fragment of silence accumulated below the drone of his thoughts—another memory lost.

A small office greeted the straight customers in front, but August headed for the real office in back. As he passed between two hydraulic lifts, he caught a glimpse of snow, waving like back-lit curtains outside the wide garage doors. The sheer volume of snow obscured the dark

matter of the city. The scene struck August as an eerie contrast to the utter silence. The chop-shops were usually the easiest to hit because they had to have cash on hand to pay the jacksmiths. They usually stashed their money for a week or so before splitting the pot between the mechanics. But when the race track wasn't running, they didn't do much business below the table, and August didn't take from the legitimate money they kept in the register. He rummaged around in the back office, but the stash boxes were empty. August moved on to the dealers and labs.

He hit a basement hydroponics farm for fifty dollars. A meth lab for a hundred.

Tonight would be bad for the whores. He didn't need to make it worse.

August stopped at Scumlord's apartment to see if the guy had left a pair of pants or a jacket in the bathroom. Anything with pockets and maybe some change.

At first, he thought that Scumlord had decided to stay in tonight too. The blue duffel bag was still on the kitchen table, and it remained stuffed full. Scumlord was nowhere to be seen. August would have left if not for two details: a single stack of bills almost hidden by the duffel's strap and a pair of white socks that protruded from a side pocket. August had one hundred and fifty dollars to show for a night of scumming. He needed at least twice that for rent. If that stack was twenties, it wouldn't do him much good, but if it was fifties or hundreds, he could take a couple and Scumlord would be left with a short stack and some questions about what creature along the food chain had tried to keep a little morsel for itself.

Scumlord had only one mirror in his apartment: the one above the sink. August could fit through, but he had to collapse himself like a pocket knife and carefully balance his weight on the sink which had a precarious, narrow base. With one foot wedged into the sink basin and the

other floating in the Grey Lands, August thrust his head through the mirror's surface and listened. Another memory gone.

He placed his right hand on the side of the mirror, grabbed the edge of the bathroom door with his left hand, and pulled his other foot into the sink. The ceramic basin creaked and wobbled under his weight, but otherwise it held him like an ungainly crane in a concrete birdbath.

Silence.

August was familiar with the apartment. The bathroom connected to the kitchen. From there, August could leave out a backdoor and descend a flight of steps to the alley, or move into what had been a small dining room and have access to the two bedrooms, the living room, and the front entrance. Most of the rooms were empty or contained simple rectangular tables with folding metal legs.

With one hand on the wall beside the mirror for balance, August stepped down from the sink. Careful to shift his weight slowly from one foot to the other as he walked, he moved silently to the door where it swung into the bathroom. He paused to listen again.

Two more careful steps and he reached the table.

The back door, a solid piece of wood with a security view-hole, was chained and bolted by three sturdy locks. Heavy curtains covered the window over the kitchen sink.

Only the light from the kitchen illuminated a patch of hardwood floors just inside the dining room. August noted how the shadow of his clothes pointed back toward the bathroom. His heart felt like a fist. With each beat, it punched him in the throat, the temple, and the solar plexus. His thoughts took on the same rhythm as his heart.

Get.

Out.

The socks were pink and white. The bundle of hundred-dollar bills looked freshly minted. August pulled back the pocket with the sock and noticed more socks and undergarments for a woman. And a child. The open zipper on top of the bag invited inspection, so August obliged. Stacks of hundreds filled the bag's main compartment. A compact black handgun rested on the pile of money like a curse.

Around the corner in the dining room, a phone rang. Once.

A faint chime indicated someone had picked up the call on this end. A man's voice, flat and hard, released one word into the phone, "Yes." It might as well have been directed at August and completely without affect or inflection.

August froze.

"An hour. Maybe less."

Pause.

"The storm helps. I'll go see."

Metal chair legs scraped the floor. Sweat ran between August's eyes, down his nose, and hovered above his top lip. He remembered the balaclava and pulled at it with one hand. He pulled too hard. Instead of unrolling across his face and leaving a hole for his eyes and nose, the entire hat slipped down and covered his eyes while leaving his cheek and jaw exposed through the face hole.

August clapped one hand over his mouth and stifled his laughter. He was going to die, and he couldn't find his eyes. He wondered if Scumlord would let him take off the balaclava before he shot him in the face.

Footsteps moved away from the kitchen. August grabbed the balaclava with both hands and twisted it violently into place. The light from a bedroom door spilled into the empty dining room. Scumlord moved some things in the other room while murmuring monosyllables into the phone. August grabbed the bag and left the loose stack of hundreds on the table. He leapt into the bathroom. He had abandoned all of his rules. He was going to die, but the bag was coming with him. It was heavy but less than he had imagined.

With a groan, the sink basin canted as he struggled for purchase. A fine mist drizzled below the sink where one of the pipes cracked under his weight. He exhaled, peered into the mirror, grabbed one side with his left hand, and kicked his left foot through the looking glass so that it dangled, invisible, in the Grey Lands.

He was slipping his left shoulder through the frame when Scumlord returned. In the living room, Scumlord's voice exhaled a low and controlled "Fuck." He seemed less surprised by the disappearance of the bag than frustrated with whatever had come to him in need of killing.

August might have made it if he hadn't flinched.

In his experiments with pushing things into the Grey Lands, August had destroyed two mirrors: the coffee table and the bathroom mirrors. In the process, he had learned two important lessons. In one instance, he had pushed a cup half-way through the coffee table and then removed his finger. The result had been violent and unexpected: the entire reflective surface of the mirror silently exploded in a fine column of powdered glass and silver, ejecting the cup from

the mirror's plane and spraying the room with a glittering dust as fine as white flour. In the second instance, the same explosion had occurred when August had reached blindly into the Grey Lands and had been distracted by a brief power outage—again, the room had been covered in a silver powder and he had been physically thrown out of the bathroom. He had learned the following:

Remain in physical contact with objects until they have fully entered the Grey Lands.

Remain focused on and in physical contact with the surface of the mirror until you have passed through.

Scumlord's bathroom mirror opaqued and burst from its frame. The silent force blasted August into the opposite wall where his back and head dented the plaster. His left wrist twisted and cracked under him as he crumpled to the floor in a shower of broken plaster, scattered toiletries, and mirror dust. Several stacks of money tumbled across the floor. The gun bounced off his forehead and clattered against the wall.

For the second time that night, the balaclava slipped over his eyes. August tore it from his head with his right hand. In the next moment he saw Scumlord step into the kitchen, silver and black gun drawn but held barrel down, along his right leg.

August's heart beat once like a bomb. It felt as if the entire apartment shook.

Scumlord raised his gun, and August realized the apartment *had* shaken. Someone was striking the backdoor hard enough that the debris littering the bathroom floor danced, and the black gun slipped an inch closer to the door.

Scumlord fired two shots, but neither of them at August. August spun around on his back and kicked the bathroom door shut. Water sprayed out of both faucets and pooled under the

toilet. Two more shots punched neat holes in the door above his head. Shards of plaster and tile stung his hands and face. August grabbed the gun from the floor and stayed on his stomach. The hammering at the back door had stopped.

“I’ve seen your face.”

The apartment shook again, and this time, August heard muffled curses from outside. Scumlord had not moved, and he repeated himself, his voice level but hostile. “I’ve seen your face.”

On the next impact, Scumlord walked back into the dining room. August stood. His clothes dripped from the water on the floor, and blood streamed from his forehead. He couldn’t stay in here. He didn’t know what the hell was happening, but he was sure he wasn’t welcome. He had to get out of the apartment. With a sudden yank, August opened the bathroom door and stumbled into the kitchen. Another blow to the back door. It was solid, and there couldn’t be much room out on the stairs for more than one or two people to kick at it.

As if on cue, several explosions splintered the door where the dead-bolts met the frame. August’s right hand went numb below the wrist, and crimson blossomed across the bag and the kitchen’s white table. Clutching the bag under his right arm and the gun in his left hand, August fled the kitchen. As he ran through the dining room, he caught a brief glance of Scumlord as the man slipped into the bedroom.

Where is he going?

Get.

Out.

August sprinted through the adjoining dining room and living room, turned at the short entry hall, and froze.

The door was open.

Across the hall that divided the apartments on this floor, August saw the door to the other apartment.

They won't come in just one door, he thought.

The door across the hall cracked open. August heard the security chain jingle as the neighbor opened her door, perhaps wondering what the commotion could be at this hour and did they know she had called the police?

August panicked and spun to the right. Was someone coming up the stairs?

More explosions from the back door, followed by a much more wooden crack. August couldn't afford to wait any more. He dashed out of the shadows of Scumlord's apartment, lowered his left shoulder, and charged across the hall. The security chain snapped and something wailed behind the door as August plowed through. The floor plan was a mirror image of Scumlord's apartment. August ran through the living room to the dining room, turned and kicked open the door to the bedroom. He blindly slapped the light switch with the butt of the handgun. It was an old woman's room, he was sure. Quilt rack at the foot of the single bed. More importantly, a free standing dressing mirror in the corner.

August stared at the room reflected in the mirror's surface, held the duffel bag in front of him, and dove for the safety of that room on the other side of the glass.

August stumbled out of the Grey Lands, blue gym bag clutched to his chest with his right arm, his right hand a useless, dead, and bloody animal attached to his wrist. The reintroduction of momentum and gravity tripped him, and he collapsed on his bedroom floor: knees and face scraped across the unforgiving carpet, right arm suddenly numbed under the impact of his body and the bag, his left hand painfully wrenched. The gun spun off into the corner past the foot of the bed.

Get up.

Knees first, bruised and swelling, left hand still working. He arched his back, pushed with his hand, and drew himself back onto his feet, but in a crouch.

Stand up.

August obeyed his own voice and pushed. Why am I running? he thought. What did I forget this time? He remembered Scumlord's gun and the two holes in the door above his head. He remembered that voice. "I've seen your face."

Whatever he had forgotten, it wasn't that.

He stumbled out of the bedroom and dropped the wet bag on his desk. He thought he heard something outside his door. He rushed to the bedroom, collided with the door frame, spun, and found himself kneeling in the center of the room surrounded by bloody handprints and a long, dark smear that must have been the result of his face impacting the floor. The wet clothes chilled him, and he found it hard to stop shaking. Back on his feet, he stooped to retrieve the gun with his left hand. Something was grinding in his wrist, but he could still use the fingers. He thumbed back the hammer and placed his back against the doorframe, his left arm extended toward the front door.

After a minute, August exhaled and inhaled.

Another minute and he blinked.

Another and his arm started to shake so much that he thought he might shoot himself as likely as he might shoot an intruder. He lowered the gun. He leaned forward until gravity compelled him to walk or fall over, at which point, he walked across the bedroom, stopped in front of the mirror, and pushed his left hand and the gun back into the Grey Lands. He pulled back an empty hand.

As he walked back toward the living room, August dropped his camera behind him, peeled off his sodden jacket and left it on the floor. The mirror reflected August's path to the living room as a trail of discarded items, wet clothes, and dirty footprints—but no blood.

“You should have kept the gat.”

Turner stood behind August's shoulder as August bandaged his right hand with a roll of gauze. The bullet or fragment of lock had pierced the back of his hand and exited through his palm. Dressing the hand was complicated by the pain in his left wrist and August's refusal to look at the wound, lest he see fragments of bone. Fortunately, once August had cleaned the wound with water and hydrogen peroxide, the blood slowed and nothing seemed to be poking out of his flesh. It just hurt. Like hell. He wrapped it tightly and swallowed a handful of aspirin.

“Seemed safer to just get rid of it.”

“Can't connect you to anything. That's smart. This guy the type to go to the cops?”

August laughed. “Scumlord? No.”

“Scumlord? That's his name?”

“I don’t know,” August replied. “It’s what I call him.”

“Too many comic books.”

August chuckled but otherwise didn’t respond. Turner walked around to the front of the desk and sat down next to the duffel bag. August glanced over the desk. His eyes came to rest on a hinged metal object next to the duffel. A familiar sick feeling uncoiled from his stomach and he asked Turner, “What the fuck is that?”

Turner glanced down at it and shrugged. “Beats hell out of me. Looks like it was here before the bag.”

August rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. He reached out and touched the device. A hinge and spring allowed the top to depress like a telegraph bar and spring back. August tapped it a few times. Turner just stared at him blankly and asked, “Something you left on the other side?”

“Must be. What do you suppose it does?”

“I know as much as you do,” Turner replied. “Is it a stamp?”

August pressed on the top, this time adding some weight. The device made a satisfying clunk and left behind a silver piece of folded wire. “Great. A splinter dispenser. That made all this worthwhile.”

“So let’s walk through this again,” Turner said. “How the hell did you come to have a big bag of greens and no smile?”

August gave a quick sketch of his movement through the routine landmarks. Turner interrupted before he could even get to Shaky the Whore.

“What the hell? You stepped on Pointer’s bed? There are other mirrors in that apartment, right?”

“It was an impulse.”

“You can bounce on your own bed here. When I said you should get us some cash, I thought you’d have the sense to work the chisel a bit farther from home.”

“I wasn’t looking for money.”

“So you wanted...” Turner trailed off with arched brows.

“I wanted to touch the sheets,” August hurried on as Turner’s jaw dropped open and his brows gathered forward like the hammer of a gun. “And I wanted to know something about who lives there. It’s like a doll’s house. I’ve never seen anyone there.” August described what he saw.

“Sounds swank.”

“Yeah, but I don’t go scumming around here,” August insisted. He wondered who he was trying to convince. “Like you said, it’s too close to home.”

Turner thrust out his jaw at the duffel. “But you got your hands on some scratch.”

“Yeah. And...” He trailed off.

“And some trouble.”

August stood and walked over to the windows facing the alley. He slid one open, and a small pile of snow cascaded onto the floor. He glanced up at the sky. Thick flakes drifted down from the uniformly grey atmosphere. At least a foot of snow covered the ground. It was impossible to tell through the snow how close the clouds might be to the roof of the city, but the sun was up, and August’s apartment was almost as dark as it had been last night.

He closed the window and absently brushed snow from his jeans. Agony stabbed his right hand, but his left suffered only some stiffness. Rust colored blood hardened the gauze around his bullet wound, but it seemed as if the bleeding had stopped.

“Yeah,” he repeated and walked back to the desk. “I got more than money.”

Turner stood over the blue duffel on the desk. “Don’t tell me this thing is still full of crank.”

“It’s not,” August answered. “I went back later. After I checked out Stulls.”

“Get what you need on him?”

“Stulls? More or less.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means I didn’t find anything I didn’t already know.”

“Did you find him?” Turner asked.

“Home. Asleep. With the Missus.”

Turner smirked. “Anything worth getting on film there?”

“No.” August felt exhaustion dragging him down like another source of gravity. He reached forward and yanked the bag’s zipper open. “I’ll get to the hotel after I’ve figured out what to do with this. Maybe after some sleep.”

Turner gaped. “What’s there to figure out?” he exploded. “Buy a car. Drive south until you run out of snow and English and land. Grab a chica and get a tan.”

“But Mrs. Stulls...”

“Send her a refund.”

“I could take it back.”

“The money?” Turner looked ready to have a stroke. “You are not listening. Blow. Town. Lots of bad people did lots of bad things to give that very bad man this very big bag of butter and eggs.”

“It’s not the stealing.”

“Is it him?” asked Turner.

“I stole from him before. This was different.”

“What the hell. Because it got a little rough?”

“Maybe. It was different. Things have changed.”

Turner backed away from the desk a step. His eyes widened, and when he spoke, August couldn’t tell if he was speaking out of shock or admiration: “What the hell are you talking about? What did you do?”

Turner watched as August unzipped the bag’s side pockets—there were four total. All of them contained bright clothing and toys, a few toiletries, and some tightly rolled t-shirts. From an internal pocket, August pulled out three passports, then another three, and three airline tickets to Costa Rica. Slipping from between two of the tickets, a folded piece of paper tumbled onto August’s desk. Like he was handling the wings of a sleeping hornet, August unfolded the paper and read the letter silently. He read it again, this time aloud:

“I won’t threaten you. You could have lied, but you didn’t. I’m going to believe you. I’m going to believe that you are done, but I’m still going to leave. With Lindsay. You’ll find us, I’m sure of this, and if you’re telling me the truth then we’ll all just disappear somewhere warm. I won’t mind. There’s nothing here for me. One plane ride and it all starts over. If you’re not

telling me the truth, you'll still find me. I'll believe you because I'll be too scared to do anything else.

"I hope you are telling the truth.

"I won't threaten you. Not because I know what you've done. I'm not afraid of you. I love you. But I'm afraid of the others. I won't have them near Lindsay anymore. Not now. Not when I know.

"You'll come for us.

"When you do, we'll start over, or I'll learn to fear you too."

Turner glanced at one set of passports. "Same last names. There's Lindsay."

"Different names on the others," August added. "Same pictures."

"They look slick, maybe even legit," Turner said as he tossed them back to the desk.

"That takes some weight."

"You see why this is different?" August asked, almost pleading.

"Oh, yeah, I see," the detective chided, "before tonight you were poor and pathetic. Now you're rich and stupid."

LeVey pistoned out of his chair, slammed it against the wall. Turner beat-back a few steps, hands up—a rat doing its best to make like a bird. LeVey growled out, "You wanna bark at something, take your dogs and drift."

Turner reddened, ground his teeth, but then came over all cool like he'd just scored off the bookies with a pocketful of ringers. All smiles and an unlit coffin nail cupped in his fist he said, "Hey. It's not my stake."

LeVey, still mad, said “Damn straight. Now dust.”

Turner vanished.

August flipped through the passports, but always returned to the little girl. Lindsay was almost four. Her name on the other passport was Claire. Different birthdays, and Claire wore her hair in a bob—maybe a wig. An adventure, she told her friends. We’re going on an adventure. It’s always warm there, she’d say. Oceans and sand, palm trees and monkeys, buried treasure.

The story enveloped August:

A young family arrives in Costa Rica. Lindsay makes some friends on the beach. She’ll tell them stories of all the places she’ll go because Daddy works everywhere. And some morning, Mommy and Daddy wake her with a present—a new doll with short hair. Would she like hair just like her doll? They are going on another adventure—Daddy bought the tickets last night. He cut his hair too, but it looks good with the beard he’s been growing. Mommy’s hair is red. A new adventure needs a new name, so they call her Claire. Mommy doesn’t want to play in this airport, but Daddy just smiles and talks to her in that voice he always has—calm and quiet.

August folded the passport closed.

Lindsay flies to Costa Rica, but it’s Claire who leaves for Belize or Malaysia or Tortola or South Africa. Somewhere they speak English and the dollar is strong.

Not any more.

Scumlord’s smart, August thought. He has a back-up plan.

“I’ve seen your face,” came Scumlord’s reply.

August zipped up the bag's main compartment and carried it into the closet. Need to pack a bag of my own, he thought. Some clothes and toiletries, his notebooks, and the essentials: flashlight, camera, knife, batteries, beef jerky, caffeine pills, multi-tool.

I've seen your face.

"What did he mean?" August asked aloud.

"He saw you through the door," Turner said. "Before he shot at you."

"Maybe. Makes sense. But it was quick. I'm on the floor. There's men at the back. He shoots there first—at the back door—not at me."

"Did he even see you before you shut the door?"

"I don't know," August admitted. "Maybe he only saw me when I turned to kick the bathroom door closed."

"He must have been having one hell of a time," Turner imagined out loud. "He knows that the money is gone, but the gunsels aren't in the apartment—they're hammering at the door."

"When I hit the wall, it probably sounded like the guys at the door."

Turner picked up the same line, "...and why would he think to look at the bathroom when someone's obviously dancing a chorus line on the back door?"

August placed his hands flat on the desk. Anywhere else and they would tremble uncontrollably. "He didn't have enough time to study my face."

"Sounds right. He wasn't committing you to memory. He recognized you."

"And I think I took more than just his bag."

"Well yeah. How could he forgive you for stealing his old lady's dainties?"

"I'm not talking about the god damn money," August snapped. "Not the clothes, either."

“Then what?” Turner asked.

“Hope.”

“A lot of hope. I suggest you apply that bagful of hope to your own circumstances.”

“I don’t need hope. I don’t need money. I need answers.”

“Then what are you doing *here*?”

At that moment, the phone rang. August snatched his hands off the desk. Turner vanished into the bedroom. On the fourth ring the answering machine went about its business. A few seconds of listening after the beep, August picked up the receiver.

“I’m here,” he said.

## *Chapter Nine: Gilley*

The storm met her at the base of Nolen Hill. Snow had been falling steadily since she had left the house, and now as she stepped into the fire lane at the hill's base, a gust of wind swept the thick flakes from the air and then swirled between the trees as if a herald. For a moment the forest stilled and brightened. Gilley relaxed. She had walked farther than she had originally planned. Nolen Hill and the cemetery at its crest marked the mid point between her house and Bridge Park on the other side of Mill Creek. The snow gave her trouble at times—her knees didn't bend at her command, and she often lost her balance even with her long walking stick. "Not enough to fall," she said aloud by way of thanks, but she slipped and stumbled enough that the thought of anyone else on the trail mortified her. Vanity is especially foolish at your age, she thought.

The walk back from Bridge Park numbed her hands and drew her breath from her as if she walked through a vacuum—some atmospheric absence that drew the approaching clouds down onto the forest as the world collapsed upon itself to fill the void. Now, in this bright, still moment, the snow settled, the wind twirled and danced just at the edge of her vision, and the temperature plummeted as if all heat had been lost to the vacuum. The sky brightened but did not blue. The sun took one last look at the earth as if through a thin, grey cataract.

"A storm comes... comes..." Mims warned.

As if summoned by the echo's words, the winds lashed the tops of the trees. The light yellowed and hardened into a wall of slate as the storm recalled its heralds, poisoned the air with snow and ice, and drove its forces across the fields and streams in a mad rage.

"It's not just a storm," Gilley managed to say before her voice was drowned out by a scream of crows. No birds appeared. The wind almost knocked her over, but by then, the screams had vanished into the trees, and she heard only the roar of the wind through the branches.

"It tears... tears... at me... tears..." Mims' echo cried.

Gilley stepped toward the echo's voice. "Mims..." but the wind gusted against her back and tore the breath from her lungs. Gilley heard the voices of the other echoes: the echoes from the orchard, the quarry, and the hay barn. They had accompanied her on this walk, often singing with her and Mims as they all followed the winding creek. As the wind shook the trees, the three nameless echoes gathered in a tight circle around her, their voices a low murmur of concern and agitation.

Mims spoke again, but the sound reached Gilley as if her sister whispered her words from a passing train.

The dark skies swept down in a heavy riot of snow that scraped along the ground like talons. As long as she faced home, the wind to her back, the ice did not tear at her face, but she had other problems as the path rapidly froze in jagged ruts and then drifted over. Every step twisted or jarred her knees, her hips, her back. The cold brought tears to her eyes where they distorted her vision and slid down her cheeks to freeze along the edge of her woolen hood. Behind her, the storm built a wall, corralling the pallid sun behind a balustrade of cloud and snow. Before the sun could even reach the horizon, the forest darkened.

Gilley leaned into her walking stick. The wind roared at her back, lifting tendrils of snow from the gaps between trees only to whip them at the sky, against the remaining light. One of the echoes—the one from the quarry, she thought—swelled for a moment, but the sound of the wind overwhelmed it—seemed to tear it apart and scatter the pieces. When the wind gave her a brief reprieve, she called out to the echo. The remaining echoes joined her, but the other never returned.

With the wind subdued for the moment, Gilley called out for Mims. She turned her head to listen. She thought she heard footsteps running along a ridge, just out of sight—a low sound, more vibration than sound; a pattering as if a pack of boys abandoned their games and raced home. Or birds, heavy, graceless birds stirred by some instinct to throw their bodies and wings against the storm. And yet, you can't see a one, Gilley thought.

“Mims!” she cried. Instead of her sister's voice, she was answered by a thunderous wave of wings, followed shortly by the raucous screams of birds—specifically, crows. Hundreds of them, as if an invisible murder swept out of the trees. This was another echo, sounds without physical form, but something wilder and more terrifying than the disembodied voices with whom she sang and talked around her home. Their caws left her ears ringing, and she stumbled as if they had physically driven her legs out from under her. When their cries died away, the wind seemed virtually silent in contrast. The attack had silenced the echoes from the orchard and the hay barn. Gilley did not think she would hear them again.

Again, Gilley called for Mims. This time, she heard singing from between two massive trunks. Mims' echo seemed to struggle with the wind.

“Mims! I can't find the path.”

The singing broke off and Mims drew near. “So lost... lost...”

“It’s over a mile home,” Gilley panted.

“You know where... know where... you are... are...”

Gilley’s voice raised in panic. What was Mims talking about? “Where’s the path?”

“In the land of... land... the blind... blind... shadows hide nothing... nothing...”

“Mims. Please help.” Gilley heard crows calling overhead and their wings: a sound like footsteps only now high in the branches. As the sound of birds dissolved beneath a gust of wind, Gilley caught a few sobs almost buried under the noise of caws and wings.

“So lost... lost...” Mims swirled away and then returned in the silence left by the boy’s sobs.

“Perhaps he will not stay,” Gilley said. “The others have left.”

“Or been destroyed... destroyed...” Mims said. After a moment the echo continued.

“This one... one... It waits... waits... The storm makes... storm... it strong but... storm... no less lost... lost... and afraid... afraid...”

“I don’t want to die in this storm.”

“We are followed... followed...”

“Mims. Lead me home.”

Mims’ voice perched at Gilley’s shoulder when it replied, “Very well... well...” Miriam sang *Amazing Grace*, and Gilley stumbled forward, the storm building at her back and the echo of her sister never closer than her next faltering step.

Barely able to shuffle her feet a few inches at a time, Gilley fumbled open the back door to her house and tripped on the two narrow steps. Tears overflowed her eyes; mucous ran in long strands across her cheeks and mouth. She coughed violently in the dark kitchen, the door still open to the storm, the fire in the stove nothing but a layer of simmering coals. Still coughing, Gilley drew her feet inside and forced the door shut. A merciful silence followed. Mims had disappeared as soon as Gilley touched the door. She curled on the floor to gather her strength. She had to get the fire going.

Maybe this silence will last.

Only as long as this breath, she thought. Each one rasped in and out. In and out.

Under her hands, the floorboards thrummed and popped as the house twisted against the wind. Draughts whispered from the corners as if imitating her ragged breathing. Above the sink, a window pane rattled. No silence. Not now. Not ever.

Gilley sat up and peeled off the sodden layers of wool and cotton. She welcomed the relative warmth of the kitchen. Won't last, she mused. I need to get dry, and the stove's not putting out much heat. Stoke the fire before it gets too cold to thaw the firewood. There it was—she would have to go back out. She could afford to change clothes first.

She stood and flipped the switch by the door. At her feet, discarded sweaters, coveralls, and socks lay like the carcasses of sheep and cattle swept along in a flash flood. Mill Creek made a sharp bend on her property as it wended south toward the wider Sugar Creek. Every spring she found animals draped over beached logs or tangled in thickets of amputated branches. She never cleared the carcasses. If it were left to her, the corpses of livestock would dam the valley, but her

neighbors knew to walk the creek and bring winches and trucks when one of their flock went missing. She didn't care.

Had I collapsed out there in the storm, it would have been me they found in the creek come the thaw.

Gilley shuddered and laughed. She stood in the kitchen, her silk long johns hanging in damp folds around her knees. The waistband had crawled up under her turtleneck so that it clung just below her ribs. Her bare feet, wrinkled from hours in wet socks, were almost transparent with age. Against the back door, her shadow looked like a wax effigy left too close to the iron stove.

The silhouette of a man stepped out of her shadow and stood next to the door and her own saggy shadow. For a moment, both shadows seemed to consider the other until Gilley stepped back in surprise. Her shadow slipped down from the door but the other remained, its head slowly turning until it seemed to stare at Gilley with nothing but its own darkness. The Silhouette dropped through the floor, vanished as if sucked beneath the floorboards, and rose on the wall behind the iron stove. It stared at Gilley again and then turned its head in profile to her, its glance indicating the hallway that led to the front door.

Something moved by the front door.

“Frank?” She called.

Feet shuffled on the bare wood floor and in the meager light that managed to connect the kitchen and front door, a military duffel bulged out of the shadows before swinging heavily back into the dark.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Garvey,” a voice called from the hall. A young voice. “I didn’t think I would make it if I stayed outside. I don’t know how to make this less awkward, but I don’t think I should step into the kitchen just yet.”

Gilley glanced down at the pile of clothes at her feet and silently agreed.

She grabbed her wool coat from the floor.

He pressed his back to the front door.

She turned on the hall lights and recognized him from the library. What was his name?

He adjusted the duffel at his back and offered some more apologies. He told her his name was Jason.

She waved him in—waved away the apologies. Wait in the kitchen, she said. I’ll go change. He said thank you Mrs. Garvey.

“Call me Gilley,” she told him.

He isn’t shy, she decided. Not overly modest. Despite the situation, his eyes weren’t rolling with embarrassment. When he first stepped into the kitchen he had averted his eyes, but only until he could confidently turn them to her face. Deferential. Polite, but steady and patient. He offered to bring in wood. It was the least he could do. She nodded, noticing that he was dressed like a ski instructor. Before he went out the back door, he set the duffel under the kitchen table. Alone with the bag, she crouched beside it; studied it. The stenciling had faded into only the vague hint of letters: pale, angular markings on the olive fabric. The straps were nylon, not original, but carefully, precisely stitched onto the canvas.

She stood and shuffled up the stairs to change clothes.

When Gilley returned to the kitchen, Jason had piled two days worth of wood next to the door. His jacket and mittens rested, neatly folded, on top of the wood pile. He had the stove door open, and he fed it several pieces of wood as she watched.

“Where did you find the dry wood?” she asked.

“I had to do some digging. The pile’s like a brick wall.”

“You brought in a lot.”

“I don’t think anyone’s coming or going for a while. Hope I’m not overstepping.”

Gilley allowed silence to inhabit the moments between them. She watched her breath leave in a long stream, a ribbon that snaked along the floor and slipped through a crack in the door and on out into the night. I feel it stretching, deforming in the storm, she thought. It will not return. With a sudden memory she inhaled sharply. The breath that entered her lungs might have been a new one, but maybe it was the same one she had been pushing in and out for years. “I’m expecting someone. Someone else,” she said to Jason.

“Frank?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Who is he?”

“My husband.”

“I hope he didn’t go far,” Jason said. “Maybe he’s out of the storm—holed up like me.”

Gilley stared at the young man across the table from her. Ridiculous, she thought. The shadows told me someone was coming and here he is. “He’s not coming,” she told Jason. “He’s been gone a long time.”

“How long?”

“Forty years this summer.”

Jason squinted at her from his side of the table. Again, without embarrassment—only curiosity tempered by deference. A reappraisal. He straightened his back and relaxed his eyes.

“But you thought he might come back tonight?”

“In the dark, I thought you might be him.”

“Have you been in contact with him? After forty years?”

“No. He disappeared. For all I know, he died.”

Jason nodded his head but held the rest of his body perfectly still. He looked away from her. She caught and held a breath.

“Do you live here alone?”

“Yes,” she said with the exhale.

“I heard you singing as you walked up. It... You have a beautiful voice. It sounded like you wove different strands of the same song. *Amazing Grace*, I think.”

“*Amazing Grace*,” Gilley agreed. “Our favorite song.”

Jason looked absently out the window and said, “I love the line: *twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace that fear relieved*. It’s not a simple hope. It’s not just a hymn of adoration.”

“Perhaps it’s an offering,” Gilley replied, “Part testament. Part confession.”

“Part warning,” Jason added. “For others facing difficulties. This is not always a benevolent god.”

“That’s what Mims believed. Maybe that’s why she liked the song.”

“Mims?” Jason asked.

“My sister.”

“I thought you meant Frank when you said *our favorite*.”

“No. Mims was the singer. She loved the song but hated hearing others sing it.”

“It’s deceptively beautiful.”

“And somewhat prophetic, it seems.”

Jason asked, “Are you talking about yourself or your sister?”

“I was thinking about you,” Gilley said and then sang:

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow*

*The sun forebear to shine*

*But God, who called me here below*

*Will be forever mine.*

“Isn’t that the final stanza?” Jason asked.

“I believe so.”

“The snow and sun seem appropriate. I’d rather end all this on the bit about grace leading me home...”

“Miriam loved the last line. Said it sounded like she’d have god wrapped around her finger.”

“Miriam’s your sister.” Jason stated.

“Yes. She’s been dead twenty years and a day.”

“Seems young.”

“Nine years younger. Beautiful voice. Beautiful girl. Just wasted away. No one knew what to do. Too scared or too stupid. Just... a waste.”

“Too scared?”

“AIDS. Twenty years ago they barely had a name for it.”

“Ryan White died of it in ‘90,” Jason said. “I remember the funeral and the newspapers but not much else.”

Gilley drummed her fingers against the table top. Her eyes never left the tips of her long, brittle nails as she spoke. “By the time he knew what he had, Mims had been dead two years. He found out in eighty-four. Got kicked out of school. Made a lot of celebrity friends. Mims was the first known case in Montgomery County. I was the only one there when she died.”

Jason leaned forward so that his forearms and elbows rested on the table in parallel, fingers splayed, palms down. Gilley thought he might be testing the table’s solidity. She sympathized. At times, she drew her finger along some surface—a wall, a strip of curtain, a cabinet hinge—certain that such contact would break the illusion of substance and memory. She wanted to trace Jason’s face with her fingernail, if only to see a jagged edge snag his cheek, tear open his opaque skin just above the pale shadow of a beard. What does he have inside?

He was speaking. How long, she wondered.

“...give you a new card. But there’s more to it than that.” He pushed photocopy across the table to the edge of his fingertips. Her own hand scuttled out to intercept the paper—a pale spider inspecting the perimeter of its web. She read her name on the image of the library card and thought of the tombstone on Nolen’s Hill—a dead name waiting patiently for its body to join it under the pines and creeping briars.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” she said. “My mind was elsewhere. You didn’t just come to drop off my library card?”

“No,” he answered. “I thought I might write a story, an article for school. This card has a history—a story—and I hoped you could tell it to me.”

After a pause in which their eyes never blinked, he asked, “Am I right?”

He calculates, she thought. He weighs these things he knows and thinks he knows. Gilley folded her hands in her lap. Has he seen the mirror, she wondered.

“What is it you want?” she asked.

“Just help me trace how this card came to you in 1939 and then got to my hand sixty-three years later. Tell me whatever you want along the way. Talk about Frank. Talk about Miriam if you want. You’ve been very gracious—I’m sorry I’ve imposed as much as I have. If nothing else, I’ll go back and star in my own story about a fool, his errand, and a blizzard.” Jason took a deep breath and blew it out. “But I’d rather leave with *your* story.”

Gilley’s heart fluttered. He heard Mims singing, she thought. Where was Mims when I was dressing? Did she ever come inside? Dizziness gripped her as if a hand at the top of her neck, just behind her ears. What did they talk about as he brought in the wood? Gilley pressed her hands into her lap until she felt her palm grind against her femur. And the Silhouette? Blood passed between her palm and bone in agonized, angry bursts.

“Why?” she whispered.

He told her he didn’t know. He had a class, and he had struggled all semester to find a story worth telling. Gilley relaxed her hands a bit. She pitied him. This boy carried his questions and patience and tact like a man—all poised and confident even when he admitted his doubts—but a boy followed along. Young. Wondrous. Inexperienced and alone. The man marveled at

words he heard for the first time because the boy thought the words had never been spoken before.

He said he could help her.

Gilley thought about this. The Silhouette hadn't reappeared, and its familiars, the shadows that scuttled across the walls and floor, no longer inhabited the house—perhaps tending to their secret gardens in the dark hollows of trees and below the snow where the black soil froze and cracked. Mims was silent. Gilley wondered where the echo might be, and it occurred to her that Mims might be soundlessly hovering over the table right now. Or it might not exist at all.

What is a silent echo?

And the crows. Where are they?

“What can you do?” she asked Jason.

“I can help you find Frank,” he replied. “When I looked for you, I found lots of ways to get public records. We shed information like a snake sheds its skin. And I looked up investigators too. They can get access where I can't.”

“It's been over forty years,” Gilley argued.

“I found you,” Jason answered.

“I never moved.”

“Maybe Frank didn't go far.”

Gilley stood. The heat from the stove pressed against the kitchen walls, drove the cold back out the windows and into the darker rooms to the front of the house. Her scalp crawled with sweat. “It's late,” she said, “late for me. You should stay and see if things clear up in the morning.”

He slumped back in his chair, rubbed his face with both hands. The stove's heat had reddened his face on one side

"We'll talk more in the morning," Gilley told him.

She led him upstairs. The guest room was right over the kitchen and the floor vents opened almost directly above the stove. As she pulled the thin bedspread back, whorls of dust danced up to the ceiling on rising thermal draughts.

"You should be warm enough here."

"Thanks. I'll be fine."

She paused by the door. "I'll be down the hall. Bathroom's downstairs—next to the kitchen."

"Thanks again."

"Let's see what this storm does tomorrow. We'll talk more in the morning."

"All right."

She walked to her room. Passive vents brought some meager heat from the kitchen, but the storm winds and the bitter cold had found purchase in this corner of the house. She did not undress, simply buried herself beneath her own comforter and several wool blankets. Despite the cold draughts and the occasional bump from the guest room, Gilley quickly surrendered her body and consciousness to the warmth of her bed.

She dreamed of tall grey trees in a white valley full of screaming crows that spiraled down from boiling storm clouds. She dreamed of a long fall and the percussion of a single gunshot as it rolled down the valley and passed from tree to tree and stone to stone.

## *Chapter Ten: Jesse*

He was warm. Maybe that was strange but he thought that maybe he should have stopped walking a long time ago and just wrapped himself in a blanket of snow. The forest was silent. Not just quiet like when he would hike in the woods behind Stacy and Mika's house. It was never loud back there but there were always crickets and mosquitoes and frogs and birds and leaves. He was warm and the forest was silent and even if he could move Jesse didn't know if he would want to. Not just yet anyways.

He could see a little of the Castle from where he lay. His eyes could still move but that hurt and the colors that used to swirl at the corners of his eyes after he slid into The Gulch now bubbled up with each blink. He closed his eyes but the silence scared him and he remembered that if you fall asleep in the snow then you freeze to death. So he stared at the base of the Castle and enjoyed the warmth that seemed to come from everywhere even though he couldn't feel any part of his body except for his face. He was scared of the silence but there were sounds that scared him even more so he was thankful that he couldn't hear the voices of the other kids on the playground or the screams of crows or that bump...

Clouds raced over the trees. There was almost no color. Black branches scraped against the grey clouds. Brown trunks and black stones lay smothered in white.

Jesse thought that the sun was shining through the trees. The trees at the base of the Castle cast long shadows on the snow. The shadows seemed to slither across the white ground and up the Castle's high stone wall. He glanced back up and the clouds raced from his left to right. If anything, the sky was darkening so that the branches blurred at their tips. The shadows *did* slither across the snow. Several shadows detached entirely from their trees and silently climbed the Castle wall. Many slid back down and flowed across the snow in wild shapes of birds and enormous black snakes.

A pile of snow tumbled over one of his hands from behind his head. He saw his mitten disappear under the thick glob of white. He felt nothing. He tried to brush the snow away but he was too warm and the thought got lost somewhere in that heat. Maybe he couldn't move his hand. Maybe he didn't want to. It didn't seem to matter. Someone was hushing him. Someone was singing. Something scratched at the leaves under the snow. He didn't wonder that he could hear again. He didn't recognize the voice singing so he listened to see if he knew the song.

*Aye said the robin sitting on a fence,*

*I once courted a handsome wench*

*She got scared and from me fled*

*And with the shame my breast burns red.*

It was a woman's voice that sang behind him soft and close but not moving any closer. The hushing was the wind moving the clouds. His breath scratched in and out but it also crackled

and bubbled like dad's coffee maker. Screams drifted from the other side of the Castle. The shadows continued to chase each other around trees and up the Castle wall.

*With a caw and a crack called the bright beak crow*

*Long lost love is what I know*

*A murder drove her far away*

*And with that murder I live today.*

The shadows raced up the side of the Castle and paused close to the top. They all seemed to flow one into the other so that where there had been close to a dozen there was now just one. The shadow descended slowly and shapelessly until it reached the bottom of the wall. It began to stretch out toward Jesse when it touched the snow. It took on a shape. Jesse was terrified. He was so warm. He could watch but the only things that seemed to move out here were this one shadow and the clouds. The singing had stopped but screaming seemed quite loud now—the cawing of crows from the opposite side of the Castle.

The shadow on the ground took the shape of a man with his feet planted against the wall of the Castle and his head pointed toward Jesse. The shadow lifted its arms toward Jesse and stretched in almost all directions at once. Jesse gave one ragged gasp but all that followed was darkness and silence.

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Small, icy flakes are falling when Mr. Freeman and the ranger climb out of the creek bed and stop to examine the small footprints silently filling up with wind and snow. They catch the slight dragging of the prints but don't waste any time discussing it. They saw the pieces of the sled and a dark stain on one of the boulders-- they are under no illusions that Jesse might just be preoccupied with some game of exploration. Both men set off down the path, calling out every few yards.

“JESSE!”

“JESSE! WHE' ARE YA!”

“JESSE! COM'ON SON! JESS...”

The trees mock their yells as they step up to the foot of the old bridge abutment. Hundreds of birds swarm through the branches, and the air ebbs and swells with their voices. Mr. Freeman walks around the base of the bridge while the ranger takes the stairs. Black crows drift around them like heavy leaves.

The ranger is the first to spot Jesse's body. He calls out to Mr. Freeman and Mike's dad follows the ranger's motions. He stops several yards from the spot.

“Mr. Freeman!” calls the ranger. “Mr. Freeman? What is it?”

But Mike's dad will go no further, nor can he retreat. Not until the ranger joins him on the valley floor. Not until the ranger lets out with another “Jesus Christ...” and reaches for his gun. Not until the retort echoes over and over through the valley until it seems to lose interest and drift down the creek bed. Not until the large crow with the orange leg band flies off like driven rain. Not until the ranger pulls down Jesse's cap, covering his blue lips and the bloody holes where his eyes used to be.

## *Chapter Eleven: Jason*

Jason woke up early. He woke up hungry.

He had fallen asleep in his clothes, wrapped in a down comforter and one thin sheet. An hour or so later, the wood stove in the kitchen had achieved full burn and radiated enough heat so that the guest-room floor was warm to the touch. The layers of crusty synthetic fibers that he had worn to bed had drawn the sweat out of his body like a fever. He had to strip all the way down and change into dry pants and t-shirt. Once he cooled down and the sweat dried from his skin, he had crawled under the covers and fallen back to sleep.

The room smelled like the banks of Sugar Creek after a drought: rank with algae scum and the stranded animals that attracted clouds of black flies.

Jason rubbed his eyes, checked his watch, and wondered what had awakened him. As he stared at the ceiling, wind and ice battered the wood siding. He hoped dawn would drive away the storm or at least sneak in behind the line of clouds and open a break for him so that he could call for a ride back to school.

Before exhaustion could pull him back to sleep, thirst drove him out of the bed. He turned on the bedside light, rummaged in his duffel, and pulled out his water bottle. The water tasted vaguely of sautéed onions and iced tea. He grimaced and wondered how long the water had been sitting in his car before he had abandoned the vehicle to the storm.

Jason quickly smoothed the pillows, pulled the sheets tight, and aligned the comforter with each corner of the bed. In no hurry, he began emptying the duffel and arranging the contents on the bed. Cataloguing his possessions brought a measure of control to his thoughts and pushed back the storm's muted roar.

By the pillows, he arranged his electronic devices: laptop, cell phone, audio recorder, and two small flash drives. Next he laid out his laundry in neat stacks. Much of his clothing remained buried in his car, but he had managed to stuff a lot into the duffel. He could outfit himself and a couple of friends for a solid week of cross-country skiing. As long as they brought a pair of boots for me, he thought ruefully. He glanced over the fabric piles again and squeezed his eyes shut. And some underwear. Inexplicably, he was wearing the only pair of boxers to make it out of the car. If he wanted clean underwear, he would have to walk back to his vehicle for them. Along with his duffel, he had three other bags: the two dry-bags that he had used to secure his electronics and a backpack in which he usually carried his books to class. This he had filled with remnants of the disastrous caving trip he had made in November: a water bottle, flashlight, some candles, a few glow-sticks, and two crushed granola bars.

He tore open one of the granola bars and crunched away as he surveyed the bed. Where the hell did I have these, he wondered with distaste and looked down at the foil package in his hand. He sniffed the wrapper. The bar tasted faintly of sautéed onions. I'm glad it's cold, he thought. That camping box in the trunk will probably reek come spring. He chided himself for being so lazy after the caving trip and made a mental note to organize all his gear when he got home.

He wished he had a book

After another moment of looking over his possessions, Jason picked up the notebook and pen, pulled up a straight-backed chair to the nightstand, and set to work writing his account of the previous night.

When he finally put down his pen, it was more at the urging of his bladder than a lack of material. He glanced at the window. Snow lashed the house, and he saw it whip by the glass, backlit by a thin luminescence. Despite the heavy cloud cover and driven snow, dawn had found a way to creep over the ridges and valleys. Jason threw on jeans and a sweatshirt, pulled on another layer of wool socks, and padded down the stairs.

The kitchen was darker and quieter than the guest room. Almost pitch black. The iron stove popped and sang as the fuel shifted—probably little more than an even layer of orange and yellow coals by now, he imagined. The darkness unnerved him. It brought to mind the speed with which the night and storm had swallowed him as he struggled up the drive and onto the porch. He stepped to the kitchen sink and stared at the blank window. When his eyes adjusted enough and he saw his reflection in the glass, he realized the snow had drifted over the window, probably over much of the outer wall, which accounted for the darkness and quiet.

He hurried on to the bathroom. When he came out, he opened the stove, packed it full of wood, and opened all the dampers so that the fire would rise quickly. He thought he heard singing from the front of the house. Maybe Gilley is up, he thought. He remembered other rooms off the entry hall. He stood and moved off toward the dining room in search of the voice.

The kitchen seemed to constrict around him. Jason retreated to the short hall that connected the kitchen to the dining room. Morning found its way more easily into the dining

room, and Jason followed the light, eager to step out of the shadows that seemed to cling to everything in the kitchen like mold.

Jason gave a breath of thanks for his sweatshirt and extra socks. The kitchen's warmth withdrew the moment he stepped into the dining room. Grey light pulsed through the windows in time to the ebb and flow of snow that swept around the house. If anything, the wan light seemed to leech heat from the room as surely as the winds that shook the house.

The dining room actually consisted of two rooms joined by a wide archway. A long table surrounded by cane-backed chairs occupied half of the room closest to the kitchen, while arm chairs, a buffet, and some low book cases created a sitting room through the arch. Jason recognized the scene from last night. He remembered the sitting room, but the dining room had never been more than a black void on the other side of the arch.

The dining table, a beautifully finished piece of dark walnut, took up the center of the room. A tall, equally dark china cabinet stood in the corner. On the table, a mirror rested lengthwise, supported by a wooden stand. In front of this sat an electric turntable. An old quilt coiled about itself below the table.

Jason stepped up to the table. A pile of LPs sat on the closest chair. On the turntable, Jason recognized the Bach fugues he introduced to Gilley at the library. From where he stood, he could see the record player reflected in the mirror as well as the table, half of the chairs, and much of the front windows as light splashed through thin curtains and into the sitting room. He couldn't see himself at this angle.

A shadow moved into one of the windows, a silhouette that stepped from the direction of the front door to stand framed by the tall window. Someone on the porch.

Jason turned to face the windows through the archway. The light clouds thinned and the porch glowed in that moment, but nothing stood outside. He looked back at the mirror and caught the merest flicker of movement, but before he could look back to the windows, his eyes were attracted back to the short hallway and the kitchen on the other side.

The same grey light that had drawn him into the dining room now filled the kitchen and, to a lesser degree, the hall. He stepped away from the mirror and quietly returned to the kitchen. No drift covered the window, although he could see that snow had indeed drifted close to the sill. The window above the sink and the window in the back door clearly illuminated the kitchen. Neither were blocked by snow. Nothing obscured the light.

Why the hell was it so dark when I came down?

He listened carefully. Snow and wind. The rumble of air as it combusted with the crumbling fuel. The insistent beat of his heart.

Jason stepped to the back door and looked over the yard. Snow descended like birds of prey. The storm dropped less snow, but the wind seemed more determined to lift the already fallen snow back into the air. From the back door, Jason stared in rapt fascination as it swirled around the barn's roof. He had barely noticed the barn last night, although he realized that he must have passed it on his way to the porch.

From behind him he heard, "Jason... Jason..."

Gilley stood at the base of the stairs. She wore a long, heavy skirt and at least two sweaters. Her hair, long and disheveled last night, clung to the back of her neck in a large, tight bun. Her mouth was slightly open, as if surprised or shocked.

She cleared her throat and repeated, hesitantly, "Jason," and added, "good morning."

“Good morning,” he answered. “Have you been up long?” He sunk his hands into his pockets. He didn’t want her to see just how apprehensive he felt. His neck and cheeks flushed as his heart seemed to rise up in his throat. He felt as though he might have to run at any moment. He didn’t understand.

Gilley spoke again. “I think we’ll both be grateful that you brought in so much wood last night.”

Not trusting his own voice, he nodded and turned to look out the door again. Behind him he heard Gilley say, “Yes... grateful... yes...” in a voice that was both lower and more distant than the tone she had used to tell him good morning. More distant, as if coming from the stairs behind her or from the dining room, but still warm and strangely familiar. His heart beat against the back of his throat like an injured bird.

He faced her across the kitchen and gestured to the stove. “I better damp that now. We’ll run out of wood if I let it burn too fast.”

“Does it look any better today?” she asked.

“I don’t think anyone can come out to get me. Snow’s not coming down as hard, but the wind and cold are worse.”

“Settle in. Make yourself at home.”

“I’ll make myself useful where I can.”

Gilley glanced up at the ceiling. After a pause, she sighed and visibly relaxed. “You said something like that last night.”

“I might have said too much last night,” he said and shrugged, “especially considering I’d just broken in to your house.”

She cut him off with a wave. “Don’t think about that. You were stuck. We both were. You did right.”

“I must have passed within a few steps of your barn. I’m surprised I didn’t try those doors first.”

“Who would choose a barn over a house?” She asked with a laugh. “You did right. I was the foolish one. I would have been home to greet you if I hadn’t... if I’d had more sense. It was too close to dusk to be out.”

“Sounds like we both caught a break.”

“Yes.” Gilley finally moved from the steps and sat down at the kitchen table. “Tell me how you would find Frank.”

Jason smiled. “Let me get my notes. I’ll be right back.” When she nodded, he smiled again and took the stairs two at a time. In the guest room he snatched the notebook off the bed, hesitated, and then grabbed his laptop as well as his phone. He put back the phone and then, with an exaggerated sigh, the laptop. The notebook held everything he needed: a list of sources he could pursue, the information he could hope to retrieve, names of investigators who worked in the area.

As he ran back down the stairs, he thought he heard Gilley arguing in a mixture of whispers and low questions. She might have been singing. He stamped on the stairs so she would know he was coming. It seemed the least he could do. He hoped she hadn’t heard him talking to himself upstairs. Everyone does it.

Yeah, but they still look at you funny if they catch you at it.

She said yes.

Just like that. Yes.

Nothing could dim his exultation. Not in that first hour. The snow tapered off and drew the clouds away from the sun. In the reprieve, Jason took up a shovel and attacked the drifts outside the back door until he had managed to force a narrow path to the wood pile. The wind remained brutal despite the bright light and wide skies. He found it difficult to estimate how much snow had fallen—probably a couple of feet, but drifts around the house loomed over his head and the wind filled the air with a thick haze of ice. As he panted with exertion, ice crystallized at the corners of his eyes, stung the inside of his nose, and scoured his face. His lips chapped and split in minutes, and his hiking boots remained woefully inadequate, regardless of how well he layered his feet with socks. After two hours of scraping and chipping at the ice, he retreated to the warmth of the kitchen, stripped off his snow gear, and propped his feet close to the stove. The wind immediately broke down the sharp edges of his path and filled in the bottom of the trench with an ankle-depth of powder.

Gilley wasn't downstairs when he came back in. Jason checked his watch and worked out what he could get done while he was here. Can't get back to the library. Might not be an internet connection here.

He grabbed his notebook and turned to the list he'd made of private investigators. A quick trip upstairs and he retrieved his cell phone. At the end of the hall, fragments of song leaked from the crack beneath Gilley's door. He clattered down the stairs, glad for the warmth. The guest room, despite its position above the kitchen, cooled quickly as the wind threatened to pull out the window and disassemble the siding.

He called an Indianapolis TV station. He called the national weather service. Winter storm warnings stretched from Chicago to Louisville. He called his dad and then called the fraternity. In both cases the lines were busy—probably downed by the storm.

Jason called fifteen investigation agencies that operated locally. None answered with more than a recording. He had only a few left and of those, only two might be affordable. He skipped to the last number on his list, the cheapest looking service he could find, and prepared to leave a message.

The machine picked up on the fourth ring. As he waited for the beep, Jason wondered if Gilley would be down soon. His stomach growled, ready for more than the granola bar. Maybe they could talk over lunch.

At the beep he gave his name, his number, and what was by now a quick, well scripted request for rates for locating a missing person.

The line clicked, and a man's voice told Jason, "I'm here."

"Yeah, well I'm..."

The man interrupted, "Where are you?"

"West of Indianapolis. Crawfordsville. Thereabouts."

"I'm going out that way," the man said. "I can meet you if you tell me where you are."

"There's quite a storm on. More coming too..."

"Not a problem."

Silence on the line for several breaths. Jason finally asked, "Is there a charge? Some consulting or travel..."

"No. Don't worry about it," the man said quickly. "Right place right time sort of thing."

“Hold on a second,” Jason said and pulled the phone away from his ear. Why wait? This guy might give up some ideas while he’s here. Things I can follow on my own. “Who am I talking to?” Jason asked.

“I’m LeVey. It’s a one-man show. Call me August.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere, August. Snow up to our eyes.”

“Interstate nearby?” August asked.

“About ten miles north.”

“Highways or state roads?”

“US 41 is west of here a few miles. State Road 234 is less than a mile to the south.”

“Talk me in from the interstate,” August commanded. “Give me all the landmarks you can.”

## *Chapter Twelve: August*

August hung up the phone.

LeVey weighed his options. The storm howled through the street like dogs on a wild hunt. Blood hung in the air. His blood, and LeVey wasn't about to crawl up under some tree and die. Not without a fight.

Or a damn long chase.

But the Stulls dame had her hooks in him. LeVey needed space to maneuver, make his play, turn trump, and keep the pot, but everywhere he turned he felt those hot blue eyes. No way he could run from those lips, so full and red that they practically bloomed if pressed by his own. They'd escape this together. She'd fit tight under his arm and over his hip, her thighs gripping his while his piece barked fire and death down the blown streets. Scumlord's silver and black gun answered in kind while his hired hounds bled out in the snow between their blazing guns.

"Now that's a goddamn beautiful scene," Turner enthused. He racked a round into his heavy automatic, a smile like poison spread across his lips. "Draw 'em in, draw 'em down, then drift with the dame."

"Utterly daft is what it is," August said, LeVey slipping away with only a faint twinge of contempt.

“Then ditch the dame. Buy another. But let’s take the fight to this guy or take a flight south. What the hell do you want with this kid in the sticks?”

“I need the work.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Turner erupted. “Maybe I don’t know how things play out in this century, but way back in ’35 I would have invested one or two bundles from your bag in a supply of scotch and then erased the word “work” from my pan.”

“I need the work,” August repeated, “not the money.”

“Then why’d you take it? The money?”

“I thought it would keep me out of the mirrors for a while—maybe forever. But I was wrong. I had a rule for Scumlord, and I broke it.”

“Maybe you forgot it. Those mirrors scramble you like a couple of eggs.”

“Every time I leave the Grey Lands,” Jason agreed. “Every time. I don’t know what I’ll forget next. That thing on the desk. Soap. I forgot soap once. Think how strange a sink or a shower is when you have no memory at all of soap.”

Turner grimaced. “I can imagine the smell.”

“I don’t have to imagine it,” August snapped. “I had to relearn soap. It wasn’t hard to relearn, but if I can forget soap then what else have I forgotten and just don’t know?”

“You forgot your rules.”

“No,” August corrected, “I broke them. And something else—I’ve never forgotten a case. That hole up here, that place where I lost my shadow and reflection, I don’t think it can touch my work. And it can’t touch my rules.”

“You got any rules against running away?”

“Not a one.”

“Then grab your bag and pick a coast. New York’s got the lights, Hollywood’s got the dames, and Mexico’s got the peso.”

Picked at the bloody bandage on his right hand. The pain in his left wrist had already subsided and that hand was only a little stiff. He talked to his hand instead of the imaginary detective. “Storm’s got things buttoned up. Scumlord’s looking right now, and I can’t be sure how much he knows.” He stood and laid a hand on the bag of money. “You’re right,” he told Turner directly, “I’ve gotta get out. Stulls is a brick around my neck, but this kid says he’s out in the country. I take this job, and it takes me out of the city. The storm breaks, I make my way south. In the mean time, I secure a few more memories by working his case.”

He grabbed the handles to the duffel with his left hand and pulled the bag over his shoulder. With his bandaged hand, August fumbled a pen and paper up from the desk. It was still hard to move the fingers but at least the grinding sensation had gone away there wasn’t any fresh blood. Turner trailed behind as August shouldered the bag into the bedroom, dropped it in front of the mirror, and sat on the bed, paper and pen at his side while he fumbled for a book to use as a writing surface.

“Leaving a note?” Turner asked.

“In a way,” August said, not even glancing up. “Some things I don’t want to forget.”

When he finished his note, August folded it into an envelope, wrote his name on the envelope, and pinned it onto the top of the duffel. He gathered his investigation materials from where they were scattered around the apartment and brought them into the bedroom where he checked and cleaned them carefully. When everything had fresh batteries, he laid them out on

the bed: digital camera, flashlights, binoculars, digital video camera, voice recorder, extra batteries, extra memory cards, notebook, pencils, and pens.

The cash took up most of the bag's main compartment, but after August rearranged the bundled packets of hundreds, all his gear fit snugly, each piece cushioned by bundles he turned edgewise.

He emptied all the rest of the duffel's side pockets and compartments. The clothes and toiletries he pushed through the mirror and into the Grey Lands. The passports he set on the bed, a plane ticket folded inside each one.

His own identification papers he rolled into the empty battery compartment of a third flashlight. He walked back to his desk. With a few keystrokes at the computer he erased all his passwords, emails, and links—anything that passed for his digital reflection and signature.

August dressed quickly, choosing to wear several layers rather than stuff clothes into the bag. When he finished dressing, he picked the passports off the bed and stared at them for several minutes. Into the same pocket where he had found them earlier, he slipped the six passports and then the flashlight containing his own papers.

The garish cover of the pulp anthology seemed to radiate its own light from its place on the dresser.

LeVey's eyes prowled the apartment like a panther, a faint snarl on his lips. The dick Tuner had been a thorn in his claw for days, and LeVey had a mind to sap the shamus—leave him and a few of the bundles scattered around the apartment, maybe stuff a plane ticket in his pocket, in case Scumlord sniffed out LeVey's pad. But Turner had taken the run-out, amscrayed before LeVey could give him the high hat. He was a slick one, and LeVey had to admit that he

got the job done. Didn't matter if the job needed a roscoe for the rats or a hard hand for the skirts. Turner survived, like a roach, and if LeVey was going to survive, he'd need someone like that.

"I know you can hear me," LeVey called out to the quiet rooms. "You queer this for me and you'll wind up dead as... dead as a snowman... in... a really hot..." It was so much harder to talk the talk than think the talk.

Turner's laughter cut him off.

August snatched up the anthology and jammed it into a pocket inside his winter coat. "I'll see you on the other side," August called to the disembodied chuckles. He adjusted the duffel's strap across his shoulders and gripped it to his belly. After staring into the empty glass of the mirror for several moments, he touched it with his bandaged hand and stepped greyside.

The Grey Lands opened before him, uniform and wholly alien. The grey medium suggested a desert horizon of tall dunes beneath a clear sky. High above his head, a group of translucent spheres, maybe eight or nine in all, overlapped like a mass of eggs in scummy water. August glanced around at the few mirrors he could see and then began the short walk through the building to the street out front.

A glimmer above his head caught his attention. For a moment he thought the spheres were changing color, but as he watched, a small rectangle appeared. And then another. Then all the mirrors in A. Pointer's apartment materialized as if a bright light had been thrust into a perforated can. August took three long steps up to the mirror by the front door. All the apartment lights burned at their highest setting, and it seemed as if there were new lights in some of the

rooms. The mirrored table supported a shaded lamp that shone so brightly that its incandescence extended into the Grey Lands as a yellow smear.

The carpet showed no sign of his trespassing the previous night. He waited, but no one appeared. He moved to each mirror in each room until he was sure no one was home. Shaking his head, he moved away and descended to street level.

Most days and nights, Washington Street hummed with cars. During the day this flow of traffic registered in the Grey Lands as a long line of small mirrors flying by like a shimmering stream of birds. At night, fewer cars meant fewer mirrors, but the windshields and other glass surfaces emerged from the grey background as new sources of light transmuted them into curved shells of silver and gold.

Even though no new snow had fallen for hours, the storm had so paralyzed the city that even the major thoroughfares like Washington Street were empty of traffic.

Neither the wind nor the cold touched August in the Grey Lands. Even the layers he wore made no difference—the Grey Lands were always chilly, as if the colorless atmosphere drew away heat directly from each of his cells, ignoring the intervening and insulating layers of cotton, leather, wool, and synthetic fabrics.

The wind and the cold frustrated August because they made it difficult to hitch a ride.

I need to get to an interstate, he thought. One of the major intersections should do the trick. Salt trucks will come by sooner or later.

After a short walk, August stood in the middle of the intersection of Washington and Emerson streets. Once there, he spent several minutes pivoting in place. On two occasions he readied himself only to jump away at the last second from an approaching mirror. He didn't want

to take a chance on a small car sliding off the road or some local turning off before they reached the interstate. Finally, a large array of mirrors approached from the north. A city plow. Two more sets of similar mirrors trailed the first—a DOT phalanx of plow, salt, and vehicles. August let the first set of mirrors sweep by. As the second approached, he held out his hand as if hailing a cab by reaching out to smack its windshield. Like all mirrors in the Grey Lands, the large rear-view mirrors on the truck shimmered with a vaguely aquatic blue. When the truck passed, its mirror struck August's outstretched hand, moving at just over twenty miles an hour.

August didn't feel a thing. To his eyes, the mirror stopped moving instantly, as did the sets of mirrors ahead of and behind him. The few reflective surfaces he could see on either side of the road sprang into motion as if the houses and businesses, perhaps even the earth itself, sped off to the north at a steady twenty miles an hour, while the trucks themselves remained in one fixed place.

The relativistic effects would be more pronounced on the interstate. August dreaded the prospect of stepping in front of a mirror moving at highway speeds.

It took no effort to hold on to the mirror. When he reached the interstate, he simply stepped away from the mirror. Without transition—no inertia and no friction—the truck mirrors sped on south and the mirrors dotting the edge of the road stopped. When he jumped off the truck they had been crossing over the interstate. Below his feet he could see a thin stream of mirrors. Few vehicles plied the interstate but they would be plenty for his needs.

The state roads will be harder, he imagined, but with some luck, I'll be at the exit in two hours and will find a farmer who just had to come into town.

After Jason's call, August had printed a topographic map of the area and then made notes concerning the landmarks Jason had described. August had checked the map against satellite images he found on the internet. The area was sparsely populated but there were some prominent roads nearby and he could wait patiently in the Grey Lands until someone came by.

Worst case, August thought as he walked down to the level of the interstate, I have to walk a few miles through the Grey Lands. Navigate from house to house using the topo map.

Mirrors flashed by. August knew the road conditions had slowed the cars, but even at the reduced speeds the mirrors passed by like a knife blades. He closed his eyes, held out his hand, and stepped into the path of a mirror as it sliced through the silent gloom.

After four hours of worst case scenarios, August gave up on speculating and resigned himself to a long stay in the Grey Lands. The storm worsened with each mile west of Indianapolis. The city might have received the same wind and cold, but it became obvious that the snows had been much heavier even in the western suburbs. Cars invariably slid into ditches, drifts, and each other. Trucks with chains and all-wheel drives rarely drove on the interstate for more than one or two exits, and twice August's ride made a u-turn and headed back east. Even the DOT trucks had to stop every mile or so to assist with a rescue. These delays ended soon after the police shut down the interstate to all but the utility vehicles, but it meant August could only rely on the plows and salt trucks to get him to his exit, and August wondered how much longer the DOT would bother keeping their people and machines out in these brutal conditions.

A plow eventually made it to his exit, and before he let go of its mirror, August caught a glimpse of roiling skies and thick waves of snow crashing back across the interstate, obliterating the plow's narrow trail.

A small cluster of mirrors hovered in the Grey Lands to the south of the interstate. August checked his map and set off toward the assortment of small portals. He had a lot of ground to cover. The mirrors he saw now were probably the edge of Veedersberg. From there, he had to navigate about ten miles of deeply drifted roads and whiteout conditions. He had maybe two hours before sunset.

He looked back the way he had come. In the hours it took to travel west, the Grey Land's horizon had undergone a metamorphosis so that although the great sand dunes maintained their basic shape and tone, small dark holes appeared as if the surface had eroded to reveal a warren of caves and cavities beneath a thin façade. August stared at the landscape. The change did not bother him—the Grey Lands constantly transformed in subtle ways and never so that he could see the changes as they occurred. The landscape had not drawn his attention, but rather the color pink had.

He closed his eyes until the amorphous greens and blues subsided in their swirling behind his eyelids. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the dunes and the caves and the orbs hovering overhead. Nothing moved. No other colors interrupted the monochrome space. He turned back to the direction of town, but for a moment he had been convinced that something pink had emerged from one of the caves and crawled into the darkness of another.

August resigned himself to traveling by foot through the Grey Lands. Not a single vehicle moved in the town. No one was leaving.

Although he could avoid the blizzard if he stayed in the Grey Lands, he faced another unique problem, namely: navigation. His annotated topo map, although it clearly indicated where he could find houses, did not give him any idea if the buildings were currently inhabited. If a mirror did not face a strong source of light it was virtually invisible in the Grey Lands, and uninhabited houses seldom contained well lit—let alone intact—mirrors. Judging distances in the Grey Lands was difficult at best, and August failed on several occasions to account for changes in elevation, resulting in situations in which August would frantically search for a house although he was actually in the hillside deep below it.

He had covered barely half the distance between the interstate and the farm when the sun set. The storm ushered in the night like Saturn swallowing his children. August watched the spectacle from a small farmhouse, just off the unplowed state highway. Clouds consumed the last faint touch of light like a pack of sharks. August realized this was the best time to locate homes in the Grey Lands. For a time, people would light up their homes against the winter dark, and the mirrors would shimmer for him—lead him through the empty wastes. But, they'll slip off to bed, he thought, give their houses over to the darkness and hope that the storm flies on by in its blind hunger.

He moved away from the mirror and the small house. The next house should be close, and he had to keep a sharp watch for its mirrors. He glanced over his shoulder.

Something followed him in the Grey Lands.

The pink thing appeared frequently now—sometimes it remained a stationary dot of color; other times it traced slow trajectories before vanishing. If August had any doubts after the first sighting, he was sure now—it always appeared at his back and it slowly narrowed the distance between them. He could not discern its shape or size, only that it appeared to grow with each appearance. He didn't know which he found more disturbing: the idea that the pink thing was growing into a giant somewhere in the distance, or that some small but persistent thing approached in pursuit.

Fear drove him to take several risks. He moved from one house to the next without being able to see any mirrors at his destination. He set off across wide fields toward houses he saw only on his map. He walked as quickly as he could and often lost count of his steps.

August stumbled across a dozen or so round, rectangular, and triangular mirrors, none bigger than his hand. Junked cars, he realized after looking through several of the small portals. These mirrors, of the hundreds that lay buried by the snow, had become exposed by the fierce winds. A bright sodium vapor light glared back at him through each one. A junk yard, then—but not something that I noticed on the map.

The pink thing seemed to unfold from the fabric of the Grey Lands. August forgot the salvage yard and stared at the blossom of color. Because it emerged behind the mirrors, August had a frame of reference. The pink thing was about the size of a small dog, roughly spherical, and about two blocks away had they been in the city. As he watched, two tentacles languidly stretched out to either side like the eyestalks of a slug, retracted for a moment, and then stretched up, as if signaling him. Then, as if drawn upward by the motion of its appendages, the pink thing rose vertically. It dimmed as it rose until it vanished in only a few seconds.

August turned and ran.

First mirror, he thought. Dive through, explain later. Chance the storm.

He stopped suddenly and spun around in confusion. In front of him, large translucent trees rose up, like a mirage or a televised image as seen through waves of static. He could see the horizon of the Grey Lands through the trees, but their form and texture distorted the image as if the trees were made of very old glass. This change in the topography frightened him as much as the pink thing. The trees thrashed as if in the grip of powerful winds, yet he felt nothing but the persistent chill of the Grey Lands.

Silence.

With a trembling hand he reached out to one of the trunks. His hand passed through it. He walked forward, expecting to feel a slight scratch or resistance. Nothing. On one side of the trunks, the texture appeared rougher and the glass-like surface seemed frosted. The effect drifted down to the base of the trees and spread out as if a deep immobile fog engulfed the ground, often as high as his chest. August took a few more steps through the trees and realized that the fog and the rough frost plastered against the trees was actually snow—several feet of it. Perhaps only the white was visible—all other color, hue, and tone had been filtered out—and what he saw was an invisible forest as revealed by patterns of interference between the wind and the snow and the trees.

Fear overpowered curiosity. The pink thing could reappear. Move on.

Find a mirror.

August walked resolutely through the spectral trees. Although nothing impeded his progress, with each step he could feel the Grey Lands solidify below his feet, and for the first

time, he felt what might be gravity. He took a pencil from one of his pockets and dropped it. Had he tried this in the city, the pencil would have hung where released until he recovered it or had moved out of sight, at which point the pencil would cease to exist. When he released it in the forest, it descended slowly, as if lowered by an unseen hand, until it touched the top of a snow drift. It did not indent the snow. It merely stopped. August snatched up the pencil. The Grey Lands still lacked color and substance but in this place, this pale outline of a forest, it seemed to borrow some small degree of form and space from the world on the other side of the glass.

When a farmhouse appeared in a clearing ahead of him like a set from a black-and-white movie, August stopped again, torn between desires. He could keep moving until he found himself back in the Grey Lands he recognized with the hope that he would find a suitable escape mirror. He could approach the grey farmhouse as if it corresponded to a similar structure on the other side. The house matched Jason's description. It seemed too much to hope that this anomaly in the formless Grey Lands and his destination were one and the same.

There should be a barn behind me and to the right, he thought.

August looked over his shoulder and noted the barn's crumbling roof and wide doors. The wind raked angry fingers through the forest. As the bare limbs crashed about silently, the pink thing appeared briefly between two straight trunks. Doubt fled, and August ran for the house.

Passing through the porch wall proved no more difficult than the immaterial trees, but his feet struck the floorboards just like they had found purchase on the ground out in the forest. In three long steps he passed through the siding of the exterior wall and found himself in a sitting room that opened onto a dining room through a wide arch. On the dining table sat the familiar

opalescent blue rectangle of a mirror—a wide dressing mirror or mantel-piece. August audibly sighed.

Movement outside the window. Something pink flittered by the porch.

August shuffled backward, away from the windows and toward the mirror. His legs passed through the table with only a slight sensation of resistance. Pausing only long enough to pull the duffel strap over his head so that it could not possibly drag him back into the Grey Lands, August thrust the duffel ahead of him and dove, yet again, through a mirror with an intense wash of relief and panic. And loss.

August's instincts as he lay on the wide walnut table pulled his eyes to the windows and then back to the mirror. No pink thing. The storm battered the porch and windows. An invisible world, utterly black, trembled outside, but no pink thing.

August had unslung the bag from his shoulder, but he was still perched on the table when something moved in the mirror. He snapped his head around so fast that the bag fell to the floor with the crunch of broken electronics. He ignored it. A young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, rose up from where she squatted in the straight-backed armchair. She had been crouched on the balls of her feet and now she uncoiled like a bird as it prepared to fall into flight. He had not seen her in the Grey Lands. She hopped down from the chair and approached the table. The light in the dining room was very dim but it looked as if the girl was trying to speak. As her mouth moved, clear water dribbled out of her nose and over her lips until it darkened her shirt and spread across her collar bones and flat chest.

He looked behind him at the armchair in the sitting room. Empty. No one else was with him in any of the rooms on this side of the mirror.

So who is screaming? He thought.

The young girl stared at him through the mirror. Behind her, a slender young woman with long dark hair and jeans walked into the sitting room. August looked again at the sitting room on his side of the mirror. Still empty. He didn't know which was worse: not seeing himself in the mirror or seeing these two people who were obviously not with him glasside. August guessed the new woman to be college aged—maybe mid-twenties. She seemed surprised and had eyes only for the young girl.

August jumped off the table and dragged the bag away from the sitting room, toward a hallway that was the only source of light.

Behind the mirror, a door opened into a short hall. Light fell slantwise into the dining room through the hall. What sounded like dozens of small hands beat against the ceiling, joined by muted screams. August dug a flashlight out of his bag and left the bag under the table. He thumbed on the powerful light and stepped into the hall. The kitchen ahead glowed from an overhead light. The stairway to his left remained dark, as if the light that drifted freely into the dining room lacked the strength to penetrate higher than the first step.

August swung his light up the stairs. The walls to either side remained black, but an old woman stood facing him on the second step, her face thin, almost youthful but bloodless. Her hair writhed about her head in a white nimbus of fine strands that had escaped the bun on her neck.

“You came,” she said, her voice soft and strangely removed from the small yellowed teeth behind her dried lips. It seemed as if her words formed in the air in front of her lips rather than emerging from her throat.

“Where is Jason?” he managed through his fear. Why is she just standing there?

“Why do you want the boy?” she asked.

“He called me from here.”

The old woman’s eyes narrowed and she clutched the bottom of her dark sweater with thin, alabaster fingers.

“Upstairs.” More staccato thumps passed overhead, followed by several short screams and a long, almost operatic wail. August twitched his light away from her face but only managed to illuminate a small circle of stairs and baseboard. When his light didn’t fall directly on her, the old woman disappeared as if she wasn’t standing within an arm’s reach. Something hard and sharp brushed his cheek, and he jerked back, the light again pulling her out of the darkness. Her hand and arm retracted from his face and the light.

“Go on,” she said. “It’s worse if I go any closer.”

The darkness surrounding her retreated up the stairs. Now August could make out the old woman, the narrow stairs, and a bit of hallway at the top.

Placing his back against one of the walls, August edged up the stairs and into the whirlwind of screams and sobs that filled the upper rooms. As he peered down the hallway, another flashlight stabbed his eyes. August aimed his light at the ceiling, and the other lifted soon after. A young man sat with his back to a closed wooden door, his knees pulled up to his chest,

the flashlight held down by his ankles. The screams had stopped, and there only remained sobs and thumps from the other side of the door.

“Are you Jason?”

The young man nodded and lifted a finger to his lips.

August crouched down at the top step and crawled down the hall. “I’m August LeVey,” he whispered.

A wry smile tugged at Jason’s mouth, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Of course you are,” he replied.

They sat in the diffused glow of their flashlights for several minutes, neither speaking nor moving. August heard a few caws from the other side of the door, but he let the question go unasked. After perhaps fifteen minutes, the sobs and shuffles and caws and scratches tapered to silence.

“Maybe he’s asleep,” Jason ventured.

“Should we check?” August asked. “What about the birds?”

Jason chuckled and then coughed into his hand. August recognized the action—Jason was on the verge of hysterics. “How the fuck should I know?” Jason asked and fought to suppress more laughter. August reached for the doorknob, but Jason grabbed his hand and said, “You won’t see anything.”

August pulled his hand back. Jason crossed his legs under him and hung his head. Almost under his breath, as if he was thinking aloud, Jason asked, “What do you think, Mims?”

From above Jason’s head, a woman’s voice, low and resonant, drifted across the ceiling and back toward the stairs, “We never... we... sleep... never...”

“So what is happening?” Jason asked as he looked up from his lap. “Has he... it... gone?”

“No... no...” the voice echoed down the hall. “He certainly... he... remains... remains... Perhaps this silence... perhaps... is also... silence... his voice... voice...”

“Good enough,” Jason answered. With a quick motion, Jason stood and directed his light at August’s chest. “Do you have a car?”

August shook his head. It seemed pointless to lie.

“Let’s find Gilley,” Jason said. “I think we all have some stories to tell.”

August nodded. As he followed Jason to the stairs, Jason put his hand out, stopped August with a touch on the arm, and asked, “Did you bring any food with you?”

## **Vita**

William Bain was born in Indianapolis in 1970. He has rarely strayed far from that city, and when he has done so, he has never stayed away for long. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Wabash College in 1993, after which he knocked about the Midwest with outdoor adventure programs and substitute teaching. He earned his Master's in Secondary Education from Indiana University in 1998 and promptly set about teaching in small, public alternative schools. In the next few years, he had exactly three stories published in very small literary magazines. This fueled his ego to the extent that in 2005, in the pursuit of a first novel, he applied for and was accepted to the low-residency MFA program at the University of New Orleans. This is that first novel.