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STEPHEN KING

11/22/63

A NOVEL

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For Zelda

Hey, honey, welcome to the party.

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a non-entity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd.

—Norman Mailer

If there is love, smallpox scars are as pretty as dimples.

—Japanese proverb

Dancing is life.

CONTENTS

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I have never been what you'd call a crying man.

My ex-wife said that my "nonexistent emotional gradient" was the main reason she was leaving me (as if the guy she met in her AA meetings was beside the point). Christy said she supposed she could forgive me not crying at her father's funeral; I had only known him for six years and couldn't understand what a wonderful, giving man he had been (a Mustang convertible as a high school graduation present, for instance). But then, when I didn't cry at my own parents' funerals—they died just two years apart, Dad of stomach cancer and Mom of a thunderclap heart attack while walking on a Florida beach—she began to understand the nonexistent gradient thing. I was "unable to feel my feelings," in AA-speak.

"I have *never* seen you shed tears," she said, speaking in the flat tones people use when they are expressing the absolute final deal-breaker in a relationship. "Even when you told me I had to go to rehab or you were leaving." This conversation happened about six weeks before she packed her things, drove them across town, and moved in with Mel Thompson. "Boy meets girl on the AA campus"—that's another saying they have in those meetings.

I didn't cry when I saw her off. I didn't cry when I went back inside the little house with the great big mortgage, either. The house where no baby had come, or now ever would. I just lay down on the bed that now belonged to me alone, and put my arm over my eyes, and mourned.

Tearlessly.

But I'm not emotionally blocked. Christy was wrong about that. One day when I was nine, my mother met me at the door when I came home from school. She told me my collie, Rags, had been struck and killed by a truck that hadn't even bothered to stop. I didn't cry when we buried him, although my dad told me nobody would think less of me if I did, but I cried when she told me. Partly because it was my first experience of death; mostly because it had been my responsibility to make sure he was safely penned up in our backyard.

And I cried when Mom's doctor called me and told me what had happened that day on the beach. "I'm sorry, but there was no chance," he said. "Sometimes it's very sudden, and doctors tend to see that as a blessing."

Christy wasn't there—she had to stay late at school that day and meet with a mother who had questions about her son's last report card—but I cried, all right. I went into our little laundry room and took a dirty sheet out of the basket and cried into that. Not for long, but the tears came. I could have told her about them later, but I didn't see the point, partly because she would have thought I was pity-fishing (that's not an AA term, but maybe it should be), and partly because I don't think the ability to bust out bawling pretty much on cue should be a requirement for successful marriage.

I never saw my dad cry at all, now that I think about it; at his most emotional, he might fetch a heavy sigh or grunt out a few reluctant chuckles—no breast-beating or belly-laughs for William Epping. He was the strong silent type, and for the most part, my mother was the same. So maybe the not-crying-easily thing is genetic. But blocked? Unable to feel my feelings? No, I have never been those things.

Other than when I got the news about Mom, I can only remember one other time when I cried as an adult, and that was when I read the story of the janitor's father. I was sitting alone in the teachers' room at Lisbon High School, working my way through

a stack of themes that my Adult English class had written. Down the hall I could hear the thud of basketballs, the blare of the time-out horn, and the shouts of the crowd as the sports-beasts fought: Lisbon Greyhounds versus Jay Tigers.

Who can know when life hangs in the balance, or why?

The subject I'd assigned was "The Day That Changed My Life." Most of the responses were heartfelt but awful: sentimental tales of a kindly aunt who'd taken in a pregnant teenager, an Army buddy who had demonstrated the true meaning of bravery, a chance meeting with a celebrity (*Jeopardy!* host Alex Trebek, I think it was, but maybe it was Karl Malden). The teachers among you who have picked up an extra three or four thousand a year by taking on a class of adults studying for their General Equivalency Diploma will know what a dispiriting job reading such themes can be. The grading process hardly figures into it, or at least it didn't for me; I passed everybody, because I never had an adult student who did less than try his or her ass off. If you turned in a paper with writing on it, you were guaranteed a hook from Jake Epping of the LHS English Department, and if the writing was organized into actual paragraphs, you got at least a B-minus.

What made the job hard was that the red pen became my primary teaching tool instead of my mouth, and I practically wore it out. What made the job dispiriting was that you knew that very little of that red-pen teaching was apt to stick; if you reach the age of twenty-five or thirty without knowing how to spell (*totally,* not *todilly*), or capitalize in the proper places (*White House,* not *white-house*), or write a sentence containing both a noun *and* a verb, you're probably never going to know. Yet we soldier on, gamely circling the misused word in sentences like *My husband was to quick to judge me* or crossing out *swum* and replacing it with *swam* in the sentence *I swum out to the float often after that.*

It was such hopeless, trudging work I was doing that night, while not far away another high school basketball game wound down toward another final buzzer, world without end, amen. It was not long after Christy got out of rehab, and I suppose if I was

thinking anything, it was to hope that I'd come home and find her sober (which I did; she's held onto her sobriety better than she held onto her husband). I remember I had a little headache and was rubbing my temples the way you do when you're trying to keep a little nagger from turning into a big thumper. I remember thinking, *Three more of these, just three, and I can get out of here. I can go home, fix myself a big cup of instant cocoa, and dive into the new John Irving novel without these sincere but poorly made things hanging over my head.*

There were no violins or warning bells when I pulled the janitor's theme off the top of the stack and set it before me, no sense that my little life was about to change. But we never know, do we? Life turns on a dime.

He had written in cheap ballpoint ink that had blotted the five pages in many places. His handwriting was a looping but legible scrawl, and he must have been bearing down hard, because the words were actually engraved into the cheap notebook pages; if I'd closed my eyes and run my fingertips over the backs of those torn-out sheets, it would have been like reading Braille. There was a little squiggle, like a flourish, at the end of every lower-case *y.* I remember that with particular clarity.

I remember how his theme started, too. I remember it word for word.

It wasnt a day but a night. The night that change my life was the night my father murdirt my mother and two brothers and hurt me bad. He hurt my sister too, so bad she went into a comah. In three years she died without waking up. Her name was Ellen and I loved her very much. She love to pick flouers and put them in vayses.

Halfway down the first page, my eyes began to sting and I put my trusty red pen down. It was when I got to the part about him crawling under the bed with the blood running in his eyes (*it also run down my throat and tasted horible*) that I began to cry—Christy would have been so proud. I read all the way to the end without making a single mark, wiping my eyes so the tears wouldn't fall on the pages that had obviously cost him so much effort. Had I thought he was slower than the rest, maybe only half a step above

what used to be called "educable retarded"? Well, by God, there was a reason for that, wasn't there? And a reason for the limp, too. It was a miracle that he was alive at all. But he was. A nice man who always had a smile and never raised his voice to the kids. A nice man who had been through hell and was working—humbly and hopefully, as most of them do—to get a high school diploma. Although he would be a janitor for the rest of his life, just a guy in green or brown khakis, either pushing a broom or scraping gum up off the floor with the putty knife he always kept in his back pocket. Maybe once he could have been something different, but one night his life turned on a dime and now he was just a guy in Carhartts that the kids called Hoptoad Harry because of the way he walked.

So I cried. Those were real tears, the kind that come from deep inside. Down the hall, I could hear the Lisbon band strike up their victory song—so the home team had won, and good for them. Later, perhaps, Harry and a couple of his colleagues would roll up the bleachers and sweep away the crap that had been dropped beneath them.

I stroked a big red A on top of his paper. Looked at it for a moment or two, then added a big red +. Because it was good, and because his pain had evoked an emotional reaction in me, his reader. And isn't that what A+ writing is supposed to do? Evoke a response?

As for me, I only wish the former Christy Epping had been correct. I wish I had been emotionally blocked, after all. Because everything that followed—every terrible thing—flowed from those tears.

PART 1

WATERSHED MOMENT

CHAPTER 1

1

Harry Dunning graduated with flying colors. I went to the little GED ceremony in the LHS gym, at his invitation. He really had no one else, and I was happy to do it.

After the benediction (spoken by Father Bandy, who rarely missed an LHS function), I made my way through the milling friends and relatives to where Harry was standing alone in his billowy black gown, holding his diploma in one hand and his rented mortarboard in the other. I took his hat so I could shake his hand. He grinned, exposing a set of teeth with many gaps and several leaners. But a sunny and engaging grin, for all that.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Epping. Thanks so much."

"It was my pleasure. And you can call me Jake. It's a little perk I accord to students who are old enough to be my father."

He looked puzzled for a minute, then laughed. "I guess I am, ain't I? Sheesh!" I laughed, too. Lots of people were laughing all around us. And there were tears, of course. What's hard for me comes easily to a great many people.

"And that A-plus! Sheesh! I never got an A-plus in my whole life! Never expected one, either!"

"You deserved it, Harry. So what's the first thing you're going to do as a high school graduate?"

His smile dimmed for a second—this was a prospect he hadn't considered. "I guess I'll go back home. I got a little house I rent

on Goddard Street, you know." He raised the diploma, holding it carefully by the fingertips, as if the ink might smear. "I'll frame this and hang it on the wall. Then I guess I'll pour myself a glass of wine and sit on the couch and just admire it until bedtime."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, "but would you like to have a burger and some fries with me first? We could go down to Al's."

I expected a wince at that, but of course I was judging Harry by my colleagues. Not to mention most of the kids we taught; they avoided Al's like the plague and tended to patronize either the Dairy Queen across from the school or the Hi-Hat out on 196, near where the old Lisbon Drive-In used to be.

"That'd be great, Mr. Epping. Thanks!"

"Jake, remember?"

"Jake, you bet."

So I took Harry to Al's, where I was the only faculty regular, and although he actually had a waitress that summer, Al served us himself. As usual, a cigarette (illegal in public eating establishments, but that never stopped Al) smoldered in one corner of his mouth and the eye on that side squinted against the smoke. When he saw the folded-up graduation robe and realized what the occasion was, he insisted on picking up the check (what check there was; the meals at Al's were always remarkably cheap, which had given rise to rumors about the fate of certain stray animals in the vicinity). He also took a picture of us, which he later hung on what he called the Town Wall of Celebrity. Other "celebrities" represented included the late Albert Dunton, founder of Dunton Jewelry; Earl Higgins, a former LHS principal; John Crafts, founder of John Crafts Auto Sales; and, of course, Father Bandy of St. Cyril's. (The Father was paired with Pope John XXIII—the latter not local, but revered by Al Templeton, who called himself "a good Catlick.") The picture Al took that day showed Harry Dunning with a big smile on his face. I was standing next to him, and we were both holding his diploma. His tie was pulled slightly askew. I remember that because it made me think of those little squiggles he put on the ends of his lower-case *y*'s. I remember it all. I remember it very well.

2

Two years later, on the last day of the school year, I was sitting in that very same teachers' room and reading my way through a batch of final essays my American Poetry honors seminar had written. The kids themselves had already left, turned loose for another summer, and soon I would do the same. But for the time being I was happy enough where I was, enjoying the unaccustomed quiet. I thought I might even clean out the snack cupboard before I left. *Someone* ought to do it, I thought.

Earlier that day, Harry Dunning had limped up to me after homeroom period (which had been particularly screechy, as all homerooms and study halls tend to be on the last day of school) and offered me his hand.

"I just want to thank you for everything," he said.

I grinned. "You already did that, as I remember."

"Yeah, but this is my last day. I'm retiring. So I wanted to make sure and thank you again."

As I shook his hand, a kid cruising by—no more than a sophomore, judging by the fresh crop of pimples and the serio-comic straggle on his chin that aspired to goateehood—muttered, "Hoptoad Harry, hoppin down the av-a-*new.*"

I grabbed for him, my intention to make him apologize, but Harry stopped me. His smile was easy and unoffended. "Nah, don't bother. I'm used to it. They're just kids."

"That's right," I said. "And it's our job to teach them."

"I know, and you're good at it. But it's not my job to be anybody's whatchacallit—teachable moment. Especially not today. I hope you'll take care of yourself, Mr. Epping." He might be old enough to be my father, but *Jake* was apparently always going to be beyond him.

"You too, Harry."

"I'll never forget that A-plus. I framed that, too. Got it right up beside my diploma."

"Good for you."

And it was. It was all good. His essay had been primitive art, but every bit as powerful and true as any painting by Grandma Moses. It was certainly better than the stuff I was currently reading. The spelling in the honors essays was mostly correct, and the diction was clear (although my cautious college-bound don't-take-a-chancers had an irritating tendency to fall back on the passive voice), but the writing was pallid. Boring. My honors kids were juniors—Mac Steadman, the department head, awarded the seniors to himself—but they wrote like little old men and little old ladies, all pursey-mouthed and *ooo, don't slip on that icy patch, Mildred.* In spite of his grammatical lapses and painstaking cursive, Harry Dunning had written like a hero. On one occasion, at least.

As I was musing on the difference between offensive and defensive writing, the intercom on the wall cleared its throat. "Is Mr. Epping in the west wing teachers' room? You by any chance still there, Jake?"

I got up, thumbed the button, and said: "Still here, Gloria. For my sins. Can I help you?"

"You have a phone call. Guy named Al Templeton? I can transfer it, if you want. Or I can tell him you left for the day."

Al Templeton, owner and operator of Al's Diner, where all LHS faculty save for yours truly refused to go. Even my esteemed department head—who tried to talk like a Cambridge don and was approaching retirement age himself—had been known to refer to the specialty of the house as Al's Famous Catburger instead of Al's Famous Fatburger.

Well of course it's not really cat, people would say, *or* probably *not cat, but it can't be beef, not at a dollar-nineteen.*

"Jake? Did you fall asleep on me?"

"Nope, wide awake." Also curious as to why Al would call me at school. Why he'd call me at all, for that matter. Ours had always been strictly a cook-and-client relationship. I appreciated his chow, and he appreciated my patronage. "Go on and put him through."

"Why are you still here, anyway?"

"I'm flagellating myself."

"Ooo!" Gloria said, and I could imagine her fluttering her long lashes. "I love it when you talk dirty. Hold on and wait for the ringy-dingy."

She clicked off. The extension rang and I picked it up.

"Jake? You on there, buddy?"

At first I thought Gloria must have gotten the name wrong. That voice couldn't belong to Al. Not even the world's worst cold could have produced such a croak.

"Who is this?"

"Al Templeton, didn't she tellya? Christ, that hold music really sucks. Whatever happened to Connie Francis?" He began to ratchet coughs loud enough to make me hold the phone away from my ear a little.

"You sound like you got the flu."

He laughed. He also kept coughing. The combination was fairly gruesome. "I got something, all right."

"It must have hit you fast." I had been in just yesterday, to grab an early supper. A Fatburger, fries, and a strawberry milkshake. I believe it's important for a guy living on his own to hit all the major food groups.

"You could say that. Or you could say it took awhile. Either one would be right."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I'd had a lot of conversations with Al in the six or seven years I'd been going to the diner, and he could be odd—insisted on referring to the New England Patriots as the Boston Patriots, for instance, and talked about Ted Williams as if he'd known him like a brudda—but I'd never had a conversation as weird as this.

"Jake, I need to see you. It's important."

"Can I ask—"

"I expect you to ask plenty, and I'll answer, but not over the phone."

I didn't know how many answers he'd be able to give before his voice gave out, but I promised I'd come down in an hour or so.

"Thanks. Make it even sooner, if you can. Time is, as they say, of the essence." And he hung up, just like that, without even a goodbye.

I worked my way through two more of the honors essays, and there were only four more in the stack, but it was no good. I'd lost my groove. So I swept the stack into my briefcase and left. It crossed my mind to go upstairs to the office and wish Gloria a good summer, but I didn't bother. She'd be in all next week, closing the books on another school year, and I was going to come in on Monday and clean out the snack cupboard—that was a promise I'd made to myself. Otherwise the teachers who used the west wing teachers' room during summer session would find it crawling with bugs.

If I'd known what the future held for me, I certainly would have gone up to see her. I might even have given her the kiss that had been flirting in the air between us for the last couple of months. But of course I didn't know. Life turns on a dime.

3

Al's Diner was housed in a silver trailer across the tracks from Main Street, in the shadow of the old Worumbo mill. Places like that can look tacky, but Al had disguised the concrete blocks upon which his establishment stood with pretty beds of flowers. There was even a neat square of lawn, which he barbered himself with an old push-type lawn mower. The lawn mower was as well tended as the flowers and the lawn; not a speck of rust on the whirring, brightly painted blades. It might have been purchased at the local Western Auto store the week before . . . if there had still been a Western Auto in The Falls, that was. There was once, but it fell victim to the big-box stores back around the turn of the century.

I went up the paved walk, up the steps, then paused, frowning. The sign reading WELCOME TO AL'S DINER, HOME OF THE FATBURGER! was gone. In its place was a square of cardboard

reading CLOSED & WILL NOT REOPEN DUE TO ILLNESS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS OVER THE YEARS & GOD BLESS.

I had not yet entered the fog of unreality that would soon swallow me, but the first tendrils were seeping around me, and I felt them. It wasn't a summer cold that had caused the hoarseness I'd heard in Al's voice, nor the croaking cough. Not the flu, either. Judging by the sign, it was something more serious. But what kind of serious illness came on in a mere twenty-four hours? Less than that, really. It was two-thirty. I had left Al's last night at five forty-five, and he'd been fine. Almost manic, in fact. I remembered asking him if he'd been drinking too much of his own coffee, and he said no, he was just thinking about taking a vacation. Do people who are getting sick—sick enough to close the businesses they've run single-handed for over twenty years—talk about taking vacations? Some, maybe, but probably not many.

The door opened while I was still reaching for the handle, and Al stood there looking at me, not smiling. I looked back, feeling that fog of unreality thicken around me. The day was warm but the fog was cold. At that point I still could have turned and walked out of it, back into the June sunshine, and part of me wanted to do that. Mostly, though, I was frozen by wonder and dismay. Also horror, I might as well admit it. Because serious illness *does* horrify us, doesn't it, and Al was seriously ill. I could see that in a single glance. And *mortally* was probably more like it.

It wasn't just that his normally ruddy cheeks had gone slack and sallow. It wasn't the rheum that coated his blue eyes, which now looked washed-out and nearsightedly peering. It wasn't even his hair, formerly almost all black, and now almost all white—after all, he might have been using one of those vanity products and decided on the spur of the moment to shampoo it out and go natural.

The impossible part was that in the twenty-two hours since I'd last seen him, Al Templeton appeared to have lost at least thirty pounds. Maybe even forty, which would have been a quarter of his

previous body weight. Nobody loses thirty or forty pounds in less than a day, *nobody.* But I was looking at it. And this, I think, is where that fog of unreality swallowed me whole.

Al smiled, and I saw he had lost teeth as well as weight. His gums looked pale and unhealthy. "How do you like the new me, Jake?" And he began to cough, thick chaining sounds that came from deep inside him.

I opened my mouth. No words came out. The idea of flight again came to some craven, disgusted part of my mind, but even if that part had been in control, I couldn't have done it. I was rooted to the spot.

Al got the coughing under control and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He wiped first his mouth and then the palm of his hand with it. Before he put it back, I saw it was streaked with red.

"Come in," he said. "I've got a lot to talk about, and I think you're the only one who might listen. Will you listen?"

"Al," I said. My voice was so low and strengthless I could hardly hear it myself. "What's happened to you?"

"Will you listen?"

"Of course."

"You'll have questions, and I'll answer as many as I can, but try to keep them to a minimum. I don't have much voice left. Hell, I don't have much *strength* left. Come on in here."

I came in. The diner was dark and cool and empty. The counter was polished and crumbless; the chrome on the stools gleamed; the coffee urn was polished to a high gloss; the sign reading IF YOU DON'T LIKE OUR TOWN, LOOK FOR A TIMETABLE was in its accustomed place by the Sweda register. The only thing missing was the customers.

Well, and the cook-proprietor, of course. Al Templeton had been replaced by an elderly, ailing ghost. When he turned the door's thumb-latch, locking us in, the sound was very loud.

4

"Lung cancer," he said matter-of-factly, after leading us to a booth at the far end of the diner. He tapped the pocket of his shirt, and I saw it was empty. The ever-present pack of Camel straights was gone. "No big surprise. I started when I was eleven, and smoked right up to the day I got the diagnosis. Over fifty damn years. Three packs a day until the price went way up in '07. Then I made a sacrifice and cut back to two a day." He laughed wheezily.

I thought of telling him that his math had to be wrong, because I knew his actual age. When I'd come in one day in the late winter and asked him why he was working the grill with a kid's birthday hat on, he'd said *Because today I'm fifty-seven, buddy. Which makes me an official Heinz.* But he'd asked me not to ask questions unless I absolutely had to, and I assumed the request included not butting in to make corrections.

"If I were you—and I wish I was, although I'd never wish being me on you, not in my current situation—I'd be thinking, 'Something's screwy here, nobody gets advanced lung cancer overnight.' Is that about right?"

I nodded. That was exactly right.

"The answer is simple enough. It wasn't overnight. I started coughing my brains out about seven months ago, back in May."

This was news to me; if he'd been doing any coughing, it hadn't been while I was around. Also, he was doing that bad-math thing again. "Al, hello? It's June. Seven months ago it was December."

He waved a hand at me—the fingers thin, his Marine Corps ring hanging on a digit that used to clasp it cozily—as if to say *Pass that by for now, just pass it.*

"At first I thought I just had a bad cold. But there was no fever, and instead of going away, the cough got worse. Then I started losing weight. Well, I ain't stupid, buddy, and I always knew the big C might be in the cards for me . . . although my father and

mother smoked like goddam chimneys and lived into their eighties. I guess we always find excuses to keep on with our bad habits, don't we?"

He started coughing again, and pulled out the handkerchief. When the hacking subsided, he said: "I can't get off on a sidetrack, but I've been doing it my whole life and it's hard to stop. Harder than stopping with the cigarettes, actually. Next time I start wandering off-course, just kind of saw a finger across your throat, would you?"

"Okay," I said, agreeably enough. It had occurred to me by then that I was dreaming all of this. If so, it was an extremely vivid dream, right down to the shadows thrown by the revolving ceiling fan, marching across the place mats reading OUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET IS *YOU*!

"Long story short, I went to a doctor and got an X-ray, and there they were, big as billy-be-damned. Two tumors. Advanced necrosis. Inoperable."

An X-ray, I thought—*did they still use those to diagnose cancer?*

"I hung in for awhile, but in the end I had to come back."

"From where? Lewiston? Central Maine General?"

"From my vacation." His eyes looked fixedly at me from the dark hollows into which they were disappearing. "Except it was no vacation."

"Al, none of this makes any sense to me. Yesterday you were here and you were *fine.*"

"Take a good close look at my face. Start with my hair and work your way down. Try to ignore what the cancer's doing to me—it plays hell with a person's looks, no doubt about that—and then tell me I'm the same man you saw yesterday."

"Well, you obviously washed the dye out—"

"Never used any. I won't bother directing your attention to the teeth I lost while I was . . . away. I know you saw those. You think an X-ray machine did that? Or strontium-90 in the milk? I don't even *drink* milk, except for a splash in my last cup of coffee of the day."

"Strontium *what?*"

"Never mind. Get in touch with your, you know, feminine side. Look at me the way women look at other women when they're judging age."

I tried to do what he said, and while what I observed would never have stood up in court, it convinced me. There were webworks of lines spraying out from the corners of his eyes, and the lids had the tiny, delicately ruffled wrinkles you see on people who no longer have to flash their Senior Discount Cards when they step up to the multiplex box office. Skin-grooves that hadn't been there yesterday evening now made sine-waves across Al's brow. Two more lines—much deeper ones—bracketed his mouth. His chin was sharper, and the skin on his neck had grown loose. The sharp chin and wattled throat could have been caused by Al's catastrophic weight loss, but those lines . . . and if he wasn't lying about his hair . . .

He was smiling a little. It was a grim smile, but not without actual humor. Which somehow made it worse. "Remember my birthday last March? 'Don't worry, Al,' you said, 'if that stupid party hat catches on fire while you're hanging over the grill, I'll grab the fire extinguisher and put you out.' Remember that?"

I did. "You said you were an official Heinz."

"So I did. And now I'm sixty-two. I know the cancer makes me look even older, but these . . . and these . . ." He touched his forehead, then the corner of one eye. "These are authentic age-tattoos. Badges of honor, in a way."

"Al . . . can I have a glass of water?"

"Of course. Shock, isn't it?" He looked at me sympathetically. "You're thinking, 'Either I'm crazy, he's crazy, or we both are.' I know. I've been there."

He levered himself out of the booth with an effort, his right hand going up beneath his left armpit, as if he were trying to hold himself together, somehow. Then he led me around the counter. As he did so, I put my finger on another element of this unreal encounter: except for the occasions when I shared a pew with him

at St. Cyril's (these were rare; although I was raised in the faith, I'm not much of a Catlick) or happened to meet him on the street, I'd never seen Al out of his cook's apron.

He took a sparkling glass down and drew me a glass of water from a sparkling chrome-plated tap. I thanked him and turned to go back to the booth, but he tapped me on the shoulder. I wish he hadn't done that. It was like being tapped by Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who stoppeth one of three.

"I want you to see something before we sit down again. It'll be quicker that way. Only *seeing* isn't the right word. I guess *experiencing* is a lot closer. Drink up, buddy."

I drank half the water. It was cool and good, but I never took my eye off him. That craven part of me was expecting to be jumped, like the first unwitting victim in one of those maniac-on-the-loose movies that always seem to have numbers in their titles. But Al only stood there with one hand propped on the counter. The hand was wrinkled, the knuckles big. It didn't look like the hand of a man in his fifties, even one with cancer, and—

"Did the radiation do that?" I asked suddenly.

"Do what?"

"You have a *tan.* Not to mention those dark spots on the backs of your hands. You get those either from radiation or too much sun."

"Well, since I haven't had any radiation treatments, that leaves the sun. I've gotten quite a lot of it over the last four years."

So far as I knew, Al had spent most of the last four years flipping burgers and making milkshakes under fluorescent lights, but I didn't say so. I just drank the rest of my water. When I set the glass down on the Formica counter, I noticed my hand was shaking slightly.

"Okay, what is it you want me to see? Or to experience?"

"Come this way."

He led me down the long, narrow galley area, past the double grill, the Fry-O-Lators, the sink, the FrostKing fridge, and the humming waist-high freezer. He stopped in front of the silent

dishwasher and pointed to the door at the far end of the kitchen. It was low; Al would have to duck his head going through it, and he was only five-seven or so. I'm six-four—some of the kids called me Helicopter Epping.

"That's it," he said. "Through that door."

"Isn't that your pantry?" Strictly a rhetorical question; I'd seen him bring out enough cans, sacks of potatoes, and bags of dry goods over the years to know damn well what it was.

Al seemed not to have heard. "Did you know I originally opened this joint in Auburn?"

"No."

He nodded, and just that was enough to kick off another bout of coughing. He stifled it with the increasingly gruesome handkerchief. When the latest fit finally tapered off, he tossed the handkerchief into a handy trash can, then grabbed a swatch of napkins from a dispenser on the counter.

"It's an Aluminaire, made in the thirties and as art deco as they come. Wanted one ever since my dad took me to the Chat 'N Chew in Bloomington, back when I was a kid. Bought it fully outfitted and opened up on Pine Street. I was at that location for almost a year, and I saw that if I stayed, I'd be bankrupt in another year. There were too many other quick-bite joints in the neighborhood, some good, some not so good, all of em with their regulars. I was like a kid fresh out of law school who hangs out his shingle in a town that already has a dozen well-established shysters. Also, in those days Al's Famous Fatburger sold for two-fifty. Even back in 1990 two and a half was the best I could do."

"Then how in hell do you sell it for less than half that now? Unless it really *is* cat."

He snorted, a sound that produced a phlegmy echo of itself deep in his chest. "Buddy, what I sell is a hundred percent pure American beef, the best in the world. Do I know what people say? Sure. I shrug it off. What else can you do? Stop people from talking? You might as well try to stop the wind from blowing."

I ran a finger across my throat. Al smiled.

"Yeah, gettin off on one of those sidetracks, I know, but at least this one's part of the story.

"I could have kept beating my head against the wall on Pine Street, but Yvonne Templeton didn't raise any fools. 'Better to run away and fight again some other day,' she used to tell us kids. I took the last of my capital, wheedled the bank into loaning me another five grand—don't ask me how—and moved here to The Falls. Business still hasn't been great, not with the economy the way it is and not with all that stupid talk about Al's Catburgers or Dogburgers or Skunkburgers or whatever tickles people's fancy, but it turns out I'm no longer tied to the economy the way other people are. And it's all because of what's behind that pantry door. It wasn't there when I was set up in Auburn, I'd swear to that on a stack of Bibles ten feet high. It only showed up here."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked at me steadily from his watery, newly old eyes. "Talking's done for now. You need to find out for yourself. Go on, open it."

I looked at him doubtfully.

"Think of it as a dying man's last request," he said. "Go on, buddy. If you really are my buddy, that is. Open the door."

5

I'd be lying if I said my heart didn't kick into a higher gear when I turned the knob and pulled. I had no idea what I might be faced with (although I seem to remember having a brief image of dead cats, skinned and ready for the electric meat grinder), but when Al reached past my shoulder and turned on the light, what I saw was—

Well, a pantry.

It was small, and as neat as the rest of the diner. There were shelves stacked with big restaurant-sized cans on both walls. At the far end of the room, where the roof curved down, were some cleaning supplies, although the broom and mop had to lie flat

because that part of the cubby was no more than three feet high. The floor was the same dark gray linoleum as the floor of the diner, but rather than the faint odor of cooked meat, in here there was the scent of coffee, vegetables, and spices. There was another smell, too, faint and not so pleasant.

"Okay," I said. "It's the pantry. Neat and fully stocked. You get an A in supply management, if there is such a thing."

"What do you smell?"

"Spices, mostly. Coffee. Maybe air freshener, too, I'm not sure."

"Uh-huh, I use Glade. Because of the other smell. Are you saying you don't smell anything else?"

"Yeah, there's something. Kind of sulphury. Makes me think of burnt matches." It also made me think of the poison gas I and my family had put out after my mom's Saturday night bean suppers, but I didn't like to say so. Did cancer treatments make you fart?

"It is sulphur. Other stuff, too, none of it Chanel No. 5. It's the smell of the mill, buddy."

More craziness, but all I said (in a tone of absurd cocktail-party politeness) was, "Really?"

He smiled again, exposing those gaps where teeth had been the day before. "What you're too polite to say is that Worumbo has been closed since Hector was a pup. That in fact it mostly burned to the ground back in the late eighties, and what's standing out there now"—he jerked a thumb back over his shoulder—"is nothing but a mill outlet store. Your basic Vacationland tourist stop, like the Kennebec Fruit Company during Moxie Days. You're also thinking it's about time you grabbed your cell phone and called for the men in the white coats. That about the size of it, buddy?"

"I'm not calling anybody, because you're not crazy." I was far from sure of that. "But this is just a pantry, and it's true that Worumbo Mills and Weaving hasn't turned out a bolt of cloth in the last quarter century."

"You aren't going to call anybody, you're right about that, because I want you to give me your cell phone, your wallet, and all

the money you have in your pockets, coins included. It ain't a robbery; you'll get it all back. Will you do that?"

"How long is this going to take, Al? Because I've got some honors themes to correct before I can close up my grade book for the school year."

"It'll take as long as you want," he said, "because it'll only take two minutes. It *always* takes two minutes. Take an hour and really look around, if you want, but I wouldn't, not the first time, because it's a shock to the system. You'll see. Will you trust me on this?" Something he saw on my face tightened his lips over that reduced set of teeth. "Please. *Please,* Jake. Dying man's request."

I was sure he was crazy, but I was equally sure that he was telling the truth about his condition. His eyes seemed to have retreated deeper into their sockets in the short time we'd been talking. Also, he was exhausted. Just the two dozen steps from the booth at one end of the diner to the pantry at the other had left him swaying on his feet. And the bloody handkerchief, I reminded myself. Don't forget the bloody handkerchief.

Also . . . sometimes it's just easier to go along, don't you think? "Let go and let God," they like to say in the meetings my ex-wife goes to, but I decided this was going to be a case of let go and let Al. Up to a point, at any rate. And hey, I told myself, you have to go through more rigamarole than this just to get on an airplane these days. He isn't even asking me to put my shoes on a conveyor.

I unclipped my phone from my belt and put it on top of a canned tuna carton. I added my wallet, a little fold of paper money, a dollar fifty or so in change, and my key ring.

"Keep the keys, they don't matter."

Well, they did to me, but I kept my mouth shut.

Al reached into his pocket and brought out a sheaf of bills considerably thicker than the one I'd deposited on top of the carton. He held the wad out to me. "Mad money. In case you want to buy a souvenir, or something. Go on and take it."

"Why wouldn't I use my own money for that?" I sounded quite reasonable, I thought. Just as if this crazy conversation made sense.

"Never mind that now," he said. "The experience will answer most of your questions better than I could even if I was feeling tip-top, and right now I'm on the absolute other side of the world from tip-top. Take the money."

I took the money and thumbed through it. There were ones on top and they looked okay. Then I came to a five, and that looked both okay and not okay. It said **SILVER CERTIFICATE** above Abe Lincoln's picture, and to his left there was a big blue 5. I held it up to the light.

"It ain't counterfeit, if that's what you're thinking." Al sounded wearily amused.

Maybe not—it felt as real as it looked—but there was no bleed-through image.

"If it's real, it's old," I said.

"Just put the money in your pocket, Jake."

I did.

"Are you carrying a pocket calculator? Any other electronics?"

"Nope."

"I guess you're good to go, then. Turn around so you're looking at the back of the pantry." Before I could do it, he slapped his forehead and said, "Oh God, where are my brains? I forgot the Yellow Card Man."

"The who? The what?"

"The Yellow Card Man. That's just what I call him, I don't know his real name. Here, take this." He rummaged in his pocket, then handed me a fifty-cent piece. I hadn't seen one in years. Maybe not since I was a kid.

I hefted it. "I don't think you want to give me this. It's probably valuable."

"Of course it's valuable, it's worth half a buck."

He got coughing, and this time it shook him like a hard wind, but he waved me off when I started toward him. He leaned on the stack of cartons with my stuff on top, spat into the wad of napkins, looked, winced, and then closed his fist around them. His haggard face was now running with sweat.

"Hot flash, or somethin like it. Damn cancer's screwing with my thermostat along with the rest of my shit. About the Yellow Card Man. He's a wino, and he's harmless, but he's not like anyone else. It's like he *knows* something. I think it's only a coincidence—because he happens to be plumped down not far from where you're gonna come out—but I wanted to give you a heads-up about him."

"Well you're not doing a very good job," I said. "I have no fucking idea what you're talking about."

"He's gonna say, 'I got a yellow card from the greenfront, so gimme a buck because today's double-money day.' You got that?"

"Got it." The shit kept getting deeper.

"And he *does* have a yellow card, tucked in the brim of his hat. Probably nothing but a taxi company card or maybe a Red & White coupon he found in the gutter, but his brains are shot on cheap wine and he seems to thinks it's like Willy Wonka's Golden Ticket. So *you* say, 'I can't spare a buck but here's half a rock,' and you give it to him. Then he may say . . ." Al raised one of his now skeletal fingers. "He *may* say something like, 'Why are you here' or 'Where did you come from.' He may even say something like, 'You're not the same guy.' I don't think so, but it's possible. There's so much about this I don't know. Whatever he says, just leave him there by the drying shed—which is where he's sitting—and go out the gate. When you go he'll probably say, 'I *know* you could spare a buck, you cheap bastard,' but pay no attention. Don't look back. Cross the tracks and you'll be at the intersection of Main and Lisbon." He gave me an ironic smile. "After that, buddy, the world is yours."

"Drying shed?" I thought I vaguely remembered *something* near the place where the diner now stood, and I supposed it might have been the old Worumbo drying shed, but whatever it had been, it was gone now. If there had been a window at the back of the Aluminaire's cozy little pantry, it would have been looking out on nothing but a brick courtyard and an outerwear shop called Your Maine Snuggery. I had treated myself to a North Face parka there shortly after Christmas, and got it at a real bargain price.

"Never mind the drying shed, just remember what I told you. Now turn around again—that's right—and take two or three steps forward. Little ones. Baby steps. Pretend you're trying to find the top of a staircase with all the lights out—careful like that."

I did as he asked, feeling like the world's biggest dope. One step . . . lowering my head to keep from scraping it on the aluminum ceiling . . . two steps . . . now actually crouching a little. A few more steps and I'd have to get on my knees. That I had no intention of doing, dying man's request or not.

"Al, this is stupid. Unless you want me to bring you a carton of fruit cocktail or some of these little jelly packets, there's nothing I can do in h—"

That was when my foot went down, the way your foot does when you're starting down a flight of steps. Except my foot was still firmly on the dark gray linoleum floor. I could see it.

"There you go," Al said. The gravel had gone out of his voice, at least temporarily; the words were soft with satisfaction. "You found it, buddy."

But what had I found? What exactly was I experiencing? The power of suggestion seemed the most likely answer, since no matter what I felt, I could see my foot on the floor. Except . . .

You know how, on a bright day, you can close your eyes and see an afterimage of whatever you were just looking at? It was like that. When I looked at my foot, I saw it on the floor. But when I *blinked*—either a millisecond before or a millisecond after my eyes closed, I couldn't tell which—I caught a glimpse of my foot on a step. And it wasn't in the dim light of a sixty-watt bulb, either. It was in bright sunshine.

I froze.

"Go on," Al said. "Nothing's going to happen to you, buddy. Just go on." He coughed harshly, then said in a kind of desperate growl: *"I need you to do this."*

So I did.

God help me, I did.

CHAPTER 2

1

I took another step forward and went down another step. My eyes still told me I was standing on the floor in the pantry of Al's Diner, but I was standing straight and the top of my head no longer scraped the roof of the pantry. Which was of course impossible. My stomach lurched unhappily in response to my sensory confusion, and I could feel the egg salad sandwich and the piece of apple pie I'd eaten for lunch preparing to push the ejector button.

From behind me—yet a little distant, as if he were standing fifteen yards away instead of only five feet—Al said, "Close your eyes, buddy, it's easier that way."

When I did it, the sensory confusion disappeared at once. It was like uncrossing your eyes. Or putting on the special glasses in a 3-D movie, that might be closer. I moved my right foot and went down another step. It *was* steps; with my vision shut off, my body had no doubt about that.

"Two more, then open em," Al said. He sounded farther away than ever. At the other end of the diner instead of standing in the pantry door.

I went down with my left foot. Went down with my right foot again, and all at once there was a pop inside my head, exactly like the kind you hear when you're in an airplane and the pressure changes suddenly. The dark field inside my eyelids turned red, and there was warmth on my skin. It was sunlight. No question about

it. And that faint sulphurous smell had grown thicker, moving up the olfactory scale from barely there to actively unpleasant. There was no question about that, either.

I opened my eyes.

I was no longer in the pantry. I was no longer in Al's Diner, either. Although there was no door from the pantry to the outside world, I *was* outside. I was in the courtyard. But it was no longer brick, and there were no outlet stores surrounding it. I was standing on crumbling, dirty cement. Several huge metal receptacles stood against the blank white wall where Your Maine Snuggery should have been. They were piled high with something and covered with sail-size sheets of rough brown burlap cloth.

I turned around to look at the big silver trailer which housed Al's Diner, but the diner was gone.

2

Where it should have been was the vast Dickensian bulk of Worumbo Mills and Weaving, and it was in full operation. I could hear the thunder of the dyers and dryers, the *shat-HOOSH, shat-HOOSH* of the huge weaving flats that had once filled the second floor (I had seen pictures of these machines, tended by women who wore kerchiefs and coveralls, in the tiny Lisbon Historical Society building on upper Main Street). Whitish-gray smoke poured from three tall stacks that had come down during a big windstorm in the eighties.

I was standing beside a large, green-painted cube of a building—the drying shed, I assumed. It filled half the courtyard and rose to a height of about twenty feet. I had come down a flight of stairs, but now there were no stairs. No way back. I felt a surge of panic.

"Jake?" It was Al's voice, but very faint. It seemed to arrive in my ears by a mere trick of acoustics, like a voice winding for miles down a long, narrow canyon. "You can come back the same way you got there. Feel for the steps."

I lifted my left foot, put it down, and felt a step. My panic eased.

"Go on." Faint. A voice seemingly powered by its own echoes. "Look around a little, then come back."

I didn't go anywhere at first, just stood still, wiping my mouth with the palm of my hand. My eyes felt like they were bugging out of their sockets. My scalp and a narrow strip of skin all the way down the middle of my back was crawling. I was scared—almost terrified—but balancing that off and keeping panic at bay (for the moment) was a powerful curiosity. I could see my shadow on the concrete, as clear as something cut from black cloth. I could see flakes of rust on the chain that closed the drying shed off from the rest of the courtyard. I could smell the powerful effluent pouring from the triple stacks, strong enough to make my eyes sting. An EPA inspector would have taken one sniff of that shit and shut the whole operation down in a New England minute. Except . . . I didn't think there were any EPA inspectors in the vicinity. I wasn't even sure the EPA had been invented yet. I knew where I was; Lisbon Falls, Maine, deep in the heart of Androscoggin County.

The real question was *when* I was.

3

A sign I couldn't read hung from the chain—the message was facing the wrong way. I started toward it, then turned around. I closed my eyes and shuffled forward, reminding myself to take baby steps. When my left foot clunked against the bottom step that went back up to the pantry of Al's Diner (or so I devoutly hoped), I felt in my back pocket and brought out a folded sheet of paper: my exalted department head's "Have a nice summer and don't forget the July in-service day" memo. I briefly wondered how he'd feel about Jake Epping teaching a six-week block called The Literature of Time Travel next year. Then I tore a strip from the top, crumpled it, and dropped it on the first step of the invisible stairway. It landed on the ground, of course, but either way it

marked the spot. It was a warm, still afternoon and I didn't think it would blow away, but I found a little chunk of concrete and used it as a paperweight, just to be sure. It landed on the step, but it also landed on the scrap of memo. Because there *was* no step. A snatch of some old pop song drifted through my head: *First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.*

Look around a little, Al had said, and I decided that was what I'd do. I figured if I hadn't lost my mind already, I was probably going to be okay for awhile longer. Unless I saw a parade of pink elephants or a UFO hovering over John Crafts Auto, that was. I tried to tell myself this wasn't happening, *couldn't* be happening, but it wouldn't wash. Philosophers and psychologists may argue over what's real and what isn't, but most of us living ordinary lives know and accept the texture of the world around us. This was happening. All else aside, it was too goddam stinky to be a hallucination.

I walked to the chain, which hung at thigh level, and ducked beneath it. Stenciled in black paint on the other side was **NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT UNTIL SEWER PIPE IS REPAIRED**. I looked back again, saw no indication that repairs were in the immediate offing, walked around the corner of the drying shed, and almost stumbled over the man sunning himself there. Not that he could expect to get much of a tan. He was wearing an old black overcoat that puddled around him like an amorphous shadow. There were dried crackles of snot on both sleeves. The body inside the coat was scrawny to the point of emaciation. His iron-gray hair hung in snaggles around his beard-scruffy cheeks. He was a wino if ever a wino there was.

Cocked back on his head was a filthy fedora that looked straight out of a 1950s film noir, the kind where all the women have big bazonkas and all the men talk fast around the cigarettes stuck in the corners of their mouths. And yep, poking up from the fedora's hatband, like an old-fashioned reporter's press pass, was a yellow card. Once it had probably been a bright yellow, but much handling by grimy fingers had turned it bleary.

When my shadow fell across his lap, the Yellow Card Man turned and surveyed me with bleary eyes.

"Who the fuck're you?" he asked, only it came out *Hoo-a fuck-a you?*

Al hadn't given me detailed instructions on how to answer questions, so I said what seemed safest. "None of your fucking business."

"Well fuck you, too."

"Fine," I said. "We are in accord."

"Huh?"

"Have a nice day." I started toward the gate, which stood open on a steel track. Beyond it, to the left, was a parking lot that had never been there before. It was full of cars, most of them battered and all of them old enough to belong in a car museum. There were Buicks with portholes and Fords with torpedo noses. *Those belong to actual millworkers,* I thought. *Actual millworkers who are inside now, working for hourly wages.*

"I got a yellow card from the greenfront," the wino said. He sounded both truculent and troubled. "So gimme a buck because today's double-money day."

I held the fifty-cent piece out to him. Feeling like an actor who only has one line in the play, I said: "I can't spare a buck, but here's half a rock."

Then you give it to him, Al had said, but I didn't need to. The Yellow Card Man snatched it from me and held it close to his face. For a moment I thought he was actually going to bite into it, but he just closed his long-fingered hand around it in a fist, making it disappear. He peered at me again, his face almost comic with distrust.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'll be damned if I know," I said, and turned back to the gate. I expected him to hurl more questions after me, but there was only silence. I went out through the gate.

4

The newest car in the lot was a Plymouth Fury from—I think—the mid- or late fifties. The plate on it looked like an impossibly antique version of the one on the back of my Subaru; that plate came, at my ex-wife's request, with a pink breast cancer ribbon. The one I was looking at now *did* say VACATIONLAND, but it was orange instead of white. As in most states, Maine plates now come with letters—the one on my Subaru is 23383 IY—but the one on the back of the almost-new white-over-red Fury was 90-811. No letters.

I touched the trunk. It was hard and warm from the sun. It was real.

Cross the tracks and you'll be at the intersection of Main and Lisbon. After that, buddy, the world is yours.

There were no railroad tracks passing in front of the old mill—not in my time, there weren't—but they were here, all right. Not just leftover artifacts, either. They were polished, gleaming. And somewhere in the distance I could hear the *wuff-chuff* of an actual train. When was the last time trains had passed through Lisbon Falls? Probably not since the mill closed and U.S. Gypsum (known to the locals as U.S. Gyp 'Em) was running round the clock.

Except it is running round the clock, I thought. *I'd bet money on it. And so is the mill. Because this is no longer the second decade of the twenty-first century.*

I had started walking again without even realizing it—walking like a man in a dream. Now I stood on the corner of Main Street and Route 196, also known as the Old Lewiston Road. Only now there was nothing old about it. And diagonally across the intersection, on the opposite corner—

It was the Kennebec Fruit Company, which was certainly a grandiose name for a store that had been tottering on the edge of oblivion—or so it seemed to me—for the ten years I'd been teaching at LHS. Its unlikely raison d'être and only means of sur-

vival was Moxie, that weirdest of soft drinks. The proprietor of the Fruit Company, an elderly sweet-natured man named Frank Anicetti, had once told me the world's population divided naturally (and probably by genetic inheritance) into two groups: the tiny but blessed elect who prized Moxie above all other potables . . . and everybody else. Frank called everybody else "the unfortunately handicapped majority."

The Kennebec Fruit Company of my time was a faded yellow-and-green box with a dirty show window barren of goods . . . unless the cat that sometimes sleeps there is for sale. The roof is sway-backed from many snowy winters. There's little on offer inside except for Moxie souvenirs: bright orange tee-shirts reading I'VE GOT MOXIE!, bright orange hats, vintage calendars, tin signs that *looked* vintage but were probably made last year in China. For most of the year the place is devoid of customers, most of the shelves denuded of goods . . . although you can still get a few sugary snack foods or a bag of potato chips (if you like the salt-and-vinegar kind, that is). The soft-drink cooler is stocked with nothing but Moxie. The beer cooler is empty.

Each July, Lisbon Falls hosts the Maine Moxie Festival. There are bands, fireworks, and a parade featuring—I swear this is true—Moxie floats and local beauty queens dressed in Moxie-colored tank bathing suits, which means an orange so bright it can cause retinal burns. The parade marshal is always dressed as the Moxie Doc, which means a white coat, a stethoscope, and one of those funky mirrors on a headband. Two years ago the marshal was LHS principal Stella Langley, and she'll never live it down.

During the festival, the Kennebec Fruit Company comes alive and does excellent business, mostly provided by bemused tourists on their way to the western Maine resort areas. The rest of the year it is little more than a husk haunted by the faint odor of Moxie, a smell that has always reminded me—probably because I belong to the unfortunately handicapped majority—of Musterole, the fabulously stinky stuff my mother insisted on rubbing into my throat and chest when I had a cold.

What I was looking at now from the far side of the Old Lewiston Road was a thriving business in the prime of life. The sign hung over the door (FRESH UP WITH 7-UP on top, WELCOME TO THE KENNEBEC FRUIT CO. below) was bright enough to throw arrows of sun at my eyes. The paint was fresh, the roof unbowed by the weather. People were going in and coming out. And in the show window, instead of a cat . . .

Oranges, by God. The Kennebec Fruit Company once sold actual fruit. Who knew?

I started across the street, then pulled back as an inter-city bus snored toward me. The route sign above the divided windshield read LEWISTON EXPRESS. When the bus braked to a stop at the railroad crossing, I saw that most of the passengers were smoking. The atmosphere in there must have been roughly akin to the atmosphere of Saturn.

Once the bus had gone on its way (leaving behind a smell of half-cooked diesel to mix with the rotten-egg stench belching from the Worumbo's stacks), I crossed the street, wondering briefly what would happen if I were hit by a car. Would I blink out of existence? Wake up lying on the floor of Al's pantry? Probably neither. Probably I would just die here, in a past for which a lot of people probably felt nostalgic. Possibly because they had forgotten how bad the past smelled, or because they had never considered that aspect of the Nifty Fifties in the first place.

A kid was standing outside the Fruit Company with one black-booted foot cocked back against the wood siding. The collar of his shirt was turned up at the nape of his neck, and his hair was combed in a style I recognized (from old movies, mostly) as Early Elvis. Unlike the boys I was used to seeing in my classes, he sported no goatee, not even a flavor patch below the chin. I realized that in the world I was now visiting (I *hoped* I was only visiting), he'd be kicked out of LHS for showing up with even a single strand of facial hair. Instantly.

I nodded to him. James Dean nodded back and said, "Hi-ho, Daddy-O."

I went inside. A bell jingled above the door. Instead of dust and gently decaying wood, I smelled oranges, apples, coffee, and fragrant tobacco. To my right was a rack of comic books with their covers torn off—*Archie, Batman, Captain Marvel, Plastic Man, Tales from the Crypt.* The hand-printed sign above this trove, which would have sent any eBay aficionado into paroxysms, read COMIX 5¢ EA THREE FOR 10¢ NINE FOR A QUARTER *PLEASE DON'T HANDLE UNLESS YOU INTEND TO BUY.*

On the left was a rack of newspapers. No *New York Times,* but there were copies of the *Portland Press Herald* and one leftover *Boston Globe.* The *Globe*'s headline trumpeted, **DULLES HINTS CONCESSIONS IF RED CHINA RENOUNCES USE OF FORCE IN FORMOSA**. The dates on both were Tuesday, September 9, 1958.

5

I took the *Globe,* which sold for eight cents, and walked toward a marble-topped soda fountain that did not exist in my time. Standing behind it was Frank Anicetti. It was him all right, right down to the distinguished wings of gray above his ears. Only this version—call him Frank 1.0—was thin instead of plump, and wearing rimless bifocals. He was also taller. Feeling like a stranger in my own body, I slid onto one of the stools.

He nodded at the paper. "That going to do you, or can I get you something from the fountain?"

"Anything cold that's not Moxie," I heard myself say.

Frank 1.0 smiled at that. "Don't carry it, son. How about a root beer instead?"

"Sounds good." And it did. My throat was dry and my head was hot. I felt like I was running a fever.

"Five or ten?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Five- or ten-cent beer?" He said it the Maine way: *beeyah.*

"Oh. Ten, I guess."

"Well, I guess you guess right." He opened an ice cream freezer and removed a frosty mug roughly the size of a lemonade pitcher. He filled it from a tap and I could smell the root beer, rich and strong. He scraped the foam off the top with the handle of a wooden spoon, then filled it all the way to the top and set it down on the counter. "There you go. That and the paper's eighteen cents. Plus a penny for the governor."

I handed over one of Al's vintage dollars, and Frank 1.0 made change.

I sipped through the foam on top, and was amazed. It was . . . *full.* Tasty all the way through. I don't know how to express it any better than that. This fifty-years-gone world smelled worse than I ever would have expected, but it tasted a whole hell of a lot better.

"This is wonderful," I said.

"Ayuh? Glad you like it. Not from around here, are you?"

"No."

"Out-of-stater?"

"Wisconsin," I said. Not entirely a lie; my family lived in Milwaukee until I was eleven, when my father got a job teaching English at the University of Southern Maine. I'd been knocking around the state ever since.

"Well, you picked the right time to come," Anicetti said. "Most of the summer people are gone, and as soon as that happens, prices go down. What you're drinkin, for example. After Labor Day, a ten-cent root beer only costs a dime."

The bell over the door jangled; the floorboards creaked. It was a companionable creak. The last time I'd ventured into the Kennebec Fruit, hoping for a roll of Tums (I was disappointed), they had groaned.

A boy who might have been seventeen slipped behind the counter. His dark hair was cropped close, not quite a crewcut. His resemblance to the man who had served me was unmistakable, and I realized that this was *my* Frank Anicetti. The guy who had lopped the head of foam off my root beer was his father. Frank 2.0 didn't give me so much as a glance; to him I was just another customer.

"Titus has got the truck up on the lift," he told his dad. "Says it'll be ready by five."

"Well, that's good," Anicetti Senior said, and lit a cigarette. For the first time I noticed the marble top of the soda fountain was lined with small ceramic ashtrays. Written on the sides was WINSTON TASTES GOOD LIKE A CIGARETTE SHOULD! He looked back at me and said, "You want a scoop of vanilla in your beer? On the house. We like to treat tourists right, especially when they turn up late."

"Thanks, but this is fine," I said, and it was. Any more sweetness and I thought my head would explode. And it was *strong*—like drinking carbonated espresso.

The kid gave me a grin that was as sweet as the stuff in the frosted mug—there was none of the amused disdain I'd felt emanating from the Elvis wannabe outside. "We read a story in school," he said, "where the locals eat the tourists if they show up after the season's over."

"Frankie, that's a hell of a thing to tell a visitor," Mr. Anicetti said. But he was smiling when he said it.

"It's okay," I said. "I've taught that story myself. Shirley Jackson, right? 'The Summer People.' "

"That's the one," Frank agreed. "I didn't really get it, but I liked it."

I took another pull on my root beer, and when I set it down (it made a satisfyingly thick chunk on the marble counter), I wasn't exactly surprised to see it was almost gone. *I could get addicted to these,* I thought. *It beats the living shit out of Moxie.*

The elder Anicetti exhaled a plume of smoke toward the ceiling, where an overhead paddle fan pulled it into lazy blue rafters. "Do you teach out in Wisconsin, Mr.—?"

"Epping," I said. I was too caught by surprise to even think of giving a fake name. "I do, actually. But this is my sabbatical year."

"That means he's taking a year off," Frank said.

"I know what it means," Anicetti said. He was trying to sound irritated and doing a bad job of it. I decided I liked these two as

much as I liked the root beer. I even liked the aspiring teenage hood outside, if only because he didn't know he was already a cliché. There was a sense of safety here, a sense of—I don't know—preordination. It was surely false, this world was as dangerous as any other, but I possessed one piece of knowledge I would before this afternoon have believed was reserved only for God: I knew that the smiling boy who had enjoyed the Shirley Jackson story (even though he didn't "get it") was going to live through that day and over fifty years of days to come. He wasn't going to be killed in a car crash, have a heart attack, or contract lung cancer from breathing his father's secondhand smoke. Frank Anicetti was good to go.

I glanced at the clock on the wall (START YOUR DAY WITH A SMILE, the face said, DRINK CHEER-UP COFFEE). It read 12:22. That was nothing to me, but I pretended to be startled. I drank off the rest of my beeyah and stood up. "Got to get moving if I'm going to meet my friends in Castle Rock on time."

"Well, take it easy on Route 117," Anicetti said. "That road's a bugger." It came out *buggah.* I hadn't heard such a thick Maine accent in years. Then I realized that was literally true, and I almost laughed out loud.

"I will," I said. "Thanks. And son? About that Shirley Jackson story."

"Yes, sir?" *Sir,* yet. And nothing sarcastic about it. I was deciding that 1958 had been a pretty good year. Aside from the stench of the mill and the cigarette smoke, that was.

"There's nothing to get."

"No? That's not what Mr. Marchant says."

"With all due respect to Mr. Marchant, you tell him Jake Epping says that sometimes a cigar is just a smoke and a story's just a story."

He laughed. "I will! Period three tomorrow morning!"

"Good." I nodded to the father, wishing I could tell him that, thanks to Moxie (which he didn't carry . . . yet), his business was

going to be standing on the corner of Main Street and the Old Lewiston Road long after he was gone. "Thanks for the root beer."

"Come back anytime, son. I'm thinking about lowering the price on the large."

"To a dime?"

He grinned. Like his son's, it was easy and open. "Now you're cooking with gas."

The bell jingled. Three ladies came in. No slacks; they wore dresses with hemlines that dropped halfway down their shins. And hats! Two with little fluffs of white veil. They began rummaging through the open crates of fruit, looking for perfection. I started away from the soda fountain, then had a thought and turned back.

"Can you tell me what a greenfront is?"

The father and the son exchanged an amused glance that made me think of an old joke. Tourist from Chicago driving a fancy sportscar pulls up to a farmhouse way out in the country. Old farmer's sitting on the porch, smoking a corncob pipe. Tourist leans out of his Jaguar and asks, "Say, oldtimer, can you tell me how to get to East Machias?" Old farmer puffs thoughtfully on his pipe a time or two, then says, "Don'tcha move a goddam inch."

"You really are an out-of-stater, aren't you?" Frank asked. His accent wasn't as thick as his father's. *Probably watches more TV,* I thought. *There's nothing like TV when it comes to eroding a regional accent.*

"I am," I said.

"That's funny, because I could swear I hear a little Yankee twang."

"It's a Yooper thing," I said. "You know, the Upper Peninsula?" Except—dang!—the UP was Michigan.

But neither of them seemed to realize it. In fact young Frank turned away and started doing dishes. By hand, I noticed.

"The greenfront's the liquor store," Anicetti said. "Right across the street, if you're wanting to pick up a pint of something."

"I think the root beer's good enough for me," I said. "I was just wondering. Have a nice day."

"You too, my friend. Come back and see us."

I passed the fruit-examining trio, murmuring "Ladies" as I went by. And wishing I had a hat to tip. A fedora, maybe.

Like the ones you see in the old movies.

6

The aspiring hoodlum had left his post, and I thought about walking up Main Street to see what else had changed, but only for a second. No sense pressing my luck. Suppose someone asked about my clothes? I thought my sport coat and slacks looked more or less all right, but did I know that for sure? And then there was my hair, which touched my collar. In my own time that would be considered perfectly okay for a high school teacher—conservative, even—but it might garner glances in a decade where shaving the back of the neck was considered a normal part of the barbering service and sideburns were reserved for rockabilly dudes like the one who had called me Daddy-O. Of course I could say I was a tourist, that all men wore their hair a little long in Wisconsin, it was quite the coming thing, but hair and clothes—that feeling of standing out, like some space alien in an imperfectly assumed human disguise—was only part of it.

Mostly I was just plain freaked. Not mentally tottering, I think a human mind that's moderately well-adjusted can absorb a lot of strangeness before it actually totters, but freaked, yes. I kept thinking about the ladies in their long dresses and hats, ladies who would be embarrassed to show so much as the edge of a bra strap in public. And the taste of that root beer. How *full* it had been.

Directly across the street was a modest storefront with MAINE STATE LIQUOR STORE printed in raised letters over the small show window. And yes, the façade was a light green. Inside I could just make out my pal from the drying shed. His long black coat hung from his coathanger shoulders; he had taken off his hat and

his hair stood out around his head like that of a cartoon nebbish who has just inserted Finger A in Electric Socket B. He was gesticulating at the clerk with both hands, and I could see his precious yellow card in one. I felt certain that Al Templeton's half a rock was in the other. The clerk, who was wearing a short white tunic that looked quite a bit like the one the Moxie Doc wore in the annual parade, looked singularly unimpressed.

I walked to the corner, waited on traffic, and crossed back to the Worumbo side of the Old Lewiston Road. A couple of men were pushing a dolly loaded with bales of cloth across the courtyard, smoking and laughing. I wondered if they had any idea what the combination of cigarette smoke and mill pollution was doing to their innards, and supposed not. Probably that was a blessing, although it was more a question for a philosophy teacher than for a guy who earned his daily bread exposing sixteen-year-olds to the wonders of Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Shirley Jackson.

When they had entered the mill, rolling their dolly between the rusty metal jaws of doors three stories high, I crossed back to the chain with the **NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT** sign hanging from it. I told myself not to walk too fast, and not to peer all around me—not to do *anything* that would attract attention—but it was hard. Now that I was almost back to where I came in, the urge to hurry was almost irresistible. My mouth was dry, and the big root beer I'd drunk roiled in my stomach. What if I couldn't get back? What if the marker I'd dropped was gone? What if it was still there, but the stairs weren't?

Easy, I told myself. *Easy.*

I couldn't resist one quick survey before ducking under the chain, but the courtyard was entirely mine. Somewhere distant, like a sound heard in a dream, I could again hear that low diesel *wuff-chuff.* It called to mind another line from another song: *This train has got the disappearing railroad blues*.

I walked down the green flank of the drying shed, heart beating hard and high up in my chest. The torn scrap of paper with the chunk of concrete on top of it was still there; so far so good. I

kicked at it gently, thinking *Please God let this work, please God let me get back.*

The toe of my shoe kicked the chunk of concrete—I saw it go skittering away—but it also thumped to a dead stop against the step. Those things were mutually exclusive, but they both happened. I took one more look around, even though no one in the courtyard could see me in this narrow lane unless they happened to be passing directly in front of it at one end or the other. No one was.

I went up one step. My foot could feel it, even though my eyes told me I was still standing on the cracked paving of the courtyard. The root beer took another warning lurch in my stomach. I closed my eyes and that was a little better. I took the second step, then the third. They were shallow, those steps. When I took the fourth one, the summer heat disappeared from the back of my neck and the dark behind my eyelids became deeper. I tried to take the fifth step, only there was no fifth step. I bumped my head on the low pantry ceiling instead. A hand grasped my forearm and I almost screamed.

"Relax," Al said. "Relax, Jake. You're back."

7

He offered me a cup of coffee, but I shook my head. My stomach was still sudsing. He poured himself one, and we went back to the booth where we had begun this madman's journey. My wallet, cell phone, and money were piled in the middle of the table. Al sat down with a gasp of pain and relief. He looked a little less drawn and a little more relaxed.

"So," he said. "You went and you came back. What do you think?"

"Al, I don't know what to think. I'm rocked right down to my foundations. You found this by accident?"

"Totally. Less than a month after I got myself set up here. I must have still had Pine Street dust on the heels of my shoes. The first

time, I actually *fell* down those stairs, like Alice into the rabbit-hole. I thought I'd gone insane."

I could imagine. I'd had at least some preparation, poor though it had been. And really, was there any adequate way to prepare a person for a trip back in time?

"How long was I gone?"

"Two minutes. I told you, it's always two minutes. No matter how long you stay." He coughed, spat into a fresh wad of napkins, and folded them away in his pocket. "And when you go down the steps, it's always 11:58 A.M. on the morning of September ninth, 1958. Every trip is the first trip. Where did you go?"

"The Kennebec Fruit. I had a root beer. It was fantastic."

"Yeah, things taste better there. Less preservatives, or something."

"You know Frank Anicetti? I met him as a kid of seventeen."

Somehow, in spite of everything, I expected Al to laugh, but he took it as a matter of course. "Sure. I've met Frank many times. But he only meets me once—back then, I mean. For Frank, every time is the first time. He comes in, right? From the Chevron. 'Titus has got the truck up on the lift,' he tells his dad. 'Says it'll be ready by five.' I've heard that fifty times, at least. Not that I always go into the Fruit when I go back, but when I do, I hear it. Then the ladies come in to pick over the fruit. Mrs. Symonds and her friends. It's like going to the same movie over and over and over again."

"Every time is the first time." I said it slowly, putting a space around each word. Trying to get them to make sense in my mind.

"Right."

"And every person you meet is meeting *you* for the first time, no matter how many times you've met before."

"Right."

"I could go back and have the same conversation with Frank and his dad and they wouldn't know."

"Right again. Or you could change something—order a banana split instead of a root beer, say—and the rest of the conversation would go a different way. The only one who seems to suspect something's off is the Yellow Card Man, and he's too booze-fucked

to know what he's feeling. If I'm right, that is, and he feels anything. If he does, it's because he just happens to be sitting near the rabbit-hole. Or whatever it is. Maybe it puts out some kind of energy field. He—"

But he got coughing again and couldn't go on. Watching him doubled over, holding his side and trying not to show me how bad it hurt—how it was tearing him up inside—was painful itself. *He can't go on this way,* I thought. *He's no more than a week from the hospital, and probably just days.* And wasn't that why he'd called me? Because he had to pass on this amazing secret to somebody before the cancer shut his lips forever?

"I thought I could give you the entire lowdown this afternoon, but I can't," Al said when he had control of himself again. "I need to go home, take some of my dope, and put my feet up. I've never taken anything stronger than aspirin in my whole life, and that Oxy crap puts me out like a light. I'll sleep for six hours or so and then feel better for awhile. A little stronger. Can you come by my place around nine-thirty?"

"I could if I knew where you live," I said.

"Little cottage on Vining Street. Number nineteen. Look for the lawn gnome beside the porch. You can't miss it. He's waving a flag."

"What have we got to talk about, Al? I mean . . . you *showed* me. I believe you now." So I did . . . but for how long? Already my brief visit to 1958 had taken on the fading texture of a dream. A few hours (or a few days) and I'd probably be able to convince myself that I *had* dreamed it.

"We've got a lot to talk about, buddy. Will you come?" He didn't repeat *dying man's request,* but I read it in his eyes.

"All right. Do you want a ride to your place?"

His eyes flashed at that. "I've got my truck, and it's only five blocks. I can drive myself that far."

"Sure you can," I said, hoping I sounded more convinced than I felt. I got up and started putting my stuff back into my pockets. I encountered the wad of cash he'd given me and took it out. Now

I understood the changes in the five-spot. There were probably changes in the other bills, as well.

I held it out and he shook his head. "Nah, keep it, I got plenty."

But I put it down on the table. "If every time's the first time, how can you keep the money you bring back? How come it isn't erased the next time you go?"

"No clue, buddy. I told you, there's all kinds of stuff I don't know. There are rules, and I've figured out a few, but not many." His face lit in a wan but genuinely amused smile. "You brought back your root beer, didn't you? Still sloshing around in your belly, isn't it?"

As a matter of fact it was.

"Well there you go. I'll see you tonight, Jake. I'll be rested and we'll talk this out."

"One more question?"

He flicked a hand at me, a go-ahead gesture. I noticed that his nails, which he always kept scrupulously clean, were yellow and cracked. Another bad sign. Not as telling as the thirty-pound weight loss, but still bad. My dad used to say you can tell a lot about a person's health just by the state of his or her fingernails.

"The Famous Fatburger."

"What about it?" But there was a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"You can sell cheap because you buy cheap, isn't that right?"

"Ground chuck from the Red & White," he said. "Fifty-four cents a pound. I go in every week. Or I did until my latest adventure, which took me a long way from The Falls. I trade with Mr. Warren, the butcher. If I ask him for ten pounds of ground chuck, he says, 'Coming right up.' If I ask for twelve or fourteen, he says, 'Going to have to give me a minute to grind you up some fresh. Having a family get-together?'"

"Always the same."

"Yes."

"Because it's always the first time."

"Correct. It's like the story of the loaves and fishes in the Bible,

when you think of it. I buy the same ground chuck week after week. I've fed it to hundreds or thousands of people, in spite of those stupid catburger rumors, and it always renews itself."

"You buy the same meat, over and over." Trying to get it through my skull.

"The same meat, at the same time, from the same butcher. Who always says the same things, unless I say something different. I'll admit, buddy, that it's sometimes crossed my mind to walk up to him and say, 'How's it going there, Mr. Warren, you old bald bastard? Been fucking any warm chicken-holes lately?' He'd never remember. But I never have. Because he's a nice man. Most people I've met back then are nice folks." At this he looked a little wistful.

"I don't understand how you can buy meat there . . . serve it here . . . then buy it again."

"Join the club, buddy. I just appreciate like hell that you're still here—I could have lost you. For that matter, you didn't have to answer the phone when I called the school."

Part of me wished I hadn't, but I didn't say that. Probably I didn't have to. He was sick, not blind.

"Come to the house tonight. I'll tell you what I've got in mind, and then you can do whatever you think is best. But you'll have to decide pretty fast, because time is short. Kind of ironic, wouldn't you say, considering where the invisible steps in my pantry come out?"

More slowly than ever, I said: "Every . . . time . . . is . . . the . . . first time."

He smiled again. "I think you've got that part. I'll see you tonight, okay? Nineteen Vining Street. Look for the gnome with the flag."

8

I left Al's Diner at three-thirty. The six hours between then and nine-thirty weren't as weird as visiting Lisbon Falls fifty-three years

ago, but almost. Time seemed simultaneously to drag and speed by. I drove back to the house I was buying in Sabattus (Christy and I sold the one we'd owned in The Falls and split the take when our marital corporation dissolved). I thought I'd take a nap, but of course I couldn't sleep. After twenty minutes of lying on my back, straight as a poker, and staring up at the ceiling, I went into the bathroom to take a leak. As I watched the urine splash into the bowl, I thought: *That's processed root beer from 1958.* But at the same time I was thinking that was bullshit, Al had hypnotized me somehow.

That doubling thing, see?

I tried to finish reading the last of the honors essays, and wasn't a bit surprised to find I couldn't do it. Wield Mr. Epping's fearsome red pen? Pass critical judgments? That was a laugh. I couldn't even make the words connect. So I turned on the tube (throwback slang from the Nifty Fifties; televisions no longer *have* tubes) and channel-surfed for awhile. On TMC I came across an old movie called *Drag-strip Girl.* I found myself watching the old cars and angst-ridden teens so intently it was giving me a headache, and I turned it off. I made myself a stir-fry, then couldn't eat it even though I was hungry. I sat there, looking at it on the plate, thinking about Al Templeton serving the same dozen or so pounds of hamburger over and over, year after year. It really *was* like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and so what if catburger and dogburger rumors circulated due to his low prices? Given what he was paying for meat, he had to be making an absurd profit on every Fatburger he did sell.

When I realized I was pacing around my kitchen—unable to sleep, unable to read, unable to watch TV, a perfectly good stir-fry turned down the sink-pig—I got in my car and drove back to town. It was quarter to seven by then, and there were plenty of parking spaces on Main Street. I pulled in across from the Kennebec Fruit and sat behind the wheel, staring at a paint-peeling relic that had once been a thriving smalltown business. Closed for the day, it looked ready for the wrecking ball. The only sign of human habitation were a few Moxie signs in the dusty show window

(DRINK MOXIE FOR *HEALTH!,* read the biggest), and they were so old-fashioned they could have been left behind for years.

The Fruit's shadow stretched across the street to touch my car. To my right, where the liquor store had been, there was now a tidy brick building that housed a branch of Key Bank. Who needed a greenfront when you could bop into any grocery store in the state and bop back out with a pint of Jack or a quart of coffee brandy? Not in a flimsy paper bag, either; in these modern times we use plastic, son. Lasts a thousand years. And speaking of grocery stores, I had never heard of one called the Red & White. If you wanted to shop for food in The Falls, you went to the IGA a block down on 196. It was right across from the old railroad station. Which was now a combination tee-shirt shop and tattoo parlor.

All the same, the past felt very close just then—maybe it was just the golden cast of the declining summer light, which has always struck me as slightly supernatural. It was as if 1958 were still right here, only hidden beneath a flimsy film of intervening years. And, if I hadn't imagined what had happened to me this afternoon, that was true.

He wants me to do something. Something he would have done himself, but the cancer stopped him. He said he went back and stayed for four years (at least I thought that was what he'd said), *but four years wasn't long enough.*

Was I willing to go back down those stairs and stay for four-plus years? Basically take up residence? Come back two minutes later . . . only in my forties, with strands of gray starting to show up in my hair? I couldn't imagine doing that, but I couldn't imagine what Al had found so important back there in the first place. The one thing I did know was that four or six or eight years of my life was too much to ask, even for a dying man.

I still had over two hours before I was scheduled to show up at Al's. I decided I'd go back home, make myself another meal, and this time force myself to eat it. After that, I'd take another shot at finishing my honors essays. I might be one of the very few people who had ever traveled back in time—for that matter, Al and

I might be the only ones who had ever done it in the history of the world—but my poetry students were still going to want their final grades.

I hadn't had the radio on when I drove to town, but I turned it on now. Like my TV, it gets its programming from computer-driven space voyagers that go whirling around the earth at a height of twenty-two thousand miles, an idea that surely would have been greeted with wide-eyed wonder (but probably not outright disbelief) by the teenager Frank Anicetti had been back in the day. I tuned to the Sixties on Six and caught Danny & the Juniors working out on "Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay"—three or four urgent, harmonic voices singing over a jackhammer piano. They were followed by Little Richard screaming "Lucille" at the top of his lungs, and then Ernie K-Doe more or less moaning "Mother-in-Law": *She thinks her advice is a contribution, but if she would leave that would be the solution.* It all sounded as fresh and sweet as the oranges Mrs. Symonds and her friends had been picking over that early afternoon.

It sounded *new.*

Did I want to spend years in the past? No. But I *did* want to go back. If only to hear how Little Richard sounded when he was still top of the pops. Or get on a Trans World Airlines plane without having to take off my shoes, submit to a full-body scan, and go through a metal detector.

And I wanted another root beer.

CHAPTER 3

1

The gnome did indeed have a flag, but not an American one. Not even the Maine flag with the moose on it. The one the gnome was holding had a vertical blue stripe and two fat horizontal stripes, the top one white and the bottom one red. It also had a single star. I gave the gnome a pat on his pointy hat as I went past and mounted the front steps of Al's little house on Vining Street, thinking about an amusing song by Ray Wylie Hubbard: "Screw You, We're from Texas."

The door opened before I could ring the bell. Al was wearing a bathrobe over pajamas, and his newly white hair was in corkscrew tangles—a serious case of bedhead if I'd ever seen one. But the sleep (and the painkillers, of course) had done him some good. He still looked sick, but the lines around his mouth weren't so deep and his gait, as he led me down the short stub of a hall and into his living room, seemed surer. He was no longer pressing his right hand into his left armpit, as if trying to hold himself together.

"Look a little more like my old self, do I?" he asked in his gravelly voice as he sat down in the easy chair in front of the TV. Only he didn't really sit, just kind of positioned himself and dropped.

"You do. What have the doctors told you?"

"The one I saw in Portland says there's no hope, not even with chemo and radiation. Exactly what the doc I saw in Dallas said.

In 1962, that was. Nice to think some things don't change, don't you think?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Sometimes there's nothing to say. Sometimes you're just stumped.

"No sense beating around the bush about it," he said. "I know death's embarrassing to folks, especially when the one dying has nothing but his own bad habits to blame, but I can't waste time being delicate. I'll be in the hospital soon enough, if for no other reason than I won't be able to get back and forth to the bathroom on my own. I'll be damned if I'll sit around coughing my brains out and hip deep in my own shit."

"What happens to the diner?"

"The diner's finished, buddy. Even if I was healthy as a horse, it would be gone by the end of this month. You know I always just rented that space, don't you?"

I didn't, but it made sense. Although Worumbo was still called Worumbo, it was now your basic trendy shopping center, so that meant Al had been paying rent to some corporation.

"My lease is up for renewal, and Mill Associates wants that space to put in something called—you're going to love this—an L.L. Bean Express. Besides, they say my little Aluminaire's an eyesore."

"That's ridiculous!" I said, and with such genuine indignation that Al chuckled. The chuckles tried to morph into a coughing fit and he stifled them. Here in the privacy of his own home, he wasn't using tissues, handkerchiefs, or napkins to deal with that cough; there was a box of maxi pads on the table beside his chair. My eyes kept straying to them. I'd urge them away, perhaps to look at the photo on the wall of Al with his arm around a good-looking woman, then find them straying back. Here is one of the great truths of the human condition: when you need Stayfree Maxi Pads to absorb the expectorants produced by your insulted body, you are in serious fucking trouble.

"Thanks for saying that, buddy. We could have a drink on it. My alcohol days are over, but there's iced tea in the fridge. Maybe you'd do the honors."

2

He used sturdy generic glassware at the restaurant, but the pitcher holding the iced tea looked like Waterford to me. A whole lemon bobbed placidly on top, the skin cut to let the flavor seep out. I choked a couple of glasses with ice, poured, and went back into the living room. Al took a long, deep swallow of his and closed his eyes gratefully.

"Boy, is that good. Right this minute everything in Al World is good. That dope's wonderful stuff. Addictive as hell, of course, but wonderful. It even suppresses the coughing a little. The pain'll start creeping in again by midnight, but that should give us enough time to talk this through." He sipped again and gave me a look of rueful amusement. "Human things are terrific right to the end, it seems like. I never would have guessed."

"Al, what happens to that . . . that hole into the past, if they pull your trailer and build an outlet store where it was?"

"I don't know that any more than I know how I can buy the same meat over and over again. What I *think* is it'll disappear. I think it's as much a freak of nature as Old Faithful, or that weird balancing rock they've got in western Australia, or a river that runs backward at certain phases of the moon. Things like that are delicate, buddy. A little shift in the earth's crust, a change in the temperature, a few sticks of dynamite, and they're gone."

"So you don't think there'll be . . . I don't know . . . some kind of cataclysm?" What I was picturing in my mind was a breach in the cabin of an airliner cruising at thirty-six thousand feet, and everything being sucked out, including the passengers. I saw that in a movie once.

"I don't think so, but who can tell? All I know is that there's nothing I can do about it, either way. Unless you want me to deed the place over to you, that is. I could do that. Then you could go to the National Historical Preservation Society and tell them, 'Hey, guys, you can't let them put up an outlet store in the courtyard

of the old Worumbo mill. There's a time tunnel there. I know it's hard to believe, but let me show you.'"

For a moment I actually considered this, because Al was probably right: the fissure leading into the past was almost certainly delicate. For all I knew (or *he* did), it could pop like a soap bubble if the Aluminaire was even joggled hard. Then I thought of the federal government discovering they could send special ops into the past to change whatever they wanted. I didn't know if that were possible, but if so, the folks who gave us fun stuff like bio-weapons and computer-guided smart bombs were the last folks I'd want carrying their various agendas into living, unarmored history.

The minute this idea occurred to me—no, the very *second*—I knew what Al had in mind. Only the specifics were missing. I set my iced tea aside and stood up.

"No. Absolutely not. Uh-uh."

He took this calmly. I could say it was because he was stoned on OxyContin, but I knew better. He could see I didn't mean to just walk out no matter what I said. My curiosity (not to mention my fascination) was probably sticking out like porcupine quills. Because part of me *did* want to know the specifics.

"I see I can skip the introductory material and get right down to business," Al said. "That's good. Sit down, Jake, and I'll let you in on my only reason for not just taking my whole supply of little pink pills at once." And when I stayed on my feet: "You know you want to hear this, and what harm? Even if I could make you do something here in 2011—which I can't—I couldn't make you do anything back there. Once you get back there, Al Templeton's a four-year-old kid in Bloomington, Indiana, racing around his backyard in a Lone Ranger mask and still a bit iffy in the old toilet-training department. So sit down. Like they say in the infomercials, you're under no obligation."

Right. On the other hand, my mother would have said *the devil's voice is sweet.*

But I sat down.

3

"Do you know the phrase *watershed moment,* buddy?"

I nodded. You didn't have to be an English teacher to know that one; you didn't even have to be literate. It was one of those annoying linguistic shortcuts that show up on cable TV news shows, day in and day out. Others include *connect the dots* and *at this point in time.* The most annoying of all (I have inveighed against it to my clearly bored students time and time and time again) is the totally meaningless *some people say,* or *many people believe.*

"Do you know where it comes from? The origin?"

"Nope."

"Cartography. A watershed is an area of land, usually mountains or forests, that drains into a river. History is also a river. Wouldn't you say so?"

"Yes. I suppose I would." I drank some of my tea.

"Sometimes the events that change history are widespread—like heavy, prolonged rains over an entire watershed that can send a river out of its banks. But rivers can flood even on sunny days. All it takes is a heavy, prolonged downpour in *one small area* of the watershed. There are flash floods in history, too. Want some examples? How about 9/11? Or what about Bush beating Gore in 2000?"

"You can't compare a national election to a flash flood, Al."

"Maybe not most of them, but the 2000 presidential election was in a class by itself. Suppose you could go back to Florida in the fall of Double-O and spend two hundred thousand dollars or so on Al Gore's behalf?"

"Couple of problems with that," I said. "First, I don't have two hundred thousand dollars. Second, I'm a schoolteacher. I can tell you all about Thomas Wolfe's mother fixation, but when it comes to politics I'm a babe in the woods."

He gave an impatient flap of his hand, which almost sent his Marine Corps ring flying off his reduced finger. "Money's not a problem. You'll just have to trust me on that for now. And advance

knowledge usually trumps the shit out of experience. The difference in Florida was supposedly less than six hundred votes. Do you think you could buy six hundred votes on Election Day with two hundred grand, if buying was what it came down to?"

"Maybe," I said. "Probably. I guess I'd isolate some communities where there's a lot of apathy and the voting turnout's traditionally light—it wouldn't take all that much research—then go in with the old cashola."

Al grinned, revealing his missing teeth and unhealthy gums. "Why not? It worked in Chicago for years."

The idea of buying the presidency for less than the cost of two Mercedes-Benz sedans silenced me.

"But when it comes to the river of history, the watershed moments most susceptible to change are assassinations—the ones that succeeded and the ones that failed. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria gets shot by a mentally unstable pipsqueak named Gavrilo Princip and there's your kickoff to World War I. On the other hand, after Claus von Stauffenberg failed to kill Hitler in 1944—close, but no cigar—the war continued and millions more died."

I had seen that movie, too.

Al said, "There's nothing we can do about Archduke Ferdinand or Adolf Hitler. They're out of our reach."

I thought of accusing him of making pronounal assumptions and kept my mouth shut. I felt a little like a man reading a very grim book. A Thomas Hardy novel, say. You know how it's going to end, but instead of spoiling things, that somehow increases your fascination. It's like watching a kid run his electric train faster and faster and waiting for it to derail on one of the curves.

"As for 9/11, if you wanted to fix that one, you'd have to wait around for forty-three years. You'd be pushing eighty, if you made it at all."

Now the lone-star flag the gnome had been holding made sense. It was a souvenir of Al's last jaunt into the past. "You couldn't even make it to '63, could you?"

To this he didn't reply, just watched me. His eyes, which had looked rheumy and vague when he let me into the diner that afternoon, now looked bright. Almost young.

"Because that's what you're talking about, right? Dallas in 1963?"

"That's right," he said. "I had to opt out. But *you're* not sick, buddy. You're healthy and in the prime of life. You can go back, and you can stop it."

He leaned forward, his eyes not just bright; they were blazing.

"You can change history, Jake. Do you understand that? *John Kennedy can live.*"

4

I know the basics of suspense fiction—I ought to, I've read enough thrillers in my lifetime—and the prime rule is to keep the reader guessing. But if you've gotten any feel for my character at all, based on that day's extraordinary events, you'll know that I wanted to be convinced. Christy Epping had become Christy Thompson (boy meets girl on the AA campus, remember?), and I was a man on his own. We didn't even have any kids to fight over. I had a job I was good at, but if I told you it was challenging, it would be a lie. Hitchhiking around Canada with a buddy after my senior year of college was the closest thing to an adventure I'd ever had, and given the cheerful, helpful nature of most Canadians, it wasn't much of an adventure. Now, all of a sudden, I'd been offered a chance to become a major player not just in American history but in the history of the *world.* So yes, yes, yes, I wanted to be convinced.

But I was also afraid.

"What if it went wrong?" I drank down the rest of my iced tea in four long swallows, the ice cubes clicking against my teeth. "What if I managed, God knows how, to stop it from happening and made things worse instead of better? What if I came back and

discovered America had become a fascist regime? Or that the pollution had gotten so bad everybody was walking around in gas masks?"

"Then you'd go back again," he said. "Back to two minutes of twelve on September ninth of 1958. Cancel the whole thing out. Every trip is the first trip, remember?"

"Sounds good, but what if the changes were so radical your little diner wasn't even there anymore?"

He grinned. "Then you'd have to live your life in the past. But would that be so bad? As an English teacher, you'd still have a marketable skill, and you wouldn't even need it. I was there for four years, Jake, and I made a small fortune. Do you know how?"

I could have taken an educated guess, but I shook my head.

"Betting. I was careful—I didn't want to raise any suspicions, and I sure didn't want some bookie's leg-breakers coming after me—but when you've studied up on who won every big sporting event between the summer of 1958 and the fall of 1963, you can afford to be careful. I won't say you can live like a king, because that's living dangerously. But there's no reason you can't live well. And I think the diner'll still be there. It has been for me, and I changed plenty of things. Anybody does. Just walking around the block to buy a loaf of bread and a quart of milk changes the future. Ever hear of the butterfly effect? It's a fancy-shmancy scientific theory that basically boils down to the idea that—"

He started coughing again, the first protracted fit since he'd let me in. He grabbed one of the maxis from the box, plastered it across his mouth like a gag, and then doubled over. Gruesome retching sounds came up from his chest. It sounded as if half his works had come loose and were slamming around in there like bumper cars at an amusement park. Finally it abated. He glanced at the pad, winced, folded it up, and threw it away.

"Sorry, buddy. This oral menstruation's a bitch."

"Jesus, Al!"

He shrugged. "If you can't joke about it, what's the point of anything? Now where was I?"

"Butterfly effect."

"Right. It means small events can have large, whatchamadingit, ramifications. The idea is that if some guy kills a butterfly in China, maybe forty years later—or four hundred—there's an earthquake in Peru. That sound as crazy to you as it does to me?"

It did, but I remembered a hoary old time-travel paradox and pulled it out. "Yeah, but what if you went back and killed your own grandfather?"

He stared at me, baffled. "Why the fuck would you do that?"

That was a good question, so I just told him to go on.

"You changed the past this afternoon in all sorts of little ways, just by walking into the Kennebec Fruit . . . but the stairs leading up into the pantry and back into 2011 were still there, weren't they? And The Falls is the same as when you left it."

"So it seems, yes. But you're talking about something a little more major. To wit, saving JFK's life."

"Oh, I'm talking about a lot more than that, because this ain't some butterfly in China, buddy. I'm also talking about saving RFK's life, because if John lives in Dallas, Robert probably doesn't run for president in 1968. The country wouldn't have been ready to replace one Kennedy with another."

"You don't know that for sure."

"No, but listen. Do you think that if you save John Kennedy's life, his brother Robert is still at the Ambassador Hotel at twelve-fifteen in the morning on June fifth, 1968? And even if he is, is Sirhan Sirhan still working in the kitchen?"

Maybe, but the chances had to be awfully small. If you introduced a million variables into an equation, of course the answer was going to change.

"Or what about Martin Luther King? Is he still in Memphis in April of '68? Even if he is, is he still standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel at exactly the right time for James Earl Ray to shoot him? What do you think?"

"If that butterfly theory is right, probably not."

"That's what I think, too. And if MLK lives, the race riots that

followed his death don't happen. Maybe Fred Hampton doesn't get shot in Chicago."

"Who?"

He ignored me. "For that matter, maybe there's no Symbionese Liberation Army. No SLA, no Patty Hearst kidnapping. No Patty Hearst kidnapping, a small but maybe significant reduction in black fear among middle-class whites."

"You're losing me. Remember, I was an English major."

"I'm losing you because you know more about the Civil War in the nineteenth century than you do about the one that ripped this country apart after the Kennedy assassination in Dallas. If I asked you who starred in *The Graduate,* I'm sure you could tell me. But if I asked you to tell me who Lee Oswald tried to assassinate only a few months before gunning Kennedy down, you'd go 'Huh?' Because somehow all that stuff has gotten lost."

"Oswald tried to kill someone *before* Kennedy?" This was news to me, but most of my knowledge of the Kennedy assassination came from an Oliver Stone movie. In any case, Al didn't answer. Al was on a roll.

"Or what about Vietnam? Johnson was the one who started all the insane escalation. Kennedy was a cold warrior, no doubt about it, but Johnson took it to the next level. He had the same my-balls-are-bigger-than-yours complex that Dubya showed off when he stood in front of the cameras and said 'Bring it on.' Kennedy might have changed his mind. Johnson and Nixon were incapable of that. Thanks to them, we lost almost sixty thousand American soldiers in Nam. The Vietnamese, North and South, lost *millions.* Is the butcher's bill that high if Kennedy doesn't die in Dallas?"

"I don't know. And neither do you, Al."

"That's true, but I've become quite the student of recent American history, and I think the chances of improving things by saving him are very good. And really, there's no downside. If things turn to shit, you just take it all back. Easy as erasing a dirty word off a chalkboard."

"Or I can't get back, in which case I never know."

"Bullshit. You're young. As long as you don't get run over by a taxicab or have a heart attack, you'd live long enough to know how things turn out."

I sat silent, looking down at my lap and thinking. Al let me. At last I raised my head again.

"You must have read a lot about the assassination and about Oswald."

"Everything I could get my hands on, buddy."

"How sure are you that he did it? Because there are about a thousand conspiracy theories. Even I know that. What if I went back and stopped him and some other guy popped Kennedy from the Grassy Hill, or whatever it was?"

"Grassy Knoll. And I'm close to positive it was all Oswald. The conspiracy theories were all pretty crazy to begin with, and most of them have been disproved over the years. The idea that the shooter wasn't Oswald at all, but someone who looked like him, for instance. The body was exhumed in 1981 and DNA tested. It was him, all right. The poisonous little fuck." He paused, then added: "I met him, you know."

I stared at him. "Bullshit!"

"Oh yes. He spoke to me. This was in Fort Worth. He and Marina—his wife, she was Russian—were visiting Oswald's brother in Fort Worth. If Lee ever loved anybody, it was his brother Bobby. I was standing outside the picket fence around Bobby Oswald's yard, leaning against a phone pole, smoking a cigarette and pretending to read the paper. My heart was hammering what felt like two hundred beats a minute. Lee and Marina came out together. She was carrying their daughter, June. Just a mite of a thing, less than a year old. The kid was asleep. Ozzie was wearing khaki pants and a button-down Ivy League shirt that was all frayed around the collar. The slacks had a sharp crease, but they were dirty. He'd given up his Marine cut, but his hair would still have been way too short to grab. Marina—holy Christ, what a knockout! Dark hair, bright blue eyes, flawless skin. She looks like a goddam movie star. If you do this, you'll see for yourself. She

said something to him in Russian as they came down the walk. He said something back. He was smiling when he said it, but then he pushed her. She almost fell over. The kid woke up and started to cry. All this time, Oswald kept smiling."

"You saw this. You actually did. You saw *him.*" In spite of my own trip back in time, I was at least half-convinced that this had to be either a delusion or an outright lie.

"I did. She came out through the gate and walked past me with her head down, holding the baby against her breasts. Like I wasn't there. But he walked right up to me, close enough for me to smell the Old Spice he was wearing to try and cover up the smell of his sweat. There were blackheads all over his nose. You could tell looking at his clothes—and his shoes, which were scuffed and busted down at the backs—that he didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, but when you looked in his face, you knew that didn't matter. Not to him, it didn't. He thought he was a big deal."

Al considered briefly, then shook his head.

"No, I take that back. He *knew* he was a big deal. It was just a matter of waiting for the rest of the world to catch up on that. So there he is, in my face—choking distance, and don't think the idea didn't cross my mind—"

"Why didn't you? Or just cut to the chase and shoot him?"

"In front of his wife and baby? Could you do that, Jake?"

I didn't have to consider it for long. "Guess not."

"Me either. I had other reasons, too. One of them was an aversion to state prison . . . or the electric chair. We were out on the street, remember."

"Ah."

"Ah is right. He still had that little smile on his face when he walked up to me. Arrogant and prissy, both at the same time. He's wearing that smile in just about every photograph anybody ever took of him. He's wearing it in the Dallas police station after they arrested him for killing the president and a motor patrolman who happened to cross his path when he was trying to get away. He says

to me, 'What are you looking at, sir?' I say 'Nothing, buddy.' And he says, 'Then mind your beeswax.'

"Marina was waiting for him maybe twenty feet down the sidewalk, trying to soothe the baby back to sleep. It was hotter than hell that day, but she was wearing a kerchief over her hair, the way lots of European women do back then. He went to her and grabbed her elbow—like a cop instead of her husband—and says, *'Pokhoda! Pokhoda!'* Walk, walk. She said something to him, maybe asking if he'd carry the baby for awhile. That's my guess, anyway. But he just pushed her away and said, *'Pokhoda, cyka!'* Walk, bitch. She did. They went off down toward the bus stop. And that was it."

"You speak Russian?"

"No, but I have a good ear and a computer. Back here I do, anyway."

"You saw him other times?"

"Only from a distance. By then I was getting real sick." He grinned. "There's no Texas barbecue as good as Fort Worth barbecue, and I couldn't eat it. It's a cruel world, sometimes. I went to a doctor, got a diagnosis I could have made myself by then, and came back to the twenty-first century. Basically, there was nothing more to see, anyway. Just a skinny little wife-abuser waiting to be famous."

He leaned forward.

"You know what the man who changed American history was like? He was the kind of kid who throws stones at other kids and then runs away. By the time he joined the Marines—to be like his brother Bobby, he idolized Bobby—he'd lived in almost two dozen different places, from New Orleans to New York City. He had big ideas and couldn't understand why people wouldn't listen to them. He was mad about that, furious, but he never lost that pissy, prissy little smile of his. Do you know what William Manchester called him?"

"No." I didn't even know who William Manchester was.

"A wretched waif. Manchester was talking about all the con-

spiracy theories that bloomed in the aftermath of the assassination . . . and after Oswald himself was shot and killed. I mean, you know that, right?"

"Of course," I said, a little annoyed. "A guy named Jack Ruby did it." But given the holes in my knowledge I'd already demonstrated, I suppose he had a right to wonder.

"Manchester said that if you put the murdered president on one side of a scale and Oswald—the wretched waif—on the other, it didn't balance. No way did it balance. If you wanted to give Kennedy's death some meaning, you'd have to add something heavier. Which explains the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Like the Mafia did it—Carlos Marcello ordered the hit. Or the KGB did it. Or Castro, to get back at the CIA for trying to load him up with poison cigars. There are people to this day who believe Lyndon Johnson did it so he could be president. But in the end . . ." Al shook his head. "It was almost certainly Oswald. You've heard of Occam's Razor, haven't you?"

It was nice to know something for sure. "It's a basic truism sometimes known as the law of parsimony. 'All other things being equal, the simplest explanation is usually the right one.' So why didn't you kill him when he *wasn't* on the street with his wife and kid? You were a Marine, too. When you knew how sick you were, why didn't you just kill the little motherfucker yourself?"

"Because being ninety-five percent sure isn't a hundred. Because, shithead or not, he was a family man. Because after he was arrested, Oswald said he was a patsy and I wanted to be sure he was lying. I don't think anybody can ever be a hundred percent sure of anything in this wicked world, but I wanted to get up to ninety-eight. I had no intention of waiting until November twenty-second and then stopping him at the Texas School Book Depository, though—that would have been cutting it way too fine, for one big reason I'll have to tell you about."

His eyes no longer looked so bright, and the lines on his face were deepening again. I was scared by how shallow his reserves of strength had become.

"I've written all this stuff down. I want you to read it. Actually, I want you to cram like a bastard. Look on top of the TV, buddy. Would you do that?" He gave me a tired smile and added, "I got my sittin-britches on."

It was a thick blue notebook. The price stamped on the paper cover was twenty-five cents. The brand was foreign to me. "What's Kresge's?"

"The department store chain now known as Kmart. Never mind what's on the cover, just pay attention to what's inside. It's an Oswald timeline, plus all the evidence piled up against him . . . which you don't really have to read if you take me up on this, because you're going to stop the little weasel in April of 1963, over half a year before Kennedy comes to Dallas."

"Why April?"

"Because that's when somebody tried to kill General Edwin Walker . . . only he wasn't a general anymore by then. He got cashiered in 1961, by JFK himself. General Eddie was handing out segregationist literature to his troops and ordering them to read the stuff."

"It was Oswald who tried to shoot him?"

"That's what you need to make sure of. Same rifle, no doubt about that, ballistics proved it. I was waiting to see him take the shot. I could afford not to interfere, because that time Oswald missed. The bullet deflected off the wood strip in the middle of Walker's kitchen window. Not much, but just enough. The bullet literally parted his hair and flying wood splinters from the munting cut his arm a little. That was his only wound. I won't say the man deserved to die—very few men are evil enough to deserve being shot from ambush—but I would have traded Walker for Kennedy any day of the week."

I paid little attention to that last. I was thumbing through Al's Oswald Book, page after page of closely written notes. They were completely legible at the beginning, less so toward the end. The last few pages were the scrawls of a very sick man. I snapped the cover closed and said, "If you could confirm that Oswald was

the shooter in the General Walker attempt, that would have settled your doubts?"

"Yes. I needed to make sure he's capable of doing it. Ozzie's a bad man, Jake—what people back in '58 call a louse—but beating on your wife and keeping her a virtual prisoner because she doesn't speak the language don't justify murder. And something else. Even if I hadn't come down with the big C, I knew I might not get another chance to make it right if I killed Oswald and someone else shot the president anyway. By the time a man's in his sixties, he's pretty much off the warranty, if you see what I mean."

"Would it have to be killing? Couldn't you just . . . I don't know . . . frame him for something?"

"Maybe, but by then I was sick. I don't know if I could have done it even if I was well. On the whole it seemed simpler to just end him, once I was sure. Like swatting a wasp before it can sting you."

I was quiet, thinking. The clock on the wall said ten-thirty. Al had opened the conversation by saying he'd be good to go until midnight, but I only had to look at him to know that had been wildly optimistic.

I took his glass and mine out to the kitchen, rinsed them, and put them in the dish drainer. It felt like there was a tornado funnel behind my forehead. Instead of cows and fenceposts and scraps of paper, what it was sucking up and spinning around were names: Lee Oswald, Bobby Oswald, Marina Oswald, Edwin Walker, Fred Hampton, Patty Hearst. There were bright acronyms in that whirl, too, circling like chrome hood ornaments ripped off luxury cars: JFK, RFK, MLK, SLA. The cyclone even had a sound, two Russian words spoken over and over again in a flat Southern drawl: *pokhoda, cyka.*

Walk, bitch.

5

"How long have I got to decide?" I asked.

"Not long. The diner goes at the end of the month. I talked to a

lawyer about buying some more time—tying them up in a suit, or something—but he wasn't hopeful. Ever seen a sign in a furniture store saying LOST OUR LEASE, EVERYTHING MUST GO?"

"Sure."

"Nine cases out of ten that's just sales-pitch bullshit, but this is the tenth case. And I'm not talking about some discount dollar store bumping to get in, I'm talking about Bean's, and when it comes to Maine retail, L.L. Bean is the biggest ape in the jungle. Come July first, the diner's gone like Enron. But that isn't the big thing. By July first, *I* might be gone. I could catch a cold and be dead of pneumonia in three days. I could have a heart attack or a stroke. Or I could kill myself with these damn OxyContin pills by accident. The visiting nurse who comes in asks me every day if I'm being careful not to exceed the dosage, and I *am* careful, but I can see she's still worried she'll walk in some morning and find me dead, probably because I got stoned and lost count. Plus the pills inhibit respiration, and my lungs are shot. On top of all that, I've lost a lot of weight."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Nobody loves a smartass, buddy—when you get to be my age, you'll know. In any case, I want you to take this as well as the notebook." He held out a key. "It's to the diner. If you should call me tomorrow and hear from the nurse that I passed away in the night, you'll have to move fast. Always assuming you decide to move at all, that is."

"Al, you're not planning—"

"Just trying to be careful. Because this matters, Jake. As far as I'm concerned, it matters more than anything else. If you ever wanted to change the world, this is your chance. Save Kennedy, save his brother. Save Martin Luther King. Stop the race riots. Stop Vietnam, maybe." He leaned forward. "Get rid of one wretched waif, buddy, and you could save millions of lives."

"It's a hell of a sales pitch," I said, "but I don't need the key. When the sun comes up tomorrow, you'll still be on the big blue bus."

"Ninety-five percent probability. But that's not good enough. Take the goddam key."

I took the goddam key and put it in my pocket. "I'll let you get some rest."

"One more thing before you go. I need to tell you about Carolyn Poulin and Andy Cullum. Sit down again, Jake. This'll take a few minutes."

I stayed on my feet. "Uh-uh. You're used up. You need to sleep."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead. Sit down."

6

After discovering what he called the rabbit-hole, Al said, he was at first content to use it to buy supplies, make a few bets with a bookie he found in Lewiston, and build up his stash of fifties cash. He also took the occasional midweek holiday on Sebago Lake, which was teeming with fish that were tasty and perfectly safe to eat. People worried about fallout from A-bomb tests, he said, but fears of getting mercury poisoning from tainted fish were still in the future. He called these jaunts (usually Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but he would sometimes stay all the way to Friday) his mini-vacations. The weather was always good (because it was always the same weather) and the fishing was always terrific (he probably caught at least some of the same fish over and over).

"I know exactly how you feel about all this, Jake, because I was pretty much in shock those first few years. You want to know what's a mind-blower? Going down those stairs at the height of a January nor'easter and coming out in that bright September sunshine. Shirtsleeve weather, am I right?"

I nodded and told him to go on. The little bit of color that had been in his cheeks when I came in was all gone, and he was coughing steadily again.

"But if you give a man some time, he can get used to anything, and when the shock finally started to wear off, I started to think

I'd found that old rabbit-hole for a reason. That's when I started to think about Kennedy. But your question reared its ugly head: can you change the past? I wasn't concerned about the consequences—at least not to start with—but only about whether or not it could be done at all. On one of my Sebago trips, I took out my knife and carved AL T. FROM 2007 on a tree near the cabin where I stayed. When I got back here, I jumped in my car and drove on over to Sebago Lake. The cabins where I stayed are gone; there's a tourist hotel there now. But the tree is still there. So was what I carved into it. Old and smooth, but still there: AL T. FROM 2007. So I knew it could be done. *Then* I started thinking about the butterfly effect.

"There's a newspaper in The Falls back then, the *Lisbon Weekly Enterprise,* and the library scanned all their microfilm into the computer in '05. Speeds things up a lot. I was looking for an accident in the fall or early winter of 1958. A certain kind of accident. I would have gone all the way into early 1959 if necessary, but I found what I was looking for on November fifteenth of '58. A twelve-year-old girl named Carolyn Poulin was hunting with her father across the river, in the part of Durham that's called Bowie Hill. Around two o'clock that afternoon—it was a Saturday—a hunter from Durham named Andrew Cullum shot at a deer in that same section of the woods. He missed the deer, hit the girl. Even though she was a quarter of a mile away, he hit the girl. I think about that, you know. When Oswald shot at General Walker, the range was less than a hundred yards. But the bullet clipped the wood sash in the middle of a window and he missed. The bullet that paralyzed the Poulin girl traveled over four hundred yards—*much* farther than the shot that killed Kennedy—and missed every tree trunk and branch along the way. If it had even clipped a twig, it almost surely would have missed her. So sure, I think about it."

That was the first time the phrase *life turns on a dime* crossed my mind. It wasn't the last. Al grabbed another maxi pad, coughed, spat, tossed it in the wastebasket. Then he drew in the closest thing to a deep breath he could manage, and labored on. I didn't try to stop him. I was fascinated all over again.

"I plugged her name into the *Enterprise*'s search database and found a few more stories about her. She graduated from Lisbon High School in 1965—a year behind the rest of her class, but she made it—and went to the University of Maine. Business major. Became an accountant. She lives in Gray, less than ten miles from Sebago Lake, where I used to go on my minivacations, and she still works as a freelance. Want to guess who one of her biggest clients is?"

I shook my head.

"John Crafts, right here in The Falls. Squiggy Wheaton, one of the salesmen, is a regular customer at the diner, and when he told me one day that they were doing their annual inventory and 'the numbers lady' was there going over the books, I made it my business to roll on up and get an eyes-on. She's sixty-five now, and . . . you know how some women that age can be really beautiful?"

"Yes," I said. I was thinking of Christy's mother, who didn't fully come into her looks until she was in her fifties.

"Carolyn Poulin is that way. Her face is a classic, the kind a painter from two or three hundred years ago would love, and she's got snow white hair that she wears long, down her back."

"Sounds like you're in love, Al."

He had enough strength left to shoot me the bird.

"She's in great physical shape, too—well, you'd almost expect that, wouldn't you, an unmarried woman hauling herself in and out of a wheelchair every day and getting in and out of the specially equipped van she drives. Not to mention in and out of bed, in and out of the shower, all the rest. And she does—Squiggy says she's completely self-sufficient. I was impressed."

"So you decided to save her. As a test case."

"I went back down the rabbit-hole, only this time I stayed in the Sebago cabin over two months. Told the owner I'd come into some money when my uncle died. You ought to remember that, buddy—the rich uncle thing is tried and true. Everybody believes it because everybody wants one. So comes the day: November fifteenth, 1958. I don't mess with the Poulins. Given my idea about stopping Oswald, I'm much more interested in Cullum, the

shooter. I'd researched him, too, and found out he lived about a mile from Bowie Hill, near the old Durham grange hall. I thought I'd get there before he left for the woods. Didn't quite work out that way.

"I left my cabin on Sebago really early, which was a good thing for me, because I wasn't a mile down the road before the Hertz car I was driving came up with a flat shoe. I took out the spare, put it on, and although it looked absolutely fine, I hadn't gone another mile before that one went flat, too.

"I hitched a ride to the Esso station in Naples, where the guy in the service bay told me he had too damn much work to come out and put a new tire on a Hertz Chevrolet. I think he was pissed about missing the Saturday hunting. A twenty-dollar tip changed his mind, but I never got into Durham until past noon. I took the old Runaround Pond Road because that's the quickest way to go, and guess what? The bridge over Chuckle Brook had fallen into the goddam water. Big red and white sawhorses; smudgepots; big orange sign reading ROAD CLOSED. By then I had a pretty good idea of what was going on, and I had a sinking feeling that I wasn't going to be able to do what I'd set out that morning to do. Keep in mind that I left at eight A.M., just to be on the safe side, and it took me over four hours to get eighteen miles. But I didn't give up. I went around by Methodist Church Road instead, hammering that rent-a-dent for all it was worth, pulling up this long rooster-tail of dust behind me—all the roads out that way are dirt back then.

"Okay, so I'm seeing cars and trucks parked off to the sides or at the start of woods roads every here and there, and I'm also seeing hunters walking with their guns broken open over their arms. Every single one of them lifted his hand to me—folks are friendlier in '58, there's no doubt about that. I waved back, too, but what I was really waiting for was another flat. Or a blowout. That would probably have sent me right off the road and into the ditch, because I was doing sixty at least. I remember one of the hunters patting the air with his hands, the way you do when you're telling someone to slow down, but I paid no attention.

"I flew up Bowie Hill, and just past the old Friends' Meeting House, I spied a pickemup parked by the graveyard. POULIN CONSTRUCTION AND CARPENTRY painted on the door. Truck empty. Poulin and his girl in the woods, maybe sitting in a clearing somewhere, eating their lunch and talking the way fathers and daughters do. Or at least how I imagine they do, never having had one myself—"

Another long fit of coughing, which ended with a terrible wet gagging sound.

"Ah *shit,* don't that *hurt,*" he groaned.

"Al, you need to stop."

He shook his head and wiped a slick of blood off his lower lip with the heel of his palm. "What I need is to get this out, so shut up and let me do it.

"I gave the truck a good long stare, still rolling at sixty or so all the while, and when I looked back at the road, I saw there was a tree down across it. I stopped just in time to keep from crashing into it. It wasn't a big tree, and before the cancer went to work on me, I was pretty strong. Also, I was mad as hell. I got out and started wrestling with it. While I was doing that—also cussing my head off—a car came along from the other direction. Man gets out, wearing an orange hunting vest. I don't know for sure if it's *my* man or not—the *Enterprise* never printed his picture—but he looks like the right age.

"He says, 'Let me help you with that, oldtimer.'

" 'Thank you very much,' I says, and holds out my hand. 'Bill Laidlaw.'

"He shakes it and says, 'Andy Cullum.' So it was him. Given all the trouble I'd had getting to Durham, I could hardly believe it. I felt like I'd won the lottery. We grabbed the tree, and between us we got it shifted. When it was, I sat down on the road and grabbed my chest. He asked me if I was okay. 'Well, I don't know,' I says. 'I never had a heart attack, but this sure feels like one.' Which is why Mr. Andy Cullum never got any hunting done on that November afternoon, Jake, and why he never shot any little girl, either. He

was busy taking poor old Bill Laidlaw up to Central Maine General in Lewiston."

"You did it? You actually did it?"

"Bet your ass. I told em at the hospital that I'd had a big old hero for lunch—what's called an Italian sandwich back then—and the diagnosis was 'acute indigestion.' I paid twenty-five dollars in cash and they sprung me. Cullum waited around and took me back to my Hertz car, how's that for neighborly? I returned home to 2011 that very night . . . only of course I came back only two minutes after I left. Shit like that'll give you jet-lag without ever getting on a plane.

"My first stop was the town library, where I looked up the story of the 1965 high school graduation again. Before, there'd been a photo of Carolyn Poulin to go with it. The principal back then—Earl Higgins, he's long since gone to his reward—was bending over to hand her her diploma as she sat in her wheelchair, all dressed up in her cap and gown. The caption underneath said, *Carolyn Poulin reaches a major goal on her long road to recovery."*

"Was it still there?"

"The story about the graduation was, you bet. Graduation day always makes the front page in smalltown newspapers, you know that, buddy. But after I came back from '58, the picture was of a boy with a half-assed Beatle haircut standing at the podium and the caption said, *Valedictorian Trevor "Buddy" Briggs speaks to graduation assemblage.* They listed every graduate—there were only a hundred or so—and Carolyn Poulin wasn't among em. So I checked the graduation story from '64, which was the year she would have graduated if she hadn't been busy getting better from being shot in the spine. And bingo. No picture and no special mention, but she was listed right between David Platt and Stephanie Routhier."

"Just another kid marching to 'Pomp and Circumstance,' right?"

"Right. Then I plugged her name into the *Enterprise*'s search function, and got some hits after 1964. Not many, three or four. About what you'd expect for an ordinary woman living an ordinary life. She went to the University of Maine, majored in busi-

ness administration, then went to grad school in New Hampshire. I found one more story, from 1979, not long before the *Enterprise* folded. FORMER LISBON RESIDENT STUDENT WINS NATIONAL DAYLILY COMPETITION, it said. There was a picture of her, standing on her own two good legs, with the winning lily. She lives . . . lived . . . I don't know which way is right, maybe both . . . in a town outside of Albany, New York."

"Married? Kids?"

"Don't think so. In the picture, she's holding up the winning daylily and there are no rings on her left hand. I know what you're thinking, not much that changed except for being able to walk. But who can really tell? She was living in a different place and influenced the lives of who knows how many different people. Ones she never would have known if Cullum had shot her and she'd stayed in The Falls. See what I mean?"

What I saw was it was really impossible to tell, one way or another, but I agreed with him, because I wanted to finish with this before he collapsed. And I intended to see him safely into his bed before I left.

"What I'm telling you, Jake, is that you *can* change the past, but it's not as easy as you might think. That morning I felt like a man trying to fight his way out of a nylon stocking. It would give a little, then snap back just as tight as before. Finally, though, I managed to rip it open."

"Why would it be hard? Because the past doesn't *want* to be changed?"

"*Something* doesn't want it to be changed, I'm pretty sure of that. But it can be. If you take the resistance into account, it can be." Al was looking at me, eyes bright in his haggard face. "All in all, the story of Carolyn Poulin ends with 'And she lived happily ever after,' wouldn't you say?"

"Yes."

"Look inside the back cover of the notebook I gave you, buddy, and you might change your mind. Little something I printed out today."