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STEPHEN KING

YOU LIKE IT DARKER

STORIES

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For the twins,
Thomas and Edward

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YOU LIKE IT DARKER

TWO TALENTED BASTIDS

1

My father—my *famous* father—died in 2023, at the age of ninety. Two years before he passed, he got an email from a freelance writer named Ruth Crawford asking him for an interview. I read it to him, as I did all his personal and business correspondence, because by then he'd given up his electronic devices—first his desktop computer, then his laptop, and finally his beloved phone. His eyesight stayed good right up to the end, but he said that looking at the iPhone's screen gave him a headache. At the reception following the funeral, Doc Goodwin told me that Pop might have suffered a series of mini-strokes leading up to the big one.

Around the time he gave up his phone—this would have been five or six years before he died—I took early retirement from my position as Castle County School Superintendent, and went to work for my dad full-time. There was plenty to do. He had a housekeeper, but those duties fell to me at night and on the weekends. I helped him dress in the morning and undress at night. I did most

of the cooking, and cleaned up the occasional mess when Pop couldn't make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

He had a handyman as well, but by then Jimmy Griggs was pushing eighty himself, and so I found myself doing the chores Jimmy didn't get around to—everything from mulching Pop's treasured flowerbeds to plunging out the drains when they got clogged. Assisted living was never discussed, although God knows Pop could have afforded it; a dozen mega-bestselling novels over forty years had left him very well off.

The last of his "engaging doorstoppers" (Donna Tartt, *New York Times*) was published when Pop was eighty-two. He did the obligatory round of interviews, sat for the obligatory photos, and then announced his retirement. To the press, he did so graciously, with his "trademark humor" (Ron Charles, *Washington Post*). To me he said, "Thank God the bullshit's finished." With the exception of the informal picket-fence interview he gave Ruth Crawford, he never spoke for the record again. He was asked many times and always refused; claimed he'd said all he had to say, including some things he probably should have kept to himself.

"You give enough interviews," he told me once, "and you are bound to stick your foot in your mouth a time or two. Those are the quotes that last, and the older you are, the more likely it becomes."

Yet his books continued to sell, so his business affairs continued. I went over the contract renewals, cover concepts, and the occasional movie or TV option with him, and I dutifully read every interview proposal once he was

incapable of reading them himself. He always said no, and that included Ruth Crawford's proposal.

"Give her the standard response, Mark—flattered to be asked, but no thanks." He hesitated, though, because this one was a little different.

Crawford wanted to write a piece about my father and his long-time friend, David "Butch" LaVerdiere, who died in 2019. Pop and I went to his funeral on the West Coast in a chartered Gulfstream. Pop was always close with his money—not stingy, but close—and the whopping expense of that roundtrip said a lot about his feeling for the man I grew up calling Uncle Butch. That feeling held strong, although the two men hadn't seen each other face to face in ten years or more.

Pop was asked to speak at the funeral. I didn't think he would—his rejection of the public spotlight spread in all directions, not just interviews—but he did it. He didn't go to the podium, only stood up where he was with the help of his cane. He was always a good speaker, and that didn't change with age.

"Butch and I were kids going to a one-room schoolhouse before the Second World War. We grew up in a no-stoplight dirt-road town fixing cars, patching them up, playing sports and then coaching them. As men we took part in town politics and maintained the town dump—very similar jobs, now that I think about it. We hunted, we fished, we put out grassfires in the summer and plowed the town roads in the winter. Knocked over a right smart of mailboxes doing it, too. I knew him when no one knew his name—or mine—outside of a twenty-mile radius. I should have come to see him these last years, but I was

busy with my own affairs. I thought to myself, there's time. We always think that, I guess. Then time runs out. Butch was a fine artist, but he was also a good man. I think that's more important. Maybe some here don't and that's all right, that's all right. Thing is, I always had his back and he always had mine."

He paused, head down, thinking.

"In my little Maine town there's a saying for friends like that. We kep' close."

Yes they did, and that included their secrets.

Ruth Crawford had a solid clip-file—I checked. She had published articles, mostly personality profiles, in a dozen places, many local or regional (*Yankee*, *Downeast*, *New England Life*), but a few national, including a piece on the benighted town of Derry in the *New Yorker*. When it came to Laird Carmody and Dave LaVerdiere, I thought she had a good hook to hang her proposed story on. Her thesis had come up glancingly in pieces about either Pop or Uncle Butch, but she wanted to drill down on it: two men from the same small town in Maine who had become famous in two different fields of cultural endeavor. Not only that, either; both Carmody and LaVerdiere had achieved fame in their mid-forties, at a time when most men and women have given over the ambitions of their youth. Who have, as Pop once put it, dug themselves a rut and begun furnishing it. Ruth wanted to explore how such an unlikely coincidence had happened . . . assuming it *was* coincidence.

"Has to be a reason?" Pop asked when I finished reading him Ms. Crawford's letter. "Is that what she's suggesting? I guess she never heard about the twin brothers who

won large sums of money in their respective state lotteries on the same day."

"Well, that might not have been a *complete* coincidence," I said. "Assuming, that is, that you didn't just make the story up on the spur of the moment."

I gave him space to comment, but he only offered a smile that could have meant anything. Or nothing. So I pressed on.

"I mean, those twins might have grown up in a house where gambling was a big thing. Which would make it a little less unlikely, right? Plus, what about all the lottery tickets they bought that were losers?"

"I'm not getting your point, Mark," Pop said. Still with the little smile. "Do you even have one?"

"Just that I can understand this woman's interest in exploring the fact of you and Dave both coming from Nowheresville and blossoming in the middle of your lives." I raised my hands beside my head as if framing a headline. "Could it be . . . *fate*?"

Pop considered this, rubbing one hand up the white stubble on the side of his deeply lined face. I actually thought he might be about to change his mind and say yes. Then he shook his head. "Just write her one of your nice letters, tell her I'm going to pass, and wish her well on her future endeavors."

So that was what I did, although something about the way Pop looked just then stuck with me. It was the look of a man who could say quite a lot on the subject of how he and his friend Butch had achieved fame and fortune . . . but who chose not to. Who chose, in fact, to keep it close.

* * *

Ruth Crawford might have been disappointed in Pop's refusal to be interviewed, but she didn't drop the project. Nor did she drop it when I also refused to be interviewed, saying my father wouldn't want me to after he'd said no, and besides, all I knew was that my father had always enjoyed stories. He read a lot, went nowhere without a paperback jammed in his back pocket. He told me wonderful tales at bedtime, and he sometimes wrote them down in spiral notebooks. As for Uncle Butch? He painted a mural in my bedroom—boys playing ball, boys catching fireflies, boys with fishing poles. Ruth wanted to see it, of course, but it had been painted over long ago, when I outgrew such childish things. When first Pop and then Uncle Butch took off like a couple of rockets, I was at the University of Maine, getting a degree in advanced education. Because, according to the old canard, those who can't do teach, and those who can't teach, teach teachers. The success of my father and his best friend was, I said, as much a surprise to me as to anyone else in town. There's another old canard about how no good can come out of Nazareth.

I put that in a letter to Ms. Crawford, because I did feel bad—a little—about not giving her the interview. In it I said they surely had dreams, most men do, and like most men, they kept those dreams to themselves. I had assumed Pop's stories and Uncle Butch's cheerful paintings were just hobbies, like whittling or guitar-picking, until the money started rolling in. I typed that, then handwrote a postscript: *And good for them!*

There are twenty-seven incorporated towns in Castle County. Castle Rock is the largest; Gates Falls is the sec-

ond largest. Harlow, where I grew up, the son of Laird and Sheila Carmody, isn't even in the top ten. It's grown considerably since I was a kid, though, and sometimes my pop—who also spent his whole life in Harlow—said he could hardly recognize it. He went to a one-room school; I went to a four-roomer (two grades in each room); now there's an eight-room school with geothermal heating and cooling.

When Pop was a kid, all the town roads were unpaved except for Route 9, the Portland Road. When I came along, only Deep Cut and Methodist Road were dirt. These days, all of them are paved. In the sixties there was only one store, Brownie's, where old men sat around an actual pickle barrel. Now there are two or three, and a kind of downtown (if you want to call it that) on the Quaker Hill Road. We have a pizza joint, two beauty parlors, and—hard to believe but true—a nail salon that seems to be a going concern. No high school, though; that hasn't changed. Harlow kids have three choices: Castle Rock High, Gates Falls High, or Mountain View Secondary, most commonly known as the Christer Academy. We're a bunch of country bumpkins out here: pickup-driving, country-music-listening, coffee-brandy-drinking, Republican-leaning hicks from the sticks. There's nothing much to recommend us, except for two men who came from here: my pop and his friend Butch LaVerdiere. Two talented bastids, as Pop put it during his brief over-the-fence conversation with Ruth Crawford.

Your mom and pop spent their whole lives there? a city person might ask. *And then YOU spent your whole life there? What are you, crazy?*

Nope.

Robert Frost said home is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. It's also the place you start from, and if you're one of the lucky ones, it's where you finish up. Butch died in Seattle, a stranger in a strange land. Maybe that was okay with him, but I have to wonder if in the end he wouldn't have preferred a little dirt road and the lakeside forest known as the 30-Mile Wood.

Although most of Ruth Crawford's research—her *investigation*—was centered in Harlow, where her subjects grew up, there are no motels there, not even a bed and breakfast, so her base of operations was the Gateway Motel, in Castle Rock. There actually *is* a senior living facility in Harlow, and there Ruth interviewed a fellow named Alden Toothaker, who went to school with my pop and his friend. It was Alden who told her how Dave got his nickname. He always carried a tube of Lucky Tiger Butch Wax in his hip pocket and used it frequently so his flattop would stand up straight in front. He wore his hair (what there was of it) that way his whole life. It became his trademark. As to whether he still carried Butch Wax once he got famous, your guess is as good as mine. I don't know if they even still make it.

"They used to pal around together back in grade school," Alden told her. "Just a couple of boys who liked to fish or go hunting with their daddies. They grew up around hard work and didn't expect nothing different. You might talk to folks my age who'll tellya those boys were going to amount to something, but I'm not one of em. They were ordinary fellas right up until they weren't."

Laird and Butch went to Gates Falls High. They were

placed in what was then called "the general education" courses, which were for kids who had no plans to go to college. No one came out and said they weren't bright enough; it was just assumed. They took something called Daily Math and Business English, where several pages of their textbook explained how to correctly fold a business letter, complete with diagrams. They spent a lot of time in woodshop and auto shop. Both played football and basketball, although my pop spent most of his time riding the bench. They both finished with B averages and graduated together on June 8th, 1951.

Dave LaVerdiere went to work with his father, a plumber. Laird Carmody and his dad fixed cars out on the family farm and sold them on to Peewee's Car Mart in Gates Falls. They also kept a vegetable stand on the Portland Road that brought in good money.

Uncle Butch and his father didn't get along so well and Dave eventually struck out on his own, fixing drains, laying pipe, and sometimes digging wells in Gates and Castle Rock. (His father had all the business in Harlow, and wasn't about to share.) In 1954 the two friends formed L&D Haulage, which mostly meant dragging the summer people's crappie to the dump. In 1955 they *bought* the dump and the town was happy to be rid of it. They cleaned it up, did controlled burns, instituted a primitive recycling program, and kept it vermin-free. The town paid them a stipend that made a nice addition to their regular jobs. Scrap metal, especially copper wire, brought in more cash. Folks in town called them the Garbage Twins, but Ruth Crawford was assured by Alden Toothaker (and other oldies with intact memories) that this was harmless ribbing, and taken as such.

The dump was maybe five acres, and surrounded by a high board fence. Dave painted it with murals of town life, adding to it each year. Although that fence is long gone (and the dump is now a landfill), photographs remain. Those murals remind people of Dave's later work. There were quilting bees that merged into baseball games, baseball games that merged into cartoon caricatures of long-gone Harlow residents, scenes of spring planting and fall reaping. Every aspect of smalltown life was represented, but Uncle Butch also added Jesus followed by the apostles (last in line came Judas, with a shit-eating grin on his face). There was nothing really remarkable about any of these scenes, but they were exuberant and good-humored. They were, you might say, *harbingers*.

Shortly after Uncle Butch died, a LaVerdiere painting of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe strolling hand-in-hand down the sawdust-floored midway of a smalltown carnival sold for three million dollars. It was a thousand times better than Uncle Butch's dump murals, but it would have looked at home there: the same screwy sense of humor, set off by an undercurrent of despair and—maybe—contempt. Dave's dump murals were the bud; *Elvis & Marilyn* was the bloom.

Uncle Butch never married, but Pop did. He'd had a high school sweetheart named Sheila Wise, who went away to Vermont State Teachers College after graduation. When she came back to teach the fifth and sixth grades at Harlow Elementary, my father was delighted to find she was still single. He wooed and won her. They were married in August of 1957. Dave LaVerdiere was Pop's best man. I came along a year later, and Pop's best friend became my Uncle Butch.

* * *

I read a review of Pop's first book, *The Lightning Storm*, and the reviewer said this: "Not much happens in the first hundred or so pages of Mr. Carmody's suspenseful yarn, but the reader is drawn on anyway, because there are violins."

I thought that was a clever way to put it. There were few violins for Ruth Crawford to hear; the background picture she got from Alden and others around town was of two men, decent and upstanding and pretty much on the dead level when it came to honesty. They were country men living country lives. One married and the other was what was called "a confirmed bachelor" in those days, but with not a whiff of scandal concerning his private life.

Dave's younger sister, Vicky, did agree to be interviewed. She told Ruth that sometimes Dave went "up the city"—meaning Lewiston—to visit the beer-and-boogie clubs on lower Lisbon Street. "He'd be jolly at the Holly," she said, meaning the Holiday Lounge (now long gone). "He was most apt to go if Little Jonna Jaye was playing there. Oh my, such a crush he had on her. He never brought *her* home—no such luck!—but he didn't always come home alone, either."

Vicky paused there, Ruth told me later, and then added, "I know what you might be thinking, *Miz* Crawford, most everyone does these days when a man spends his life without a long-time woman, but it's not so. My brother may have turned out to be a famous artist, but he sure as hell wasn't *gay*."

* * *

The two men were well liked; everyone said so. And they *neighbored*. When Philly Loubird had a heart attack with his field half-hayed and thunderstorms in the offing, Pop took him to the hospital in Castle Rock while Butch marshaled a few of his dump-picking buddies and they finished the job before the first drops hit. They fought grassfires and the occasional housefire with the local volunteer fire department. Pop went around with my mother collecting for what was then called the Poor Fund, if he didn't have too many cars to fix or work to do at the dump. They coached youth sports. They cooked side by side at the VFD pork roast supper in the spring and the chicken barbecue that marked the end of summer.

Just country men living country lives.

No violins.

Until there was a whole orchestra.

I knew a lot of this. I learned more from Ruth Crawford herself at the Korner Koffee Kup, across the street from the Gateway Motel and just about a block down from the post office. That's where Pop got his mail, and there was usually a pretty damn good budget of it. I always stopped at the Koffee Kup after grabbing the post. The Kup's java is strictly okay, no more than that, but the blueberry muffins? You never had a better one.

I was going through the mail, sorting out the trash from the treasure, when someone said, "May I sit down?"

It was Ruth Crawford, looking slim and trim in white slacks, a pink shell top, and a matching mask—that was the second year of Covid. She was already sliding into the

other side of the booth, which made me laugh. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Timidity never won a fair maiden the Nobel Prize," she said, and took off her mask. "How's the coffee here?"

"Not bad. As you must know, since you're staying right across the street. The muffins are better. But still no interview. Sorry, Ms. Crawford, can't do it."

"No interview, check. Anything we say is strictly off the record, okay?"

"Which means you can't use it."

"That's what it means."

The waitress came—Suzie McDonald. I asked her if she was keeping up with her night classes. She smiled behind her own mask and said she was. Ruth and I ordered coffee and muffins.

"Do you know *everyone* in the three towns?" Ruth asked when Suzie was gone.

"Not everyone, no. I used to know more, and a lot more people, when I was still Superintendent of Schools. Off the record, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Suzie had a baby when she was seventeen and her parents kicked her out. Holy rollers, Church of Christ the Redeemer. Went to live with her aunt in Gates. Since then she's finished high school and is taking classes at the County Extension, associated with Bates College. Eventually she wants to be a vet. I think she'll make it, and her little girl is doing fine. What about you? Having a good time? Learning a lot about Pop and Uncle Butch?"

She smiled. "I learned your father was quite the hot-rodder before he married your mother—sorry for your loss, by the way."

"Thanks." Although in that summer of 2021, my mother had been gone five years.

"Your dad rolled some old farmer's Dodge and lost his license for a year, did you know that?"

I hadn't, and told her so.

"I found out Dave LaVerdiere liked the bars in Lewiston, and had a crush on a local singer who called herself Little Jonna Jaye. I found out he bolted the Republican Party after the Watergate thing, but your father never did."

"No, Pop will vote Republican until the day he dies. But . . ." I leaned forward. "Still off the record?"

"Totally!" Smiling, but her eyes were bright with curiosity.

I lowered my voice to a near whisper. "He didn't vote for Trump the second time. Couldn't bring himself to vote for Biden, but he had a bellyful of the Donald. I expect you to take that to your grave."

"I swear. I found out that Dave won the annual town fair pie-eating contest from 1960 to 1966, when he retired from competition. I learned that your father sat on the ducking stool at Old Home Days until 1972. There are amusing pictures of him in one of those old-fashioned bathing suits and a derby hat . . . waterproof, I assume."

"I was totally embarrassed," I said. "Such a ribbing I took at school."

"I learned that when Dave went west, he packed everything he felt he needed into the saddlebags of his Harley-Davidson motorcycle and just took off. Your father and mother sold everything else he owned at a yard sale and sent him the money. Your dad also sold his house for him."

"At a pretty nice profit," I said. "Which was good. By then Uncle Butch was painting full-time, and he used that money until he started selling his work."

"And by then your father was writing full-time."

"Yes, and still ran the dump. Did until he sold it back to the town in the early nineties. That's when it became a landfill."

"He also bought Peewee's Car Mart and sold that. Gave the proceeds to the town."

"Seriously? He never told me." Although I was sure my mom knew.

"He did, and why not? He didn't need the money, did he? By then writing was his job and all the town stuff was just a hobby."

"Good works," I said, "are never a hobby."

"Your father taught you that?"

"My mother."

"What did *she* think of the sudden change in your fortunes? Not to mention your Uncle Butch's change in his?"

I considered her question while Suzie brought our muffins and coffee. Then I said, "I don't really want to go there, Ms. Crawford."

"Call me Ruth."

"Ruth, then . . . but I still don't want to go there."

She buttered her muffin. She was looking at me with a kind of sharp-eyed bewilderment—I don't know what else to call it—that made me uncomfortable.

"With what I've got I can write a good piece and sell it to *Yankee* magazine," she said. "Ten thousand words, full of local color and amusing anecdotes. All the Maine shit people like, lots of *ayuh* and *I sh'd smile and kiss a pig*. I've got pictures of Dave LaVerdiere's dump murals. I've got

pictures of your father—the famous author—wearing a 1920s-style bathing suit while townies try to dump him into a tank of water."

"Two bucks for three throws at the big Ducking Lever. All profits to various town charities. They cheered every time he went kersplash."

"I have photos of them serving chicken dinners to tourists and summer people, the two of them wearing aprons and joke toques that said YOU MAY KISS THE COOK."

"Plenty of women did."

"I've got fishing stories, hunting stories, good deeds done—like getting in the hay for the man who had the heart attack. I've got the story of Laird joyriding and losing his license. I've got all of that, and I've got *nothing*. Which is to say nothing of real substance. People love to tell stories about them—I knew Laird Carmody *when*, I knew Butchie LaVerdiere *when*, but none of them explain what they *became*. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

I said I did.

"You must know some of those things, Mark. What the fuck *happened*? Won't you tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell," I said. I was lying, and I think she knew it.

I remember a call I got in the fall of 1978, the dormitory mom (there actually were such things back then) puffing up to the third floor of Roberts Hall and telling me my mother was on the phone and sounded upset. I hurried down to Mrs. Hathaway's little suite, afraid of what I might hear.

"Mom? Everything okay?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. Something happened to your father while they were on their hunting trip in the 30-Mile Wood." Then, as if an afterthought: "And to Butch."

My stomach dropped; my testicles seemed to rise up to meet it. "Was there an accident? Are they hurt? Is someone . . ." I couldn't finish, as if to ask if someone was dead would make it so.

"They're all right. Physically all right. But something happened. Your father looks like he saw a ghost. And Butch . . . the same. They told me they got lost, but that's hogwash. Those two men know the 30-Mile like the back of their hand. I wish you'd come home, Mark. Not right now, this weekend. Maybe you can get it out of him."

But when I asked, Pop insisted that they'd just gotten lost, finally found their way back to Jilasi Creek (a slurred, Americanized version of the Micmac word for hello), and came out behind the Harlow Cemetery, pretty as you please.

I didn't believe that crap story any more than Mom did. I went back to school, and before Christmas break, a terrible idea surfaced in my mind: that one of them had shot another hunter—which happens several times a year during hunting season—and killed him, and buried him in the woods.

On Christmas Eve, after Mom had gone to bed, I finally summoned the nerve to ask him about that idea. We were sitting in the living room, looking at the tree. Pop looked startled . . . then he laughed. "God, no! If something like that had happened, we would have reported it and taken our medicine. We just got lost. It happens to the best of us, kiddo."

My mother's word came to me, and I almost said it: hogwash.

My father had a dry sense of humor, and it was never on better display than when his accountant came up from New York—this was around the time Pop's last novel was published—and told Pop his net worth was just over ten million dollars. Not J.K. Rowling numbers (or even James Patterson's), but considerable. Pop thought it over and then said, "I guess books do a lot more than furnish a room."

The accountant looked puzzled, but I got the reference and laughed.

"I won't be leaving you broke, Markey," Pop said.

He must have seen me wince, or maybe just realized the implication of what he'd said. He leaned over and patted my hand, as he had when I was a child and something was troubling me.

I wasn't a child any longer, but I was alone. In 1988 I married Susan Wiggins, a lawyer in the county attorney's office. She said she wanted kids but kept putting it off. Shortly before our twelfth wedding anniversary (for which I'd purchased a string of pearls), she told me she was leaving me for another man. There's a lot more to the story, I suppose there always is, but that's all you need to know, because this story isn't about me—not really. But when my father said that thing about not leaving me broke, what I thought of—what I believe we both thought of—is to whom *I* would leave that ten million, or whatever remained of it, when my time came?

Probably Maine School Administrative District 19. Schools always need money.

* * *

"You must know," Ruth said to me that day in the Koffee Kup. "You *must*. Off the record, remember?"

"Off the record or on it, I really don't," I said. All I knew was something happened to Pop and Uncle Butch in November of 1978, on their annual hunting trip. After that Pop became a bestselling writer of thick novels, the kind critics used to call three-deckers, and Dave LaVerdiere gained fame first as an illustrator and then as a painter "who combines the surrealism of Frida Kahlo with the American romance of Norman Rockwell" (*ArtReview*).

"Maybe they went down to the crossroads," she said. "You know, like Robert Johnson was supposed to have done. Made a deal with the devil."

I laughed, although I would be lying if I hadn't had the same idea cross my mind, mostly on stormy summer nights when the rolls of thunder kept me awake. "If they did, the contract must have been for a lot more than seven years. Pop's first book was published in 1980, the same year Uncle Butch's portrait of John Lennon was on the cover of *Time*."

"Almost forty years for LaVerdiere," she mused, "and your father's retired but still going strong."

"Strong might be too strong a word for it," I said, thinking about the pissy sheets I'd changed just that morning before setting sail for the Rock. "But he *is* still going. What about you? How much longer are you going to spend in our neck of the woods, ferreting out dirt on Carmody and LaVerdiere?"

"That's kind of a shitty way of putting it."

"I'm sorry. Bad joke."

She had eaten her muffin (I told you they were good) and was mashing up the few remaining crumbs with a forefinger. "Another day or two. I want to go back to the elder care place in Harlow, and maybe talk to LaVerdiere's sis again, if she's willing. I'll come out of this with a very salable piece, but no way is it the piece I wanted."

"Maybe what you wanted is something that can't be found. Maybe creativity is supposed to remain a mystery."

She wrinkled her nose and said, "Save your metaphysics to cool your porridge. Can I pick up the check?"

"No."

Everyone in Harlow knows our house on Benson Street. Sometimes fans of Pop's books from away stop by for a peek if they happen to be on vacation, although they tend to be disappointed by it; just your typical New England saltbox in a town that's full of them. A little bigger than most, set back from a good-sized lawn dotted with flowerbeds. My mother planted those and tended them until she died. Now Jimmy Griggs, our handyman, keeps them watered and pruned. Except for the daylilies growing along the picket fence out front, that is. Pop likes to see to them himself, because Mom loved them best. When Pop waters them, or just walks their length, limping slowly along on his cane, I think he does it to remember the woman he always called "my dear Sheila." Sometimes he bends to caress one of the blossoms—crowns that form on leafless stems called scapes. The blooms are yellow, pink, and orange, but he particularly likes the red ones, which he says remind him of her cheeks when she blushed. His public persona was crusty and a bit cynical—plus there

was that dry sense of humor—but at heart he was always a romantic and could be a bit corny. He told me once that he kept that part hidden, because it bruised easily.

Ruth knew where the house was, of course. I'd seen her cruise past in her little Corolla several times, and once she stopped to snap pictures. I'm sure she also knew that Pop was most apt to walk our picket fence, looking at the daylilies, at midmorning, and if you don't know by this point that she was a very determined lady, I haven't done my job.

Two days after our off-the-record talk in the Koffee Kup, she came slow-rolling down Benson Street, and instead of driving past, she pulled over and stopped right next to the little signs on either side of the gate. One says PLEASE RESPECT OUR PRIVACY. The other says MR. CARMODY DOES NOT GIVE AUTOGRAPHS. I was walking with Pop as I usually did when he inspected the daylilies; he turned eighty-eight in that summer of 2021, and even with the cane he sometimes tottered.

Ruth got out and approached the fence, although she made no effort to try the gate. Persistent, but also mindful of boundaries. I liked her for that. Hell, I liked her, period. She was wearing a flower-printed mask. Pop wasn't, claimed they made it hard to breathe, but he'd had no objections to the vaccinations.

Pop looked at her with curiosity, but also with a faint smile. She was good-looking, especially in the light of a summer morning. Checked shirt, denim skirt, white socks and sneakers, hair pulled back in a teenager's ponytail.

"As the sign says, Miss, I don't give autographs."

"Oh, I don't think that's what she wants," I said. I was amused by her chutzpah.

"My name is Ruth Crawford, sir. I wrote and asked for an interview. You turned me down, but I thought I'd try one more time in person before getting on the road to Boston."

"Ah," Pop said. "Me and Butch, right? And is serendipity still your angle?"

"Yes. Although I don't feel I ever really got to the heart of the matter."

"The heart of darkness," he said, and laughed. "Literary joke. I've got a bunch of them, although they have been gathering dust since I retired from giving interviews. A vow I intend to keep even though you seem like a nice woman, and Mark here tells me you're well about it."

I was both surprised and pleased to see him extend a hand over the fence. She seemed surprised, too, but she shook it, being careful not to squeeze too hard.

"Thank you, sir. I felt I had to try. Your flowers are beautiful, by the way. I love daylilies."

"Do you really, or are you just saying that?"

"I do really."

"My wife did, as well. And since you've been kind enough to compliment what my dear Sheila loved, I'm going to offer you a fairy tale deal." His eyes were sparkling. Her good looks—and maybe her chutzpah—had perked him up the way a splash of water seemed to perk up his dear Sheila's blooms.

She smiled. "What would that be, Mr. Carmody?"

"You get three questions, and you can put my answers in your article. How is that?"

I was delighted, and Ruth Crawford looked the same. "Totally excellent," she said.

"Ask away, young lady."

"Give me a second. You're putting me under pressure."

"True, but pressure creates diamonds from coal."

She didn't ask if she could record him, which I thought was smart. She tapped her lips with a forefinger, maintaining eye contact with Pop as she did it. "Okay, question one. What did you like best about Mr. LaVerdiere?"

He didn't stop to consider. "Loyalty. Trustworthiness. They come to the same, I suppose, or almost. Men are lucky to have even one good friend. Women, I suspect, have more . . . but you would know better than I."

She considered. "I think I have two friends I'd trust with my deepest secrets. No . . . three."

"Then you're lucky. Next question."

She hesitated, because she probably had at least a hundred of them and this short interview over our picket fence, for which she hadn't prepared, was going to be her only shot. And Pop's smile—not entirely kind—said he knew the position he'd put her in.

"Time is ticking away, Miss Crawford. Soon I'll have to go inside and rest my tired old pins."

"All right. What's your best memory of time you spent with your friend? I'd like to know the worst time, too, but I want to save my last question."

Pop laughed. "I'll give you that one for free, because I like your persistence, and because you are easy on the eyes. The worst time was out in Seattle, the last cross-country trip I imagine I'll ever make, looking at a coffin and knowing my old friend was inside. His talented right hand stilled forever."

"And the best?"

"Hunting in the 30-Mile," he said promptly. "We went the second week of November from the time we were teenagers right up until Butch mounted his steel pony and set

sail for the golden west. We stayed at a little cabin in the woods that my grandfather built. Butch claimed that *his* grandfather pitched in when it came to the roofing, which might or might not have been true. It was a quarter-mile or so beyond Jilasi Creek. We had an old Willys jeep, and until '54 or '55, we drove it across the plank bridge, parked on the other side, and humped it to the cabin with our packs and our rifles. Then we got so we didn't trust the Willys on the bridge because floods had undercut it some, so we'd park on the town side and walk across."

He sighed, looking off into the distance.

"What with all the clear-cutting by Diamond Match, and that housing development on Dark Score Lake where the Noonan place used to be, 30-Mile Wood is more like 20-Mile Wood now. But back then there was plenty of forest for two boys . . . then two young men . . . to ramble around in. We sometimes shot a deer, and once we shot a turkey that turned out tough and sour, but the hunting was the least of it. We just liked being on our own for those five or six or seven days. I guess a lot of men take to the woods so they can drink and smoke, maybe go out to the bars and bring back a night's worth of poontang, but we never did those things. Oh well, yes, we did drink a little, but if we brought a bottle of Jack it'd last us the whole week with some left over, which we pitched into the fire to watch the flames shoot up. We talked about God and the Red Sox and politics and how the world might end in nuclear fire.

"I remember once we were sitting on a log, and a buck, biggest one I ever saw, an eighteen-pointer, maybe the biggest one *anybody* ever saw, at least in these parts . . . it

came walking through the marsh below us, as delicate as you please. I raised my rifle and Butch put his hand on my arm. 'Don't,' he said. 'Please don't. Not that one.' And so I didn't.

"Nights we'd lay a fire in the fireplace and have us a knock or two of Jack. Butch brought a pad and he'd draw. Sometimes while he did, he'd ask me to tell him a story, and I did. One of those stories eventually became my first book, *The Lightning Storm*."

I could see her trying to remember it all. It was like gold to her, and it was like gold to me. Pop never talked about the cabin.

"I don't suppose you've read an essay called 'Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!,' have you?"

Ruth shook her head.

"No? No, of course not. Nobody reads Leslie Fiedler anymore, which is a shame. He was outrageous, a slayer of sacred cows, and that made him fun. He argued in the essay that homoeroticism was the great engine of American literature—that stories of male bonding were actually stories of suppressed sexual desire. Bullshit, of course, probably says more about Fiedler than it does male sexuality. Because . . . why? Can either of you tell me?"

Ruth looked like she was afraid to break the spell (the one he'd cast over himself as well as her), so I spoke up. "It's shallow. Turns male friendship into a dirty joke."

"Oversimplified but not wrong," Pop said. "Butch and I were friends, not lovers, and during those weeks in the woods we enjoyed that friendship in its purest state. Which is a kind of love. It wasn't that I loved Sheila less, or that Butch didn't enjoy his trips up the city less—he

was so crazy about rock and roll music, which he called bop—but in the 30-Mile, all the bump, bustle, and roar of the world fell away."

"You kep' close," I said.

"We did indeed. Time for your last question, Miss."

She didn't hesitate. "What happened? How was it that you stopped being men of the town and became men of the world? Cultural icons?"

Something in his face changed, and I remembered my mother's distress call when I was in college: *Your father looks like he saw a ghost*. If so, I thought he was seeing it again. Then he smiled, and the ghost was gone.

"We were just two talented bastids," he said. "Leave it at that. Now I need to get inside and out of this bright sun."

"But—"

"No." He spoke curtly, and she recoiled a little. "We're done."

"I think you got more than you expected," I told her. "Be content with that."

"I guess I'll have to. Thank you, Mr. Carmody."

Pop lifted one arthritic hand in acknowledgement. I guided him back to the house and helped him up the porch steps. Ruth Crawford stood there for a bit, then got in her car and drove away. I never saw her again, but of course I read the article she wrote about Pop and Uncle Butch. It was lively and full of amusing anecdotes, if short on real insight. It was in *Yankee* magazine, and twice the length they usually allowed for their articles. I'm sure she really did get more than she expected when she stopped by the house on her way out of town, and that included the title: "Two Talented Bastids."

* * *

My mother—Sheila Wise Carmody, Our Lady of the Daylilies—died in 2016, at the age of seventy-eight. It came as a shock to everyone who knew her. She didn't smoke, she only drank the rare glass of wine on special occasions, she was neither over nor underweight. Her mother lived to ninety-seven, her grandmother to ninety-nine, but Mom suffered a massive heart attack while driving home from the Castle Rock IGA with a load of groceries in the trunk of her car. She pulled over on the shoulder of Sirois Hill, set the emergency brake, turned off the engine, folded her hands in her lap, and went into the darkness that surrounds this bright flash we call life. My father was shaken by the death of his old friend Dave LaVerdiere, but his wife's death left him inconsolable.

"She should have lived," he said at her funeral. "Someone in the clerical department has made a terrible mistake." Not very eloquent, not his best, but he was in shock.

For six months, Pop slept downstairs on the pullout couch. Finally, at my urging, we cleaned out the bedroom where they had spent over 21,000 nights. Most of her clothes went to the Goodwill in Lewiston, which was a favorite charity. He shared her jewelry out among her friends, with the exception of her engagement ring and her wedding ring, which he carried in the watch pocket of his jeans until the day he died.

The cleaning out was a hard job for him (for both of us), but when it came to clearing her little study, hardly more than a closet adjacent to the mudroom, he flat refused.

"I can't, Mark," he said. "I just can't. It would break me. You'll have to do it. Box up her papers and put them

in the basement. I'll look at them eventually, and decide what needs to be kept."

But so far as I know, he never did look. Those boxes are still where I put them, under the Ping-Pong table that nobody has used since Mom and I used to have spirited games down there, Mom swearing colorfully every time I hit a smash she couldn't handle. Cleaning out her little "think room," as she called it, was hard. Looking at the dusty Ping-Pong table with its sagging green net was even harder.

A day or two after Pop's extraordinary picket-fence interview with Ruth Crawford, I found myself remembering how I'd fortified myself with a Valium before going into her think room with a couple of empty banker's boxes. When I got to the bottom drawer of her desk, I found a stack of spiral notebooks, and when I opened one, I'd seen my father's unmistakable backslanted printing. They predated his breakthrough, after which every book, even the first, became a bestseller.

His first three novels, written before word processors and computers became commonplace, were composed on an IBM Selectric, which he lugged home each afternoon from the Harlow Town Office. He gave me those typed manuscripts to read and I remembered them well. There were places where he'd scratched out words and added different ones between the lines, and he'd make a pen-slash through a paragraph or two if they went long—that's how it was done before the delete button was invented. Sometimes he used the *x* key, where *A beautiful lovely day* might become *A xxxxxxxxx lovely day*.

I'm going on about this because there were few strike-outs or strike-overs in the finished manuscripts of *The*

Lightning Storm, *The Terrible Generation*, and *Highway 19*. The spiral notebooks, on the other hand, were full of crossouts, some so heavy they had torn the pages. Other pages had been entirely scribbled over, as if in a fury. There were marginal notes, like *What happens to Tommy?* and *Remember the bureau!!!* There were a dozen of those notebooks in all, and the one at the bottom was pretty clearly a trial run at *The Lightning Storm*. It wasn't terrible . . . but it wasn't very good, either.

Thinking of Ruth's final question—also of my mother's distress call in 1978—I found the banker's box containing those old notebooks. I dug out the one I wanted and read some of it sitting crosslegged beneath a naked lightbulb.

> A storm was coming!
>
> ~~Jason~~ Jack stood on the porch watching black clouds form in the west. Thunder rolled! Lightning ~~hit everywhere!~~ smashed the ground like battering rams of fire! The wind began to ~~blow~~ howl. Jack was wicked scared but he couldn't stop looking. Fire before rain, he thought. FIRE BEFORE RAIN!

There was a picture in those words, and there was narration, but it was hackneyed at best. On that page and the ones that followed, I could see Pop straining to say what he saw. As if he knew what he was doing wasn't very good and kept trying, trying, trying to make it better. It was painful because it *wanted* to be good . . . and wasn't.

I went downstairs and got a copy of *The Lightning Storm* from the shelf of proofs in Pop's office. I turned to the first page and read this:

A storm was on the way.

Jack Elway stood on the porch, hands in his pockets, watching as black clouds rose in the west like smoke, blotting out the stars as they came. Thunder muttered. Lightning lit the clouds, making them look like brains, or so he thought. The wind began to pick up. *Fire before rain*, the boy thought. *Fire before rain*. The idea terrified him, but he couldn't stop looking.

Comparing the bad (but trying so hard to be good) handwritten copy to the version in the finished book, I found myself thinking first of Butch LaVerdiere's dump murals, then of his painting of Elvis and Marilyn on the midway, which had sold for three million dollars. I thought again that one was the bud and one was the bloom.

All over this country—all over the *world*—men and women are painting pictures, writing stories, playing instruments. Some of these wannabes go to seminars and workshops and art classes. Some hire teachers. The fruit of their labors is dutifully admired by friends and relatives, who say things like *Wow, really good!* and then forget it. I always enjoyed my father's stories when I was a kid. They enthralled me and I thought *Wow, really good, Pop!* As I'm sure people passing on Dump Road saw Uncle Butch's brash and busy murals of town life and thought *Wow, really good!* and then went on their way. Because someone is always painting pictures, someone is always telling stories, someone is always playing "Call Me the Breeze" on the guitar. Most are forgettable. Some are competent. A very few are indelible. Why that should be I don't know.

And how those two country men made the leap from good to good enough to great—I didn't know that, either.

But I found out.

Two years after his brief interview with Ruth Crawford, Pop was once more inspecting the daylilies growing along the picket fence. He was showing me how outliers had begun to pop up on the other side of the fence, even on the other side of Benson Street, when I heard a muffled crack. I thought he might have stepped on a fallen branch. He looked at me with wide eyes, his mouth open, and I thought (I remember this clearly) *This is what Pop looked like when he was a kid*. Then he tilted to the side. He grabbed for the fence. I grabbed his arm. We both missed our holds. He fell to the grass and began screaming.

I didn't always carry my cell—I'm not of the generation that would no more go without a phone than without underwear—but that day I had it. I called 911 and told them I needed an ambulance at 29 Benson because my father had had an accident.

I knelt next to Pop and tried to straighten his leg. He shrieked and said no-no-no, it hurts, Markey, it hurts. His face was as white as fresh snow, as Moby-Dick's underbelly, as amnesia. I didn't often feel old, probably because the man I lived with was so much older, but I felt plenty old then. I told myself not to pass out. I told myself not to have a heart attack. And I hoped the Harlow EMT wagon (which my father and Butch had paid for) was in the area, because an ambulance from Gates Falls would take half an hour and one from the Rock might take even longer.

I can still hear my father's screams. Just before the Harlow EMT vehicle showed up, he passed out. That was a relief. They got him in the back with a power lift and took him to St. Stephen's, where he was stabilized—supposing a ninety-year-old man *can* be stabilized—and took X-rays. His left hip had snapped. There was no attributable cause; it just happened. Nor was it a mere break, the orthopedist told me. It had exploded.

"I'm not sure how to proceed," Dr. Patel said. "If he was your age, I would of course recommend a hip replacement, but Mr. Carmody is suffering from advanced osteoporosis. His bones are like glass. All of them. And he is, of course, of an advanced age." He spread his hands above the X-rays. "You must advise me."

"Is he awake?"

Patel made a call. Asked. Listened. Hung up. "He's soupy from the pain medication but conscious and able to respond to questions. He wants to speak to you."

Even with Covid on the decline, space was at a premium in St. Stevie's. Still, my father was given a single room. This was because he could pay, but also because he was a celebrity. And loved in Castle County. I once gave him a tee-shirt that said ROCK STAR WRITER, and he wore it.

He was no longer as white as Moby-Dick's belly, but he looked shrunken. His face was haggard and shiny with sweat. His hair was every whichway. "Broke my goddam hip, Markey." His voice was little more than a whisper. "That Pakistani doc says it's a wonder it didn't happen, when we went to Butchie's funeral. Remember that?"

"Of course I do." I sat down beside him and took my comb out of my pocket.

He held up a hand in his old imperious *stop* gesture. "Don't do that, I'm not a baby."

"I know, but you look like a crazy person."

The hand dropped to the sheet. "All right. But only because I once changed your shitty diapers."

I guessed that had probably been Mom's job, but I didn't argue, just put his hair as right as I could. "Pop, the doc is trying to decide if you should have a hip repla—"

"Hush up," he said. "My pants are in the closet."

"Dad, you're not going anywh—"

He rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ, I know that. Bring me my keyring."

I found it in his left front pocket beneath a little jingle of change. He held it close to his eyes with a trembling hand (I hated to see that tremble) and picked through the keys until he found a small silver one.

"This opens the bottom drawer of my desk. If I don't pull through this clusterfuck—"

"Pop, you'll be fi—"

He held up the hand with the keys in it, his old gesture. "If I don't pull through, you'll find the explanation for my success—and Butch's—in that drawer. Everything that woman . . . I can't recall her name just now . . . was curious about. She wouldn't have believed it, and you won't, but it's the truth. Call it my last epistle to the world."

"Fine. I understand. Now what about the operation?"

"Well, let's see. Let's think this through. If I don't have it, what? A wheelchair? And a nurse, I suppose. Not a pretty one, a big hairy fullback of a fellow with a shaved

head who wears English Leather. You certainly won't be capable of horsing my freight around, not at your age."

I supposed that was true.

"I think I'm going to go for it. I may die on the operating table. I may pull through, do six weeks of physical therapy, and then break the other hip. Or my arm. Or my shoulder. God has a vile sense of humor."

His bones were fragile, but his brains were still in good working order, even doped to the gills. I was glad he hadn't put the responsibility for the decision—and its consequences—on me.

"I'll tell Dr. Patel."

"You do that," he said, "and tell him to get the painkiller train ready to roll. I love you, son."

"I love you, too, Pop."

"Bring my keys back if I come through. Look in the drawer if I don't."

"You've got it."

"What was that woman's name? Crockett?"

"Crawford. Ruth Crawford."

"She wanted an answer. An explanation. The Unified Field Theory of Creativity, God save the Queen. And in the end, all I could have given her was a bigger mystery." His eyes slipped closed. "Whatever they gave me must have been strong. No pain just now. It'll be back, but right now I think I can sleep."

He did, and never woke up. Sleep became a coma. He had signed a DNR years before. I was sitting at his bedside and holding his hand when his heart stopped at 9:19 the following evening. He didn't even get the lead obituary in the *New York Times*, because an ex–Secretary of State died in a car accident that same night. Pop would have

said it's an old story: in death as in life, politics almost always trumps art.

Just about everyone in Harlow came to the funeral at Grace Baptist Church, along with a good contingent of press. Ruth Crawford didn't come, she was in California, but she sent flowers and a nice condolence note. Luckily the funeral director knew what to expect, and put speakers on the church lawn for the overflow. He offered to add video screens; I refused on the grounds that it was a funeral, not a rock concert. The graveside service was shorter and less well attended, and when I showed up a week later with flowers (daylilies, of course), I was alone—the last leaf on the Carmody family tree, and now turning an autumnal brown. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

I knelt to prop the vase against his headstone. "Hey, Pop—I've got the key you gave me. I'm going to respect your dying wish and open that drawer, but if there's anything in there that explains anything, I'll be . . . what did you always used to say? . . . a monkey's testicle."

The first thing I found in it was a manila folder. Either the sly dog hadn't completely given up his laptop after all, or he'd gotten someone at the library to do a printout for him, because the page on top was an article from *Time* magazine, dated May 23, 2022. The headline read CONGRESS IS FINALLY TAKING UFOs SERIOUSLY.

I scanned it and learned that these days UFOs are actually called UAPs—unidentified aerial phenomena. The Congressional hearings, chaired by Adam Schiff, were the

first to take place on the subject since Project Blue Book, fifty years before, and everyone who testified was eager to point out that the focus wasn't on little green men from Mars or anywhere else. All witnesses said that while craft of extraterrestrial origin couldn't be ruled out, they were considered highly unlikely. What they were worried about was the possibility that some other country—Russia, China—had developed hypersonic technology far greater than our own.

Below the printout were clippings, yellowed and slightly brittle, from September and October of 1978. One from the *Press Herald* was headlined MYSTERIOUS LIGHTS SPOTTED OVER MARGINAL WAY. The one in the *Castle Rock Call* read CIGAR-SHAPED "UFO" SPOTTED OVER CASTLE VIEW. There was a photo of the View, with the rusty Suicide Stairs (as long gone as my Uncle Butch's dump murals) zig-zagging up the side. No sign of the flying White Owl, though.

Below the folder of clippings was a spiral notebook. I flipped back the cover, expecting to see another of Pop's early efforts—a stab at *The Terrible Generation*, perhaps, or *Highway 19*. It was his backslanted printing, unmistakable, but there were no cross-outs, scribbles, or doodles while he struggled for a way to express what he was thinking. It wasn't a bit like the early notebooks I'd found after my mother died. This was Laird Carmody in total command of his writing ability, although some of the letters looked shaky. I couldn't be sure, but I thought the narrative had been written at some point after he claimed retirement.

Pop was a novelist in full, usually respected for his storytelling abilities, and it only took me three pages to

decide this was another story, albeit one with real people—Laird Carmody and Dave LaVerdiere—as made-up characters. Metafiction, in other words. Not uncommon; any number of fine writers have dabbled in the concept (or maybe you call that sort of thing a conceit). Dave certainly couldn't object, Pop would have thought, because his old friend was dead. If Pop had claimed it as true in his hospital room, it was only because he was addled with dope and pain. Such things happened. At the end of his life, hadn't Nathaniel Hawthorne confused himself with the Reverend Dimmesdale? Didn't Emily Dickinson leave the world saying "I must go in, the fog is rising"?

My father had never written fantasy *or* metafiction, and this was both, but he was up to his good old tricks nevertheless. I was caught up immediately and read through the pages in that notebook without stopping. Not just because I knew the people and the Harlow landscape, either. Laird Carmody could always tell a story, even his harshest critics admitted that, and this was a good one. But true?

I called bullshit on that.

2

In the old days, when Butch and I ran the town dump, we had Picker Tuesday. It was Butch's idea. (We also had Rat Saturday, but that's a different story.)

"If they're gonna pick," Butch said, "we should give em a day to do it when we can watch out for em and make sure some juicer or pothead doesn't gash a leg and get gangrene."

One old alkie who showed up more Tuesdays than not was Rennie Lacasse. He was what Maine folks call a ratchet-jaw, probably even talked in his sleep. Whenever he got talking about the old days, he'd always begin by saying "That pitcher never excaped my memory."

That's how I feel about the hunting trip in 1978 that changed our lives. Those pitchers have never excaped my memory.

We left on November 11th of that year, a Saturday, and the plan was to be back on the 17th or 18th, maybe earlier if one or both of us got our deer. If we did, we'd have plenty of time to get them dressed out at Ordway's Butcher Shop in Gates Falls. Everyone enjoyed venison at Thanksgiving, especially Mark, who was due home from college on the 21st.

Butch and I clubbed together to buy an Army surplus Willys jeep back in the early fifties. By 1978 she was an old lady, but still perfect for loading up our gear and groceries and bucketing off into the woods. Sheila used to tell me every year that NellyBelle was going to throw a rod or drop her transmission somewhere in the 30-Mile, but she never did. We drove that Willys out there until Butch headed west. Only we didn't do much hunting after 1978. We even avoided the subject. Although we thought about it, of course. Hard not to. By then I'd sold my first book, and Butch was making money doing comics and graphic novels. Nothing like the money he made later, but a-country fair, as Rennie Lacasse might have said.

I kissed Sheila, Butch gave her a hug, and off we went. Chapel Road took us to Cemetery Road, then to three

woods roads, each more overgrown than the last. By then we were deep into the 30-Mile and pretty soon we could hear Jilasi Creek. Some years it wasn't much more than a chuckle, but that summer and fall we'd had buckets of rain and old Jilasi was roaring.

"I hope the bridge is still there," Butch said.

It was, but listing a bit to starboard. There was a yellow sign nailed to a stanchion with one word on it: UNSAFE. When the spring runoff came the next year, the bridge washed out entirely. After that you'd have to go twenty miles downstream to cross the Jilasi. Damn near to Bethel.

We didn't need the sign. It had been years since we'd dared to drive across that bridge, and that day we weren't sure we even dared walk across it.

"Well," Butch said, "I'll be damned if I'm going to drive twenty miles down Route 119 and then twenty miles back."

"You'd be pulled over by a cop for sure if you tried," I said, and slapped the side of the Willys. "NellyBelle hasn't had an inspection sticker on her since 1964."

He grabbed his pack and his sleeping bag and walked to the edge of that clattery old wooden bridge. There he stopped and looked back. "You coming?"

"I think I'll wait and see if you make it across," I said. "If the bridge goes, I'll fish you out. And if the current takes you before I can, I'll wave you goodbye." I actually didn't want both of us on it at once. That would have been tempting fate.

Butch started across. I could hear the hollow clonk of his bootheels over the sound of the creek. When he got to the other side he put down his gear, dropped his pants, and mooned me.

As I went across I could feel the bridge trembling like it was alive, and in pain. We went back—one at a time—and got the cartons with our food in them. They were full of things men eat in the woods: Dinty Moore, canned soup, sardines, eggs, bacon, pudding cups, coffee, plenty of Wonder Bread, two sixpacks of beer, and our annual bottle of Jack Daniel's. Also a couple of T-bone steaks. We were big eaters in those days, although far from healthy ones. On the last trip we brought our rifles and the first aid kit. It was a big one. Both of us were members of the Harlow Volunteer Fire Department, and the EMT first aid training course was a requirement. Sheila insisted we drag the VFD kit with us for our hunting week, because accidents can happen in the woods. Sometimes bad ones.

As we tarped NellyBelle to keep her from filling up with rain, Butch said, "This is the time one of us will go in the drink, you wait and see."

We didn't, although that last trip we had to make together, one holding each end of the first aid kit, which weighed thirty pounds and was the size of a footlocker. We talked about leaving it in the jeep, but in the end we didn't.

On the far side of the bridge there was a little clearing. It would have been a nice place to fish, except the Jilasi ran through Mexico and Rumford before it got to us, and any fish we caught would be toxic because of the runoff from the textile mills. Beyond the clearing was an overgrown path that led a quarter of a mile to our cabin. It was neat enough then, with two bedrooms, a wood-fired cookstove in the kitchen half of the main room, and a composting toilet out back. No electricity, of course, but there was a little pumphouse for water. All a couple of mighty hunters could possibly want.

By the time we got our gear bucked up to the cabin, it was almost dark. I made a meal (Butch was always willing to do his share, but that man would burn water, Sheila used to say) and Butch built a fire in the fireplace. I settled down with a book—there's nothing like an Agatha Christie when you're out in the woods—and Butch had a Strathmore drawing pad, which he would fill with cartoons, caricatures, and forest scenes. His Nikon was on the table beside him. Our rifles were propped in the corner, unloaded.

We talked a little, as we always did up there, some about the past and some about our hopes for the future. Those hopes were fading by then—we were in our early middle age—but they always seemed a little more realistic, a little more attainable, out in the woods, where it was always so quiet and life seemed less . . . busy? That's not exactly right. Less cluttered. No phones to ring and no fires—literal as well as metaphorical—to put out. I don't think we ever went into the woods to hunt, not really, although if a deer walked into our sights, who were we to say no? I think we went out there to be our best selves. Well . . . our honest selves, maybe. I always tried to be my best self with Sheila.

I remember going to bed that night, pulling the covers up to my chin and listening to the wind sigh through the trees. I remember thinking that the fading of hopes and ambitions was mostly painless. That was good, but it was also rather horrible. I wanted to be a writer, but I was beginning to think being a good one was beyond me. If it was, the world would continue to spin. You relaxed your hand . . . opened your fingers . . . and something flew away. I remember thinking *maybe that's all right*.

Out the window, through the swaying branches, I could see some stars.

That pitcher has never excaped my memory.

On the 12th we put on our orange vests and orange hats and into the woods we went. In the morning we separated, getting together again for lunch and to compare notes—what we'd seen and what we hadn't. That first day we met back at the cabin and I made a big pot of pasta with cheese and half a pound of bacon. (I called this Hungarian goulash, but any self-respecting Hungarian would have taken one look and covered his eyes.) That afternoon we hunted together.

The next day we ate a picnic lunch in the clearing, looking across the creek—which was more like a river that day—at NellyBelle. Butch made sandwiches, which he could be trusted to do. There was sweet water from our well to drink, and Hostess Fruit Pies for afters: blueberry for me, apple for Butch.

"Did you see any deer?" Butch asked, licking frosting from his fingers. Well . . . those fruit pies aren't exactly *frosted*, but they have a glaze that's quite tasty.

"Nope. Not today, not yesterday. But you know what the oldtimers say—the deer know when November comes, and they hide."

"I actually think that could be true," Butch said. "They do have a tendency to disappear after Halloween. But what about gunshots? Heard any?"

I thought it over. "A couple yesterday. None today."

"Are you going to tell me we're the only hunters in the 30-Mile?"

"Christ, no. The woods between here and Dark Score Lake are probably the best hunting in the county, you know that. I saw a couple of guys this morning not long after I started out, although they didn't see me. I think one of them might have been that nummie Freddy Skillins. The one who likes to call himself a carpenter."

He nodded. "I was over on that humpback ridge, and I saw three men on the other side. Dressed like models from L.L.Bean's and carrying scoped rifles. Just about had to be out-of-staters. And for every one we see, there's probably five or ten more. There should be plenty of bang-bang, because not *all* the deer decided to up stakes and head for Canada, did they?"

"Seems unlikely," I said. "The deer are out there, Butchie."

"Then why haven't we seen them? And listen!"

"What am I supposed to be listening f—"

"Just shut up a minute and you'll hear it. By which I mean you won't."

I shut up. I heard the Jilasi roaring away, no doubt undercutting the bridge supports even as we sat there on the grass munching the last of our fruit pies. I heard the far-off drone of an airplane, probably bound for the Portland Jetport. Otherwise, nothing.

I looked at Butch. He was looking at me and not smiling. Solemn.

"No birds," I said.

"No. And the woods should be full of them."

Just then a crow gave out a single loud caw.

"There you go," I said, and actually felt relieved.

"One crow," he said. "Big deal. Where are the robins?"

"Flown south?"

"Not yet, not all of them. We should be hearing nut-

hatches and cardinals. Maybe a goldfinch, and chickadees galore. But there's not even a fucking woodpecker."

I usually ignore the soundtrack of the woods—you get used to it—but now that he mentioned it, where *were* the birds? And something else.

"The squirrels," I said. "They should be running around everywhere, getting ready for winter. I think I've seen a couple . . ." I trailed off because I wasn't even sure of that.

"It's aliens," Butch said in a low, joke-spooky voice. "They could be creeping toward us through the woods right now. With their disintegrator rayguns."

"You saw that story in the *Call*," I said. "The one about the flying saucer."

"Wasn't a saucer, it was a cigar," Butch said. "A flying see-gar."

"The Tiparillo that came from Planet X," I said.

"With a lust for Earth women!"

We looked at each other and snickered.

I had an idea for a story that afternoon—much later it became a novel called *The Terrible Generation*—and I was making some notes in one of my spiral notebooks that evening. I was trying to think of a good name for the villainous young man at the heart of the story when the cabin door banged open and Butch ran in. "Come here, Lare. You have to see this." He grabbed his camera.

"See what?"

"Just come!"

I looked at his wide eyes, put aside my notebook, and followed him out the door. While we walked the quarter-mile to the clearing and the creek, he told me he'd come

out to check if the bridge's tilt had increased (we would have heard it if it had collapsed entirely). Then he saw what was in the sky and forgot all about the bridge.

"Look," he said when we got to the clearing, and pointed up.

It had started to rain, just a gentle mist. It was full dark and I shouldn't have been able to see the lowering clouds, but I could, because they were lit by slowly moving circles of bright light. Five, then seven, then nine. They were different sizes. The smallest was maybe thirty feet across. The biggest could have been a hundred. They weren't shining off the clouds, the way a bright spotlight or a powerful flashlight will; they were *in* the clouds.

"What are they?" I asked, almost whispering.

"I don't know, but they sure as shit aren't Tiparillos."

"Or White Owls," I said, and we began to laugh. Not the way you do when something is funny; the way you do when you're absolutely gobsmacked with amazement.

Butch took pictures. This was years before chip technology allowed for instant gratification, but I saw the prints later, after he developed them in his own little darkroom. They were disappointing. Just big circles of light above the dark jig-jags of the treetops. I have seen pictures of UFOs since then (or UAPs, if you prefer), and they are usually disappointing: blurry shapes that could be anything, including the trick photography of hoaxers. You had to be there to understand how wonderful it was, and how weird: great soundless lights moving in the clouds, seeming almost to waltz.

What I remember most clearly—other than a sense of awe—was how divided my mind was during the five or ten minutes it went on. I wanted to see what was making

those lights . . . yet I didn't. I was afraid, you see, that we were close to artifacts—maybe even intelligent beings—from another world. That exalted me but it also terrified me. Looking back on that first contact (for surely it was that), I think our only two choices were to laugh or to scream. If I'd been alone, I almost certainly would have screamed. And run away, probably to hide under my bed like a child and deny I'd seen anything. Because we were together, and grown men, we laughed.

I say five or ten minutes, but it might have been fifteen. I don't know. It was long enough for the drizzle to thicken into real rain. Two of the bright circles grew smaller and disappeared. Then two or three more went. The biggest stayed the longest, then it also began to dwindle. It didn't move from side to side; simply shrank to the size of a plate, then a fifty-cent piece, then a penny, then a brilliant dot . . . then gone. As if it had shot straight up.

We stood there in the rain, waiting for something else to happen. Nothing did. After a little while Butch grabbed my shoulder. I gave a squawk.

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered. "Let's go in. Lightshow's over and we're getting soaked."

That was what we did. I hadn't bothered to put on a jacket, so I built up the fire, which had been down to coals, and stripped off my wet shirt. I was rubbing my arms and shivering.

"We can tell people what we saw, but they won't believe it," Butch said. "Or they'll shrug and say it was some crazy weather phenomenon."

"Maybe it was. Or . . . how far away is the Castle Rock Airport?"

He shrugged. "Has to be twenty or thirty miles east of here."

"The runway lights . . . maybe with the clouds . . . the moisture . . . it could, you know . . . some prismatic effect . . ."

He was sitting on the couch, camera in his lap, looking at me. Smiling just a little. Saying nothing. He didn't have to.

"That's bullshit, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes. I don't know what that was, but it wasn't lights from the airport and it wasn't a fucking weather balloon. There were eight or ten of those things, maybe a dozen, and they were *big*."

"There are other hunters in the woods. I saw Freddy Skillins and you saw three guys who were probably flatlanders. They could have seen it."

"Maybe they did, but I doubt it. I just happened to be in the right place—that clearing on the edge of the creek—at the right time. In any case, it's over. I'm going to bed."

It rained all the next day—the 14th, that would have been. Neither of us wanted to go out and get soaked looking for deer we probably wouldn't find. I read and worked a little bit on the idea for my story. I kept trying to come up with a good name for the bad kid and didn't have any luck—maybe because I didn't have a clear fix on why the bad kid was bad. Butch spent most of the morning with his pad. He drew three different pictures of the lights in the clouds, then gave up in disgust.

"I hope the photos come out, because these suck," he said.

I looked them over and told him they were good, but they weren't. They didn't suck, but they didn't convey the strangeness of what we'd seen. The *enormity*.

I looked at all the crossed-out names of my proposed bad guy. *Trig Adams*. No. *Vic Ellenby*. No. *Jack Claggart*. Too on-the-nose. *Carter Cantwell*. Oh, puke. The story I had in mind seemed amorphous: I had an idea but no specifics. Nothing to hold onto. It reminded me of what we'd seen the previous night. Something was there, but it was impossible to tell what, because it was in the clouds.

"What are you doing?" Butch asked me.

"Fucking off. I think I'll take a nap."

"What about lunch?"

"Don't want any."

He considered this, then looked out the window at the steady rain. Nothing is colder than cold November rain. It crossed my mind that someone should write a song about it . . . and eventually, someone did.

"A nap sounds like just the ticket," Butch said. He put his pad aside and stood up. "Tell you something, Lare. I'm going to draw all my life, but I'll never be an artist."

The rain stopped around four o'clock that afternoon. By six the clouds had unraveled and we could see stars and a sliver of moon—God's fingernail, the oldtimers say. We ate our steaks for dinner (along with plenty of Wonder Bread to sop up the juice), then went out to the clearing. We didn't talk about it, just went. We stood there for maybe half an hour, craning our necks. There were no

lights, no saucers, no flying cigars. We went back inside, Butch found a pack of Bicycles in the living room cabinet, and we played cribbage until almost ten o'clock.

"I can hear the Jilasi even in here," I said as we finished the last hand.

"I know. That rain didn't do the bridge any help. Why is there a fucking bridge there, anyway? Did you ever ask yourself that?"

"I think someone had an idea for a development back in the sixties. Or pulpers. They must have clear-cut these woods back before World War I."

"What would you think about hunting one more day and going back?"

I had an idea he was thinking of more than going home, most likely empty-handed. Seeing those lights in the clouds had done something to him. Could have done something to both of us. I'm not going to call it a come-to-Jesus moment. It's just that maybe you see something, lights in the sky or a certain shadow at a certain time of day, how it lies across your path. You take it as a sign and decide to move along. You say to yourself that when I was a child I spoke as a child, understood as a child, thought as a child, but there comes a time to put away childish things.

Or it could have been nothing.

"Lare?"

"Sure. One more day, then we go back. I have to clean the gutters before the snow flies, and I keep putting it off."

The next day was cool and clear and perfect for hunting, but neither of us saw so much as a single flick of a single

whitetail. I heard no birdsong, just the occasional crow-call. I kept an eye out for squirrels, but didn't see any. I didn't even see a chipmunk, and the woods should have been full of their scurry. I heard some gunshots, but they were far away, near the lake, and hunters shooting didn't mean they were shooting at deer. Sometimes guys get bored and just want to let off a round or two, especially if they've decided there's no game to scare away.

We met back at the cabin for lunch, then went out together. We no longer expected to see deer, and we didn't, but it was a fine day to be outdoors. We walked along the creek for a mile or so, then sat on a fallen log and opened cans of Bud.

"This just isn't natural," Butch said, "and I don't care for it much. I'd say drive out this afternoon, but by the time we got loaded up it'd be dark, and I don't trust NellyBelle's headlights on those woods roads."

A sudden breeze kicked up, rattling leaves off the trees. The sound made me startle and look over my shoulder. Butch did, too. Then we looked at each other and laughed.

"Jumpy much?" I asked.

"Just a little. Remember when we went in the old Spier place on a dare? 1946 or so, wasn't it?"

I remembered. Old Man Spier came back from Okinawa missing an eye and blew his head off in his parlor with a shotgun. It was the talk of the town.

"The house was supposed to be haunted," I said. "We were . . . what? Thirteen?"

"I guess. We went in and picked up some stuff to show our friends we'd been there."

"I got a picture. Some old landscape I grabbed off the wall. What'd you get?"

"A fucking sofa cushion," he said, and laughed. "Talk about stupid! I thought of the Spier house because the way I felt then is how I feel now. No deer, no birds, no squirrels. Maybe that house wasn't haunted, but these woods . . ." He shrugged and drank some of his beer.

"We could leave today. Those headlights will probably be okay."

"Nope. Tomorrow. We'll pack up tonight, go to bed early, and leave at first light. If it suits you."

"Suits me fine."

Things would have been very different for us if we'd trusted NellyBelle's headlights. Sometimes I think we did. Sometimes I think there's a Shadow Laird and a Shadow Butch who led shadow lives. Shadow Butch never went to Seattle. Shadow Laird never wrote a novel, let alone a dozen of them. Those shadows were decent men who lived unremarkable Harlow lives. They ran the dump, they owned a hauling company, they did the town's business the way it should be done—which means so the books balance at Town Meeting in March and there's less bitching from mossbacks who'd be happy to bring back the Poor Farm. Shadow Butch got married to some girl he met in a Lewiston bop joint and had a litter of shadow young'uns.

I tell myself now it was good none of that happened. Butch told himself the same thing. I know, because we told each other when we talked on the phone or, later, via Skype or FaceTime. It was all good. Of course it was. We became famous. We became rich. Our dreams came true. Nothing wrong with those things, and if I ever have doubts about the shape of my life, doesn't everybody?

Don't you?

* * *

That night Butch threw a bunch of leftovers into a pot and called the result stew. We ate it with Wonder Bread and washed it down with well-water, which was really the best part of the meal.

"I'll never let you cook again," I told Butch as we did our few dishes.

"After that mess, I'll hold you to it," he said.

We packed up what we had and put it by the door. Butch dealt the big first aid kit a sideways kick with one sneaker. "Why do we always bring this thing?"

"Because Sheila insists. She's convinced one of us is going to fall in a sinkhole and break a leg or one of us will get shot. Probably by a flatlander with a scoped rifle."

"Bullshit. I think she's just superstitious. Believes the one time we don't haul it out here is the one time we'd need it. You want to go take another look?"

I didn't have to ask what he meant. "Might as well."

We went down to the clearing to look at the sky.

There were no lights up there, but there was something on the bridge. Or rather, someone. A woman, lying facedown on the planks.

"What the fuck?" Butch said, and ran onto the bridge. I followed. I didn't like the idea of three of us on it at the same time, and close together, but we weren't going to leave her lying there unconscious, maybe even dead. She had long black hair. It was a breezy night and I noticed that when the wind gusted her hair blew in a clump, as if

the strands had been glued together. There were no gauzy flyaways, just that clump.

"Grab her feet," Butch said. "We have to get her off before the fucking bridge falls into the fucking creek." He was right. I could hear the supports groaning and the Jilasi thundering, in full spate thanks to all the rain.

I got her feet. She was wearing boots and corduroy pants, and there was something funny about them, too. But it was dark and I was scared and all I wanted right then was some solid ground under my feet. Butch lifted her by the shoulders and gave a cry of disgust.

"What?" I asked.

"Ne'mind, come on, hurry!"

We got her off the bridge and into the clearing. Only sixty feet, but it seemed to take forever.

"Put her down, put her down. Jesus! Jesus Christ!"

Butch dropped the top half of her and she face-planted, but he paid no attention. He crossed his arms and started rubbing his hands in his armpits, as if to get rid of something nasty.

I started to put her legs down and froze, not able to believe what I thought I was seeing. My fingers appeared to have sunk into her boots, as if they were made of clay instead of leather. I pulled free and stared stupidly at the marks of my fingers as they smoothed out. "My God!"

"It's like . . . fuck, like she's made out of Play-Doh, or something."

"Butch."

"What? For Chrissakes, *what?*"

"Her clothes aren't clothes. It's like . . . body-paint. Or camouflage. Or some damn thing."

He bent toward her. "It's too dark. Have you got—?"

"A flashlight? No. Didn't bring it. Her hair—"

I touched it, then pulled away. It wasn't hair. It was something solid but pliable. Not a wig, more like a carving. I didn't know what it was.

"Is she dead?" I asked. "She is, isn't sh—"

But just then the woman took a long, rasping breath. One of her legs twitched.

"Help me turn her over," Butch said.

I took one of her legs, trying to ignore that weird pliability. A thought—*Gumby*—shot through my head like a meteor and was gone. Butch grabbed her shoulder. We rolled her. Even in the dark we could see she was young, pretty, and ghastly white. We could see something else, as well. It was the face of a department store mannequin, smooth and unlined. The eyes were shut. Only her lids had color; they looked bruised.

This is not a human being, I thought.

She took another rasping breath. It seemed to catch in her throat as if on hooks, when she exhaled. She didn't take another one.

I think I would have stayed where I was, frozen, and let her die. It was Butch who saved her. He dropped to his knees, used two fingers to yank down her jaw, and put his mouth on hers. He pinched her nose shut and breathed into her. Her chest rose. Butch turned his head to one side, spat, and took another deep breath. He blew into her again and her chest rose again. He lifted his head and stared at me, bug-eyed. "It's like kissing plastic," he said, then did it again.

While he was bent over her, the woman's eyes opened. She looked at me through the bristles of Butch's buzzcut.