
Road Trip Down A
Dark Memory Lane
Kristopher Mallory

Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane

by

Kristopher Mallory

Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane

A Horror Novella

Copyright



www.StealthFiction.com

Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane

eBook Edition
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Special Thanks

For everyone who rode along, one update at a time.

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Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

~ William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun

Chapter 1 – 25 Years Ago

All I wanted is to be left alone. Just today. A few hours are all I need to clear my head.

“The park?” I ask.

“No. It looks like it’s going to rain.”

Damn.

“I know. You could take Charlie out to see a movie. Maybe just walk around the mall for a while?”

She doesn’t answer me right away.

“Things like this shouldn’t be bottled up.” She sighs. “It’s best to work through it. Find some resolution.”

‘Things like this.’ She can’t even say it. I want to ask, what things? Abduction? Terror? Abuse? Rape? Murder? Suicide? Honey, are those the kinds of things you’re talking about? I’m feeling angry. But I resist the urge to snap at her. I know she’s concerned. She doesn’t understand the pain. No one can.

“Well, what about taking him to see his grandmother,” I say, smiling. “She would love to spend some time with both of you.”

She drops what she is doing and walks over to where I am sitting on the edge of the bed. She kneels down and looks me dead in the eyes.

“Stop it.”

“But…”

“Stop. It.”

“Let the past stay buried,” I say, defeated. “It’s better that way.” I start to hum the tune of Auld Lang Syne.

She says my office has already been called and I won’t be coming in. She’s also told me that I’m not to leave the house without her. She is determined to make sure I don’t hole up somewhere alone. Worse yet, I notice that all the normal clutter on my desk has somehow been replaced by neatly stacked paper and a box of pencils. I know what she wants, and the thought terrifies me.

“Why are you pressuring me? I’m fine. Really, I am.”

She continues to stare at me. Part love. Part sadness.

“I’m fine,” I say again.

She takes my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. That’s when I realize how badly I am shaking.

Fuck.

“You are not going to push us away.” She kisses me on my forehead. “We love you.”

The next thing I know, she is standing in the doorway.

“Write down what you refuse to talk about. I will read it later tonight.” The door closes slowly.

For fifteen minutes I sit on the edge of the bed staring at the wall. She has left me without a choice. I force myself to walk over to my desk. I pick up a pencil and study it. Am I ready to do this?

No.

God help me.

* * *

When I was six years old, I was stolen. Today is the anniversary of my abduction. That’s why my wife is worried. That’s why I’m shaking. That’s why I’m not fine.

Exactly twenty-five years ago, terrible things happened to me. Quarter of a century later and I’m still afraid to even think about any of it. To be honest, I probably can’t recall everything about what happened. So maybe my wife is right. If, by writing about it, the door to those memories becomes unlocked, perhaps I can put all of it behind me once and for all.

* * *

The date is June 29th, 1987. It is a Monday morning. First grade was over, so I don’t have to go to school. My mother is cooking breakfast: French toast, my favorite. My father is still in bed, I think. He usually likes to sleep in on the weekends, but like I said, it’s a Monday, so maybe he

was home sick. Me, I am playing Super Mario Brothers. My mother tells me to turn it off because she's tired of hearing the music over and over again. (…Do-do-do-dodo-do-do…) I ask if I can watch Cartoon Express instead, but she says not right now. I ask if I can go outside to play then. Rain has been coming down on and off, but it has stopped for the moment, though the sky is still cloudy and likely to start raining again soon.

She says it's all right. "As long as you stay in the front yard," she yells, "and come back in if it starts to rain!"

Before she can finish the sentence, I'm already slamming the door. "O.K.!" I yell back.

Outside, the remnants of a battle of He-Man versus Voltron versus G.I. Joe versus M.U.S.C.L.E. are scattered across the yard. I'm looking for one of my figures, a green tiger with orange stripes from the He-Man team. I don't know if my friend next door, Roger, took it or if we buried it as a temporary casualty of war. That one is mine, so if he did take it, I'm going to be super pissed.

I wanted to go back in the house for a minute to use the phone and call Roger to find out if he's got my tiger. Maybe ask him if he can come out and play. I don't do it, though. I bet that my mother will say she's had a change of heart and tell me that I can't go back out again since it's looking more and more like it's going to rain. So instead of making a call, I decide to cross the street and knock on his door. Even though my mother said to stay in the yard, I don't think she would care. I'm six, and I know to look both ways before crossing the road.

As soon as I close my gate, a rusty old red van starts coming down my block. I wait for it to pass so I can cross the road. Instead of driving by, it slows down, then stops right in front of me. I'm pretty sure I've seen the van before. Didn't it just drive by my house a few minutes ago?

The driver's side window rolls down. "Hey kid," the man says.

It sounds as if he knows me. I look at him, wondering if he's one of my friends' fathers. His hair is cut short and jet-black. There is some stubble on his face, which partially covers a long scar on his cheek. I think he

looks sort of familiar, but with the dark sunglasses (kind of like the pair Magnum P.I. wears), I'm not completely sure who he is. "Hi," I say. "Aren't you Tanya's dad?"

He smiles. "No. Not Tanya's dad."

The smile… something was wrong with his smile. Even at six, I knew that. Underneath his friendly grin, I could see the darkness. It is a smile that makes kids remember that they're not supposed to talk to strangers.

I take a step back while being careful that I don't take my eyes off of the man. He's still got that smile as he stares at me. I plan on screaming as loud as I can if he so much as moves. I know that in a second I'll be safely back in my yard, just a few more steps to go.

"I got an idea," he says. "You know what? Let's take a ride."

As planned, I scream my lungs out as I dash the last step into my yard and then into my house. I cry as my mother holds me close. My father runs outside with a baseball bat, or maybe a shotgun. He can handle the stranger in the rusted van. The neighbor heard my scream and called the police with the description and the license plate number. I'm safe.

As far as plans of six-year-olds go, this was a good one. Only I didn't notice the woman who had snuck up and grabbed me from behind. She's got my mouth and nose covered with one hand, and she's choking me with her forearm. No one can hear me scream. I try to get free, but she's too strong. No matter how much I kick my legs or flail my arms, I can't get loose. The grip on my neck tightens, and my vision begins to go dark. She is dragging me closer and closer to the rusted red van. The harder she squeezes, the less fight I have left.

"Hurry an' get 'em in here, Sally. We got'ta go 'for someone happen ta see us," the man says.

I'm struggling for a breath. A heavy rain begins to fall. She is squeezing my neck tighter. I can't breathe. She is dragging me closer and closer to the van's open back door. Two bolts of lightning strike nearby. As everything fades to black, the last thing I know before I die is the double crash of thunder.

* * *

While writing this, twenty-five years later, I am amazed and terrified by all of these long-forgotten memories. The lightning strikes; I know now that I have never seen anything so beautiful. I regret having lost that, but I needed to banish the good along with the bad. How could I have possibly separated it from the surrounding events? Over the years, I've managed to condition myself to believe a fiction. I've told myself that I made it safely back into my house so many times, it became real, so real that I had forgotten the details about the actual kidnapping. Faced with the truth, I realize I've been reliving it over and over in my nightmares.

* * *

I am walking down a dirt path. Hills roll on in every direction. I can see endless mountains in the distance. Other than a few trees, only boulders dot the landscape. For now, it's sunny, and the air is fresh and cool. It won't last. There is a storm forming on the horizon. From over the crest of the hill, a horse-drawn wagon approaches. As it comes closer, I notice that the wagon and the horse are both a fiery shade of red. Closer still, I can see the two figures dressed in black, sitting side by side on the wagon's bench, a man and a woman. Right as we begin to pass each other, I tip my head to them and offer a palm-up salute. It is a sign of respect. I mean to show that I am just an unarmed traveller. The man calls for the red horse to stop. It does. The man smiles. Oh, there is something wrong with his smile. He points a rusty sword at my chest. "You," he says. His voice is full of hatred, disgust, and a hint of recognition. Have we met somewhere before? The woman climbs down from where she was seated. She grabs me by the neck and throws me into the back of the wagon. Lightning strikes somewhere far away. The man laughs. "One!" he screams. I feel something wet and sticky. I look at my hands. They are covered in blood. The back of the wagon is filled with corpses. Hundreds of dead baby beasts, floating in a sea of blood, stare at me with pale, milky eyes.

* * *

Back in 1987, a six-year-old is thrown into a rusted-out red van. He is dead. He feels loved. He feels safe. He wants to be drawn in. Suddenly, death retreats; he doesn't want to leave the warm place and chases after it. Now contentment is dotted by pain, which becomes increasingly hard to ignore. The void pulls away. Hearing returns, further distracting him from trying to hold onto what he had found.

"Is he still convulsing back there?"

"No. He stopped."

"Well, is he breathing for Christ's sake!"

"Who cares? Fuckin' drive!"

I hear a screeching noise. It takes me a moment, but then I remember what tires are, then a moment more to remember where I am and how I got here. I try to sit up, but I can't. My wrists are bound. I try to call out for my mother, but I can't. My mouth is taped shut.

I become aware that I am not alone in the back of the van. Now that my vision has cleared, I see a little girl sitting across from me. She is surrounded by a litter of puppies. Each of them has a large gash on their neck. All of them are dead, except for the one the little girl is holding in her hand. That one is gasping for breath as blood pours from its throat and mouth. In her other hand, she's holding a butcher knife.

"Hi," she says.

* * *

Back in the present once more, I feel as if I should apologize to whoever happens to be reading this. While I haven't lied, I feel like I misled you. When I started writing this, I pleaded that I wanted to be left alone for a short while. Looking back, I can see how this might imply that I could overcome the obstacles brought about by the anniversary of my abduction within a single day. The truth is that these feelings, when they surface every year, don't go away after a few hours. It takes multiple days for me to recover fully. Some days are easier, but most are very difficult

for anyone who happens to be around me. The reason, I think, is because the trauma I experienced didn't end in a single day. What these people did to me, what they had planned for me, was going to last until someone was dead.

I'm thinking, trying to remember what happened directly after seeing the little girl, but all I can remember is fireworks. Cut to:

* * *

The date is July 4th, 1987. It is a Saturday afternoon. It's been six days since I was stolen from in front of my house. They haven't killed me yet. All I do is cry. Even when they aren't hurting me or making me do bad things, I cry. Every day the little girl promises that they are going to take me home. Every day the man and the woman laugh at me for hoping it's true.

While they are all out by the campfire setting up fireworks for later that night, I'm tied up again in the back. I'm thinking of home. First, I wonder what Roger is doing. I wonder how much summer break we have left before second grade starts. This makes me think of homework, and I remember that when first grade started, I had trouble with the math. I picked up spelling and reading right away; numbers just don't make a lot of sense. My mother and father would help me with my homework assignments. They kept saying to retrace the steps if I ran into a problem I couldn't solve. This past week has gone by in a haze of shock and pain. This makes me go over the past few days. Maybe I can learn something. If I do what they want, or say the right thing, then they will let me go home. If not, I can find a way to escape.

The first day ended in a motel. I was chained to the bathroom sink. They kept duct tape over my mouth. I tried screaming the whole night. At some point, the woman came in and slapped me hard across the face and warned me to keep it down, or else she would drown me in the toilet. Being drowned is frightening enough on its own, but at some point the little girl had tried to flush a few of the pups she had killed, so being

drowned in puppy blood made it seem much worse. I tried to get free the whole night, but the handcuffs were too tight. By morning, my wrists were cut and bruised.

The second day, the man told me he was going to give me some medicine. Immediately I knew that I would refuse to swallow whatever he gave me, and if forced, I would throw it up. I don't care what happens after that. The look in his eye tells me that he knows what I'm thinking. When he opened the pouch he was carrying, instead of a bottle of pills, I saw a needle. I don't remember anything after that.

I don't know how long I was asleep. My clothes were wet when I woke up. I'm embarrassed that I had peed myself. None of them seem to care. I'm offered a Happy Meal from McDonald's. The toy is gone. The woman was sitting in the back this time.

On the radio, I hear the news announcer mention an ongoing search for a missing six-year-old boy. How sad, I think. I hope they find him soon. I'm trying to listen to the details, but the woman keeps interrupting. She's telling me how cute I am. I nod, because I want to let her know I'm listening. Then she pinches my cheeks, digging her nails into them. I feel the trickle of blood running down my face. She laughs. I cry, but the tape is back over my mouth again so it's just a bunch of muffled sobs. She pinches me again, then gives a hard slap.

"Ungrateful little shit," she says.

The little girl, who was now sitting in the front seat, turns around.

"Momma?" she asks.

"Yeah?" the woman says.

"Can we get a cat? I want a cat. But without claws."

It might have been day four. They are never on the road for long and are always at night. They stop for gas and sometimes food, and they give me the scraps they bring back. I'm never left alone. This time it's the little girl. She is pouring a gallon of milk over the head of a cat while she's holding it down by its neck. I'm begging her to stop hurting the animal, but my mouth is still taped, so she easily ignores me.

“Bad kitty,” she says. “You’ve been a very bad kitty.”

By the time the man and woman are back, the cat is dead. They toss it out the window once the van is back on the road.

The next day they took off the tape. I’ve learned to keep my mouth shut. Also, the man has stopped sticking me with the needle. I’ve learned to pretend to sleep during the day. I can hear the man and woman whispering to each other, but I don’t know what they are saying. The van pulls off to the side of the road. We’re in the mountains now. All three of them are looking at me. They all seem so very angry, and I don’t know what I’ve done to upset them.

“Undo his hands,” the man says.

The little girl takes the key from the woman and removes my handcuffs.

“Hold him down,” he says. “I don’t want to hurt him… too badly.”

I don’t resist. If I do what they want, they won’t keep hurting me. The woman grabs both of my wrists and pins me to the floor of the van. The little girl sits on my chest. She’s got a blow pop that she’s twirling on her tongue. For a second I’m kind of jealous that I don’t have one too.

Now the man has something in his hand. It’s a razor blade. I know this because my father uses one to shave. He told me that he was going to teach me how to do it one day. He leans down, and I can’t see what he’s doing.

The pain… My god. The pain.

When it was all over, and the van was driving again, I was left unchained and ungagged. It hurt. It hurt so, so bad. The man had used the razor to carve an X into the pad of each of my fingertips.

So here I am on day six. I still don’t know what I should do to be able to go home. I’m hoping my mother and father will come get me. I’m upset that they haven’t yet. How could they not know where I am? If I were a dad, I would always be able to find my son no matter what. I can’t help but be mad at them. Then I feel bad for being mad. Over the last few days, I’ve learned a lot. Most importantly, not to cry. No matter what they do to me, I’m not going to cry anymore.

The fireworks are ready. They are waiting for the sun to go down.

“We’re going to have some fun tonight,” I hear the woman say.

All three of them are looking at me in the van. I just know something bad is going to happen.

* * *

Back in the present, at about 3:20 PM. My wife heard me. I don’t want to say crying… so, let’s say sniffling. Men are allowed to sniffle, right? She came in to see if I was okay. I let her know that she left me with my laptop, so I used that instead. She wasn’t upset. I haven’t told her I posted this up on the Internet, though. I don’t plan to either. It feels like a betrayal, but I want to make sure it’s right before I let her read it. Hopefully when she does, she’ll understand.

She was holding my hands. I turn them over and stare at the scars on the tips of my fingers.

“I’ve never told anyone how I got these.”

She doesn’t say anything, which I am glad about. You know you have a good wife when she knows when to push and when to back off. I don’t know how I got so lucky.

“Just remember this was your idea,” I say. “I hope you are right about this.”

“Do you want to stop?” she asks.

I’m looking at the bottle of Southern Comfort (Black Label) sitting on my desk. A little more than a third of it is gone. I’m imagining that a stranger out there might have had a drink, or two, or three, along with me. If so, cheers to you. And thanks.

“No. I’ve got to finish now. People are counting on me.” I mean to imply her and our son, and I do mean them, but you know whom I’m talking about. “I need to take another break, though.”

I’m thinking maybe I can drink another third of the bottle. I don’t want to be sober when I have to go over what happened during the fireworks. I can’t be. There’s no way I can do that sober.

“Lay down for a while. I’ll bring you some dinner later on.”

She leaves the room again. I take another shot. Now I’m going to try and nap. Bad dreams are sure to follow.

* * *

I lay down listening to the ambient noise of the house. My son had knocked on the door asking if he could come lie down for a nap with me. Normally I would say yes, and even though I love having him cuddle up with his head in my armpit, like he always manages to do, I tell him no.

He’s upset and knocks again, this time saying, “Please, Daddy?”

“Go get your mom. Daddy doesn’t feel very well right now.”

Eventually he gives up and goes back into the living room. I’m listening to the cars drive by outside. It’s nice out, but really hot. Obviously my wife was lying earlier when she said it was supposed to rain. At the moment I’m relaxed and somewhat drunk. While I would have preferred Jack Daniel’s or some kind of spiced rum, the Southern Comfort is doing the job. Before long I’m out.

Midday naps usually lead to vivid dreams with me, sometimes lucid. If this were a story, I would have had a terrible nightmare which I would then describe to you in full detail. Things don’t happen as we expect them to in real life. I expected to have some kind of nightmare. I didn’t, though. In fact, I slept really well. Maybe my wife is right. I won’t say I feel… (Better?) Comfortable with opening myself up like this, but this isn’t as terrible as I thought it would be.

After I wake up, I eat most of the dinner my wife brings to me. It isn’t anything fancy, but it was good: Glazed chicken, creamed corn, fries, a can of Coke Zero, and a glass of ice (to mix with my liquor).

While eating, I realize the worst is the 4th of July. I am debating how best to talk about it. Whenever I dream about hearing a hinge squeaking as a door is slowly opened, then seeing a dark figure standing in the doorway watching me, I know it’s about the 4th.

…

Shit.

…

I didn't mean to tell you about that.

* * *

Back in 1987, it is still the 4th of July. As the sun is setting, a six-year-old kid is taken out of the rusted red van. The woman and the little girl are showing him around.

"Well," the woman says, "this is our home." She points to a rundown mobile home, which happens to be sitting on cinder blocks. "It's not much to look at on the outside."

For the first time in days, I dare to speak. "It's nice."

"Well, aren't you sweet."

In what you could say is the front yard, there are a few broken-down cars. Most of them are stripped. Doors removed, engines taken apart. Tires stacked all over. One of the vehicles, a school bus, is on its side with the windows all busted out and a tree growing through it. There's also an empty dog cage. Piles of crap and old bones are inside the enclosure. An empty bucket is tipped over in one corner, and in the other corner is the corpse of a large dog, which is mostly covered in maggots. The smell makes me gag. Neither the woman nor the girl makes any comment; instead, they walk me around to the back side of their home.

In the back, I get an unobstructed view of the area. We are somewhere in the mountains. I know what States are, but I couldn't tell you what state we were even in. I look around trying to figure out which way home is. It's no use. All I know is that it's far.

"I bury the bad ones back here," the little girl says.

I look to where she's pointing. Dozens of small little graves are all over the backyard.

The woman laughs. "This girl," she says while shaking her head, "she can't find a good pet to save her life. We eat the squirrels and the rabbits.

Can’t tell ya how many dogs, cats, and hamsters she’s buried back here. I think there’s even a ferret.”

“Two ferrets,” the little girl says.

“What?” the woman asks.

“Two ferrets.”

“If you say so. Take him in the house and show him where the bathroom is.”

She grabs my hand and squeezes it hard enough to break open the scabs on my fingertips. “You clean yourself up,” she says. “He don’t like dirty boys.”

The inside of the trailer is much nicer, just like the woman said. The little girl tells me I ought to take off my shoes. She says I’ll be in trouble if I get the carpet dirty. The couch, love seat, and recliner all look to be brand new. As I’m walking through the living room, I notice they are all covered with plastic. The T.V. is on and tuned into Family Ties. Sometimes my mother lets me watch it with her. The walls are painted light brown and cream in a striped pattern. They are bare, no pictures or artwork. The only thing that seems out of place is the newspaper clippings which cover the coffee table.

The little girl leads me to the bathroom. The tub is already full, and there is a stack of clean clothes sitting on the toilet seat. “They don’t have any boy clothes,” the little girl says.

I look closer and see that the shirt is pink and the jeans have a few shiny rhinestones.

“You smell like pee,” she says, then turns around and slams the door.

The water is colder than warm, and it’s hard to use the washcloth with my fingers hurting like they were, but I manage to hold it with my palms and clean myself almost as well as I would have at home.

The door swings open. The man is standing there smiling at me.

“Get dressed, kid. If you’re good, you’ll see the fireworks after dinner.”

For dinner, they gave me a frozen potpie that had been microwaved. I'm not hungry, but I eat the best I can. Do what they want, and they will let me go home, I keep telling myself.

The man is still smiling at me. He sees me staring at the scar on his face.

"I could make ya smile."

I look back down at my half-eaten potpie.

"Maybe I will. I'll make you smile jus' like me," he says. "They call it a Glasgow smile, and the motherfucker who tried to give one to me only got halfway there before I ripped his fucking eyes out."

"More iced-tea, sweetie?" the woman asks.

It's night now: starless, dark. I've been locked into one of the bedrooms. Outside I can hear the pop-pop-poppoppop of firecrackers and the whistle of bottle rockets. The window curtains are open enough so that I can see the woman and the little girl out there having fun. Then the first big one goes off. Boom! A bright green glow covers everything. Then the second one explodes, this time blue, purple, and red. For that brief moment, I've forgotten everything. I'm just a kid smiling at the fireworks.

The next sound, which I think is another bottle rocket, is actually the door to the room being opened. The next explosion paints the man in gold and red. The door closes behind him. He… He made me… I'm watching the fireworks. BOOM, there goes another, BOOM… and another. Somewhere I hear laughing. Somewhere I hear crying. Somewhere, somebody is being hurt, but that's not important right now. I'm watching the pretty fireworks.

Boom.

* * *

Monsters are hungry. (These tears are real.) Most monsters feed by causing pain and suffering. Some thrive by witnessing the deeds done by other monsters. Monsters are everywhere. (This shaking is real.) One may be reading this right now. It might even be you. If you're out there, know

that I'm glad to deny you a retelling of that abuse. Thinking about what you are makes me wish that there is a hell. I would even come to visit, standing on the observation deck, eating popcorn while I watch you burn. Monsters are hidden. (These memories are real.) Maybe there is time for you to change… to become human… before it is too late. Others can pray for your salvation. I certainly won't because I know… I know you can't change. And as much as I wish it wasn't true, as much as people try to deny it: Monsters are real.

(Monsters… Are… Real…)

Watch for them.

* * *

Somewhere stuck between the past, the present, and the future sits a man with an empty bottle of liquor. He doesn't know how he's said what he has or how he can possibly continue. He can barely see the words through the tears, and he can barely type the keys because his hands are shaking so badly. All he wants is to be held by his wife and his son. All he wants is to feel them close to him, to feel safe again. Just for a little while. Just so he can remember there are still good things in this world.

There are still good things in this world, aren't there?

* * *

Morning, Saturday, June 30th, 2012. My head is throbbing. My first thought is: I should have had some water last night. It's my own fault, though. No one forced me to down a whole 1-liter bottle of one-hundred-proof. As for what happened last night, well, it was difficult. While trying to make it through the telling of some parts, it is as if the keys of the laptop resist being pressed. I don't know how long I was trying to make it through that. For those who are following along live: I feel like you are no longer faceless observers. Somewhere along the way you have become a part of my life story. Some of you have helped me remember long-forgotten details. Others have shared in my pain. Thank you.

Late last night I found out my wife was right about it going to rain after all. A massive storm hit the county we live in. The winds were so high that the house was shaking. It sounded like there was a freight train outside. I kept worrying about a tornado coming. Secretly, I wanted it to. I haven't assessed the damage to our yard yet, but we are lucky considering that many people in our area are stuck without power on what is going to be a hot day.

At some point, the room was spinning so badly that I felt like I might throw up, so I stumbled my way to the bathroom. Much like my first night back in 1987, I slept next to the toilet. My wife woke me up to tell me she was making breakfast. When I go to stand up, I see the butcher knife sitting on the edge of the tub. I'm confused as to why it's there.

While I'm in the shower, I try to remember if I had dreamt or not. I did…

* * *

In a car approaching a red light, I press the brake pedal, and the car slows, but it doesn't stop. I press down harder, and the car continues to roll forward. The brakes aren't working; it doesn't matter how hard I press down. There is a car in front of mine that is already stopped at a red light. If I can't get the brakes to work, my car will collide into the back of theirs. Even though the vehicle moves slower than walking speed, I know the impact will result in a deadly crash resulting in wreckage and body parts all over the intersection. Now I'm in a jail cell. Hundreds of people are crammed in here with me. Everyone is pushing and shoving, trying to find a space to breathe. A man tries to force me off my small section of bench. He threatens to kill me. I stand my ground. Another man, larger than all the rest, grabs me and pulls me to my knees. I can't do anything as he unbuckles his belt. Now I'm watching T.V. It's an old show about a family living on a prairie. I'm trying to remember the name of the show, but I can't because my teeth keep falling out.

* * *

Back in the shower, I have an idea.

At breakfast: Scrambled eggs with cheese, tomato, ham, a side of toast, a cup of coffee with three sugars. There's a card-sized envelope sitting on the table that is addressed to me. I ignore it.

"Daddy," my son asks, "can we do something today?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"You guys should do something," I say. "I actually have a plan."

"More writing?" my wife asks.

"A road trip," I say. "There's a place I need to visit."

"I told you yesterday that you're not going anywhere without us."

"Can I go? I want to go!" my son says.

"It's a bad idea."

"I don't care. Either we go, or you stay."

"Please, Daddy!"

"Look, it's kind of far away. Might even be on the road for a few days. I don't even know if I can find it."

We have an argument. She refuses to take no for an answer. I'm writing this as she's packing an overnight bag.

"You're going to have to drive if I'm going to keep writing."

* * *

Back in 1987, it is now July 5th. It's my birthday. I'm seven years old. The man and woman are fighting. Something has happened. I'm still in a bedroom, and though it hurts to move, and there is blood on my pants and on the bed, I crawl over to the door and listen.

"They know us here. It's over."

"We can go to New York!" she says.

"An' stay with Grace? NO."

"What then?"

"West. Make it back to Destiny."

I try the door handle. It's unlocked. I crack the door open just wide enough to see them standing in the living room screaming at each other. The morning news is on, and I'm confused because they just showed a picture of the little girl next to a sketch of the man.

"Fuck Nevada!" she screams. "I don't want to go back there."

Now the news is showing a picture of a van which looks a lot like the rusted red one.

"Fuck you. That's where I'm going. You can do whatever the fuck you want."

"The kids?" she asks.

Now the news is showing the picture of the little girl again. The words above her head I can read. It says: Missing Girl Spotted.

"Well, what about the kids!" she screams at him.

The man crosses his arms.

"What do you think? We put them in the ground."

* * *

Back in the present, the car is loaded, and we're about ready to leave. There's a place up in the mountains that scares the shit out of me, but I know I have to see it. I've already grabbed the envelope off the kitchen table. I have a feeling this is going to be a long weekend.

Chapter 2 – Road Trip Down a Dark Memory Lane

Late evening, July 1st, 2012. We're at a Motel 6. In it, you will find a broken man trying to tell the story of his abduction for the first time. Anyone who has suffered from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse will want to skip all of this. What you need to know is that I was taken from my home when I was six years old. I was tortured by monsters over the course of a week. My wife wanted me to write a letter to her, which she thought would help me get over the past. I tried to sabotage the attempt by posting what I had written to the forum. That decision backfired, and now I'm determined to finish. I'm compelled to revisit the nightmarish trailer on the mountain where most of the abuse happened. Will it help? I don't know. Everything is different now. I feel strange. My family has been on the road for a day and a half. We're not there yet, but we're getting closer.

* * *

Standard greeting cards are usually printed on high-quality paper called card stock. Most are rectangular in shape, folded in half, and have a picture or a decorative print on the front side. Inside will be a pre-printed message along with a blank space for a sender to add a signature or, if they choose, an additional handwritten message. Some cards even come with a matching envelope. The Greeting Card Association (an international trade organization representing the interests of greeting card and stationery manufacturers) would like you to know that the more money you spend on a card, the more it shows how much you care. That's why some greeting cards and envelopes feature fancy materials, such as glitter, gold leaf, and ribbons. Some even feature sound!

Standard greeting cards are made for almost any occasion: Birthday, Thinking of You, I'm Sorry, Thank You, Graduation, New Baby, Funeral, New Home, Baptism, Sympathy, New Job, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Get Well Soon, Thanksgiving Day, Halloween, Kiss My Ass, New Year's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Friendship, Love, Fun, Wedding, Anniversary,

Retirement, Congratulations, Invitation. They are subcategorized for the recipient: Age, Relation, Tone, and Race. In addition to all those options, they also come in every printable color you can think of.

On the way to the first hotel, while waiting for a freight train to finish passing, I finally open up the envelope addressed to me. The front reads: Get Well Soon Grandma! There's a picture of a little old lady with a thermometer in her mouth, and she's holding her belly. I open the card and take out the $5 bill that I knew would be there. The inside reads:

Maybe you should have some soup,
Or try licking on an Ice-cream scoop.
I hope you get well.
And I'll never tell.
That you are having trouble trying to POOP!
No Message. No signature.

A card like this is sent to me every year. They are always different. The only similarities are that the cards never have a signature or a handwritten message. And there is always a $5 bill inside, which I know is supposed to be the real message. I've tried my best over the years to bury my past, but I've dealt with a lifetime of this kind of harassment. I crumple up the $5 bill, roll down the window, and throw it outside. I watch as the wind carries it away. I'm irritated… pissed off. But it's not all bad; on the bright side, I have another card that I can add to the box at home. Since there isn't a personal message or a signature, I'm going to stick it to the GCA by reusing them. Who knows, maybe one day I will have a Mexican niece whom I can give a sweet sixteen card that will remind her to always practice safe sex.

* * *

It's shortly before 1 AM when we arrive at the same motel my captors stayed at back in 1987. Minus bathroom breaks, refueling, and food stops, we've been on the road for 15 hours. My wife and son are dead tired. I wish I could say the same. The night manager hands me the keys to room

19. As we're walking past the old Coke & ice machines, my hands become clammy. I wonder if I'm about to walk into the same room.

Inside, everything is dated and old. The T.V. is one of the console tube types with the two dials; the top one lets you select channels 1 to 13, VHF, and the bottom has the higher range of VHF. I tried to turn it on, but it doesn't work. A yellow pages phone book is on the desk. The Gideon Bible is in the nightstand. Nothing else stands out. It's clear the room hasn't been changed since my last visit. Based on the style of lamps and the shag carpet, I would say the place hasn't seen a remodel since the mid-1970s.

No additional memories are triggered by being in this place. I don't feel anything at all.

"You want to stay… here?" my wife says. "We passed a Holiday Inn we could go back to—"

"Does that one have a pool?" my son asks through half-open eyes. "I wanna go swimming." His eyes close again, asleep.

"—because I would really like to take a hot bath."

I sigh.

She doesn't know anything about my past yet, trusting that I'll share my story with her when I'm ready. Not yet, I tell myself. I need her to be the strong one, someone I can hold onto while I figure this out. I have to say something, though. Otherwise our being in this shithole won't make sense.

"This is one of the places they took me."

While looking for something in her purse, she suddenly freezes and slowly looks up at me. She searches my face, waiting for me to continue. I don't. That should be enough. Her shoulders drop.

"Oh. Then we stay."

But we didn't.

My wife carefully laid our sleeping son down in the playpen we packed. She took a quick shower, put on a robe, and brushed her hair. I watched her do all this through the window as I smoked a cigarette outside our room. She opened the door and gave me a kiss.

“Love you. Good night.”

“I love you too,” I said.

“Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t.”

I’m thankful she didn’t mention the cigarette. I don’t smoke, or I haven’t smoked in a long time, I mean. All I want is to calm my nerves. Normally I would turn to alcohol, but that didn’t go over so well last time.

About 15 minutes after my wife is asleep, I use my laptop to go online. First I double-check the route I’ve mapped out. Then I log on to the forum hoping to find a few encouraging words. There simply isn’t any possible way I can explain how much I appreciate the support I’ve found there. I respond to a few questions and take some criticism into consideration. I’m feeling better… Then I see this: “HEY KID! Coming to see me?” Posted by THE MAN FROM 1987. It takes everything I have not to throw my laptop at the wall. I take a deep breath, hold it, and let it out slowly. It doesn’t help.

Around 3 AM, I need to use the bathroom. I can’t hold it any longer. How long have I been avoiding walking in there? How fucking pathetic am I? I pee in the dark. Only when I’m done do I switch on the bathroom light to get a good look at the spot where I was chained, beaten by the woman, laughed at by the little girl… and, for the love of god, I just remember, fondled for the first time by the man. It could have been a minute, or it could have been an hour that I stood there staring at myself in the mirror. “I’m going to kill you. I’m going to fucking kill you, kid.” I repeated what he had said to me twice.

Then I started to kick the toilet. I kicked it until the tank cracked. I ripped off the shower curtain rod and used it to break the mirror. I hear someone crying from the other room, but I’m too busy trying to break the drain from under the sink to give a damn. I’m doing all these things that I wish I could have done back when I was six. Then I feel hands grab me, trying to hold my arms, loving hands wanting me to stop.

Finally, after god knows how long, I do.

“We can leave now,” I say, out of breath.

Without explaining, I give the night manager a check for $750 and write my phone number down on the stationery at the front desk. He’s rightfully confused and asks me what it’s for. I shake my head and shrug. “25 years bad luck,” I tell him.

I drive on for a few hours while my family sleeps. Night driving, for me, is very relaxing. The highways are mostly empty, and that freedom makes me feel like speeding. What I’m thinking about is my birthday back in 1987 and the game we were forced to play. I’m going close to 90 when the first rays of the sun snap me back into reality. I see the name of the next exit, and I realize I’ve gone off course. Somehow I’ve left the interstate, and we’re on a cross highway. Let’s call it a subconscious detour. I take the exit and head towards the Motel 6 on the edge of town. It’s time for me to sleep. In the morning, after a good breakfast, I think I’ll be able to write about the past again. Though I’ve never visited the place up ahead, I know the name. A little girl I once knew lived here a long time ago, back before she liked to torture and kill animals.

* * *

She stood in front of me with her head cocked to the side as if she didn’t understand something. Tears fell from her eyes just as they did from mine. Her dress had the same crimson stains of blood in the same areas as the clothes that I wore. I tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out. She holds her hands out to me with the palms facing up. She has the same scars on the tips of her fingers as I do. I wish I had known that we were the same. I wish things had happened differently. I wish it would have been you instead of me. Neither of us was completely broken, but she had been forced to bend farther to survive. She fades into the black flames of other nightmares still waiting to be had.

* * *

Back in 1987, the little girl and I were told to stand in front of each other. The woman tells us that they need to hit the road soon, but first we need to have a birthday party game.

“Why didn’t ya tell us it was your birthday?” she said. “I would have made a cake.”

The man pushes her away. “Shut it, Sally. Which one do you want?”

“I ’spose I’ll take, oh,” She points at each of us in turn while saying “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.” Her finger lands on me. “The boy.”

“Fine. I got the girl. What’s the bet?” he asks.

“Five dollars. And the loser has to do the dishes for a month!”

“Jesus Christ. Deal.”

They both spit in their hands and then shake. All the while, the little girl is just staring at me with vacant eyes.

“Should we at least sing happy birthday?” she asks.

He ignores her and kneels down in front of the two of us.

“Pay attention, ya hear me? This’s important.”

He’s holding a gun in each hand. The little girl and I both look at him.

“This is a little ol’ game I invented called Junkie Roulette. The rules ain’t as simple as normal roulette, but I reckon you’ll catch on quick enough. Understand? Nod if ya do.”

I nod. The little girl doesn’t.

This draws his unwanted attention away from me, and he focuses solely on her. “I ain’t even got to the rules yet, and you’re the one I’m goin’ to have a problem with?”

“But I’m being good. You said if I was good I—”

The man grabs her by the neck and squeezes. Only when her eyes start to roll back does he let go. She falls to the ground, and he gives her a solid slap to the face.

“Get up, sweetie,” the woman says. “We can’t keep ya anymore is all.”

“Now where was I?” the man says. “Right, the rules. You each get a gun. Just like, uh, what’s that game? The one with the funny dog?”

“Duck Hunt,” the woman says.

“Right, Duck Hunt. Anyway, there are two guns and each of the guns has one bullet. Got that? Nod if ya do.”

The little girl and I both nod.

“Good. I got you, girl, so you pick. Which of these here guns do ya want?” He holds them both out, and she points to the one on the right. “Alright, take it. Here, kid,” he says, “this one will be yours.”

I take the gun into my hand.

“So, like I said, there’s one bullet in each of those guns. Don’t know which chamber it will be in. Sally, you wanna come spin the chambers. I don’t wanna spoil the surprise.”

The woman takes the gun from me. She opens it up somehow and gives the circular thing a good spin before swinging it closed again and handing it back to me. She does the same thing to the gun the little girl is holding.

“Now you can do one of two things. You can point your gun at the other person.” He demonstrates this by grabbing the arm of the little girl and raising it until the barrel of the gun is pressed up against the middle of my chest. “Or you can point it at your own head.” Now he grabs my arm and bends it until the barrel of the gun I’m holding is pressed up against the side of my head.

“Isn’t that a sight!” He laughs.

“Been a long time since we’ve seen it played,” the woman says.

“So far, so good. Now you take turns pulling the trigger. Since you picked the gun,” he says to the little girl, “the kid gets to shoot first.”

I hear a CLICK. The little girl had pulled the trigger while the gun was still pressed to my chest.

“FOR FUCK SAKE!” he screamed. “Don’t you have any respect for the rules?”

“You’d have done the same,” the woman said.

“Mayhaps. But if she ain’t going to play fair, I’m gonna stomp her head in with my boot.”

He grabs her arm, and suddenly he has a blowtorch in his hand. He holds the flame to her arm, and the little girl screams in agony. I'm still holding the gun to my head while she's screaming.

"Do not pull that trigger again until I tell you. Now here is how reward and punishment work… Listen and listen closely. If you pull the trigger while it's pointed at the other person and nothing happens, you get the torch. Hurts, don't it?"

"You don't want the torch, nope," the woman says.

"But if you hold the gun to your own head and nothing happens, well then you get the Junk."

He holds up a small glass pipe. Inside the pipe is what looks like white crystals.

"It's good shit. Takes the pain right away, it does. A hit of this will make you forget all about the burn. Keep that in mind. Any questions? It's your turn, boy. Aim at her or at yourself and pull on the trigger; that's all you got to do."

I don't understand any of what he's said. I'm looking at the blister forming on the arm of the little girl and all I can think about is how much it must hurt. I burned my leg once on a heater when I was four, and I know that the torch would be much worse. The gun is still to my head.

"You can move it and point it at her or pull the trigger like that. You understand, kid?"

"I don't want to get burned."

"Then pull the trigger."

And I do.

Nothing happens.

"Yeah!" the woman screams.

"Shut up, Sally, game ain't over by far."

"Breathe this in, kid. Just a little."

He holds the torch to the crystals in the glass pipe, and he places it to my lips. I breathe in, just a little, like I was told. It tastes like burning plastic and hurts my throat. I cough and cough and cough. And then… I

don’t even know, or want to explain it. Suddenly I felt like I did when I was first thrown into the van. The comfort and love of death overfilled my little body.

“That’s how you play Junkie Roulette!” the man says while smiling his twisted smile. “Now if you want some medicine for that burn, girl, you got to pull the trigger on your own head, else you’ll get another burn on your arm, if you’re wrong.”

Without hesitation, the little girl aims at me and pulls the trigger again. Click. Still looking straight ahead, without any signs of emotion, she holds out her arm to the man. He gives it another burn. She shakes and clenches her teeth, but she doesn’t cry out again.

“Brave girl. Your turn again, kid. Pick.”

I can smell her burning arm. I don’t want that. Why take a burn when you can feel happy? I point at my head again. Click.

“Well shit, Sally,” he says as he’s holding the pipe back up to my lips. “You ought to just give me that five dollars now.”

“Go, girl.”

Click.

She’s burned for a third time.

Click.

I get some more medicine.

“Hey sweetie,” the woman says to the girl. “Why don’t you do it the other way. I know that arm’s got to be hurting something fierce.”

“Fuck off, Sally. Stop trying to cheat,” the man says.

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are. Cut the shit.”

“Fine.”

“Go, girl.”

Click.

And once more she gets another burn. This time she does cry out again. As for me, I’m now sitting on the floor looking at the fibers on the carpet.

I'm wondering what it's like to live as an ant, with everything so much bigger and smarter than you are.

"Kid. Your turn."

I've seen the little girl point the gun at me so many times now that I'm thinking I'm playing wrong, so this time I point it at her and pull the trigger.

Click.

The man grabs my arm and holds the torch up to it. I see the hair burn away and the skin sizzle. It tickles.

"Alright, girl, you got two tries left. You can take one for the pain or risk another burn."

She's looking at me. I can see she's debating something. It's clear she understands this game a lot better than I do. She holds the gun up to her head, thinks, and then points it at me again.

Click.

I see her get burned, but now she's smiling as if she knows something I don't.

I hold the gun to my own head. I point it at her and then back at myself. I'm mimicking what the little girl did. To me, it doesn't matter either way. I just don't want to look like I didn't understand how to play. I aim the gun at her chest.

CRACK.

The little girl is rocked backwards. A pink mist of blood hangs in the air. I look at the smoking barrel of the gun, wondering what just happened. The little girl's leg is slowly kicking up and down. I can hear her trying to say something over and over again.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"FUCK!" the man yells. I see him open up his wallet. He takes out a $5 bill and hands it to the smiling woman.

The little girl stops saying she's sorry. Sorry for what? I wonder. Her leg stops kicking. Then she stops breathing. All this happens while the man and the woman are taking turns putting the glass pipe up to their lips. I

walk over and look down at the hole in the chest of the little girl. A pool of blood is spreading on the carpet, so I take a step back, not wanting my bare feet to get wet.

* * *

Morning, July 2nd, 2012. First order of business is to call my office to let them know I won't be in today. The phone is answered on the second ring. I cough loudly and then groan.

"Ugh, sorry," I say. "It's me. I know I'm late. I don't think I can make it in this morning. Still sick." I leave out the fact that I'm hundreds of miles away.

"I was wondering where you were. Feeling any better at all?"

"Not really."

"Eh, sorry. I can handle things here. Get some more rest; you sound like shit."

"Thanks."

"And don't come in tomorrow either. I can't afford to catch whatever you've got."

"Thanks again. I was just about to ask."

"No problem. See ya Wednesday."

"Wednesday's the 4th."

"Oh, that's right… fine. I'll see ya on Thursday then. You can help me close out the books."

"My Birthday. Personal holiday."

"You're killing me." He laughs. "You know that, right?"

I can't help but laugh too, accidentally dropping the sick routine.

"Friday?" he asks, already knowing the answer.

"Listen, Roger," I say. "You don't happen to remember what you did with Cringer, do you?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind," I say, still smiling. "I'll see ya when I get back, er, I mean, better. Take care."

I hang up the phone before he can reply.

Since my wife is still sleeping, I decide to fire up Minecraft for a little while. Instead of building anything, I spend all my time tearing down structures that I had spent weeks putting together. After I'm satisfied with the destruction, I dig a hole straight down, deeper and deeper, until I fall into an underground cave. The fall didn't kill my character, so I keep on digging until, finally, I uncover a lava pit and die.

Checking the replies to these postings has become a habit. I answer the questions I can. Some of them, though, are left unanswered because certain things shouldn't be said out of context.

Once again, I see a reply from THE MAN FROM 1987. This time he says he knows where I am, and he's threatening to come find my family. I know his game, though. He'll probably continue to drop vague references based on what I've written. Or he'll make guesses at things he shouldn't be able to know. This time he claims to know the town I'm in. He says he remembers eating at a really good barbecue place. We're in the goddamn mountains, where I would say barbecue is one of the best-loved foods around. Not much of a stretch to guess at that. Even still, with all the reasons as to why this guy is clearly bullshit (not to mention I know what happened to the man, you idiot), I call down and ask the girl at the front desk if there's a place in the area.

"No," she says.

"Thanks," I say, relieved.

"Used to be, I think, I can ask the manager, but it closed down years ago."

I just hang up the phone. Fuck you, man. Seriously, fuck you. Now that morning is spoiled, I tell my wife that we're leaving. I just want to make one quick stop, and then we need to get back on the road.

* * *

I turn down a side street, which leads to a cul-de-sac. I see the house, the second one on the left, which is a two-story split-level with an attached

garage. The yard is well maintained. Next to the rosebush and the birdbath, there's a medium-sized gnome with a red hat on. I like gnomes.

I park in front of the house and stare at it. My wife stares at it too. In the back seat, my son is playing with a teddy bear that I had won for him from a claw machine at the diner where we had breakfast this morning. (Pancakes, not very good.)

"Hon," my wife says, "is this where they kept you?"

"No," I say, while turning up the radio. "I just need a minute."

A song had caught my ear, and I need to listen to it before I decide what to do next. I turn the volume up a few more notches before I close my eyes and drown in the music. My heart aches because after the storm there are so many broken things that can't be put back together.

When the song's over, I hug my wife for a long time.

"Thank you for being here with me. I couldn't have done this without you."

Walking up to the door, I'm trying to think of something to say. If this were a story, I'd have a speech ready. I'd know exactly what I was going to say when the door opens. This isn't a story, and my mind is blank. I hesitate and wonder if this is a good idea, but that doesn't stop me from ringing the doorbell.

The woman who answers the door, I know, is in her mid-fifties, but even with gray-streaked dark hair, she looks much younger.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello." She smiles. "Can I help you?"

"I…" I don't know what to say, and try again, "I… was wondering if… I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," she says, no longer smiling. "You need to leave. I don't talk to reporters."

"But…" I try to say as she closes the door.

Back in the car now, I'm frustrated. Why did I come here? What did I hope to accomplish?

"Well, I screwed that up," I say.

“Who was that woman?” my wife asks.

“Mrs. Jennifer. I knew her daughter,” I say. “This is the house she lived in when they took her.”

“Oh, god, I’m sorry.”

“I called her ‘the little girl,’ but she wasn’t that little. She was tough, and strong, and brave.” I bow my head and think back. All the terrible things she had to do. “She did what she needed to survive,” I say. “She was twelve years old when she died.”

Tears well up in my wife’s eyes.

“I don’t know how people can be so cruel to each other. My god.”

I’m holding my wife’s hand as I pull away from the house.

“Her name was Rebecca Harn,” I say. “I think she would have looked a lot like you had she been the one who lived.”

* * *

When tragedy happens, some people will scream, “Why God, why! This can not be!” Others will try to reassure themselves by saying that it’s all part of a master plan. Everything happens for a reason. Nothing happens that God hadn’t wanted to happen. But what kind of god has a plan in which innocent children are to be used and thrown away like trash? While the faithful cry out for salvation, there are those who argue that a supreme being wouldn’t allow for something like a twelve-year-old girl being shot in the chest by another child, especially if that little girl was pregnant. God doesn’t exist. Or maybe God is dead, they claim.

Personally, I think they all have it wrong. I believe God is alive and well. I believe he is just a bored author writing stories, trying to come up with a perfect anthology. When it’s finished, it will be something that will make him experience every emotion simultaneously for all eternity. Our problem is that he doesn’t know we’re real beings; after all, aren’t we just his invention? Pleasures and pains are just plot devices to advance the story. Birth and death are simply ways to introduce or get rid of characters. War, famine, mass murders, even the Great Flood. That’s just God editing

out mistakes, cleaning up the plot holes, and dropping ideas which aren't working out as he hoped. Sure, when he's done, and everything is tied up in a nice little bow, it will look like he had it planned out that way the whole time. As for us, no matter what choices we make, there simply aren't any consequences that affect him. We can be erased at any time. This is how I choose to look at the world. This is why I don't ask for mercy. I know I'll only get it if it makes sense for the story…

* * *

Back in 1987, I'm given a birthday present to play with while the man is busy cutting off the hands and feet of the little girl, which has something to do, he says, with not being able to identify a body.

"Go ahead, give her a little kiss, sweetie," the woman says. Then she laughs hysterically, "Ahead, get it! A Head!"

I pick up the little girl's head out of my lap and go to give it a kiss on the cheek. I don't want to do it, and I feel like I'm going to throw up. To be honest, I don't think that playing with someone's head is a very fun game, but I pretend to have fun because I don't want mine to be chopped off next.

"Hey! Sally! A car's comin' up the road. See who it is."

The woman picks up one of the guns, which has now been fully loaded, and she tucks it in the waistband behind her back. She cracks the front door and peeks out. "It's Tommy!" she screams over the sound of the electric saw.

"Well, see what he wants," the man says, annoyed.

"Hey, Tommy!" she yells. "What's shakin' bacon?"

I hear the sound of footsteps on the patio outside the trailer. The woman doesn't open the door; she keeps it cracked just enough to put her head outside.

"You got problems," the voice says, the guy they called Tommy.

"We know. Saw the news."

"Well, it's worse than that."

"Yeah, how?"

“Sheriff deputy sniffing around. He said a trucker made a positive I.D. from a mugshot.”

“Well, shit. Hold on.” She turns around and shouts, “Hey! It was that stupid ass trucker.” She pops her head back out the door. “What did you tell him?”

I hear the man grumble something. While the woman is talking to Tommy, I think it’s safe to stop playing with the little girl’s head. I push it under the coffee table, hoping that the woman will forget she wanted me to kiss it, but instead of being hidden, it left a long blood trail from being slid across the floor, which I think would be hard to ignore if you’re looking for a missing body part.

“I told him that I haven’t seen anyone that matched the description. He wanted to look around, but I said the ridge and the whole mountain is private property of the Axis Foundation.”

“So he’s gone?”

“Yeah, for now. I think he’s going to get a warrant.”

“Thanks for the warning. Now go away.”

“Hey, I did my job. Now take your sick fuck of a husband and the both of you get out of here.”

“Love you too.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy said.

I hear the sound of the car tearing away. The woman closes the door and takes a seat on the couch.

“Fucking pigs,” she says to me. “Hey… where’s that head?”

* * *

Afternoon, July 2nd, 2012. We’re about two hundred miles from the last pee stop. I pull into a barbecue joint. I don’t know why, but I have a sudden craving. My meal consists of a pulled pork sandwich with coleslaw on top. For a side, I have hand-cut, peanut oil-cooked fries, topped with a generous amount of sea salt and more than a few splashes of vinegar. I washed it down with a Cheerwine (which happens to be the greatest

beverage ever invented). The food was great, but the server wasn't friendly at all. My guess is they don't really care for out-of-towners, which is understandable. In total, I'd give the whole experience an A-. If traveling back the same way, I might even stop here again.

After lunch, I check us in at a small motel. It's small, but the room is clean. I feel lucky when I see that they have HBO and a workout room a few doors down. I try to watch an episode of Game of Thrones (on demand), but it's only a few minutes in when I see a head on a spike. I don't need to see that right now. I turn it off.

My wife is sitting on the bed beside me, and she yells at me for changing the station, but only halfheartedly. I look over and see my son is already napping again in his playpen. Quietly, I kiss my wife and unbutton the back of her dress. I can feel the pressure building in my jeans as her hands slide into them. I want her more than anything. She moans softly as I thrust into her from behind.

The mountain isn't far now. There is just one more spot I need to revisit before making the final leg of the trip: The truck stop.

* * *

Late evening, July 2nd, 2012. I think I'm losing my mind. What I see is impossible. It can't be him. No, he's dead, dead, and rotting somewhere. But I swear I see him. I would swear it in a court of law. I try to rationalize the impossible. It has to be my nerves, I think. All of these memories flooding into my mind have brought with them the ghosts of the past. Really, there isn't any other logical explanation. But he's aged, his skin wrinkled and weathered. The face, once clean-shaven, is mostly covered by a thick beard, but underneath I see what could have been the scar of a botched Glasgow smile. The black hair, once short, is now long, greased back into a tight ponytail. As insanity bleeds through, time seems to slow down. I watch this man, his eyes scanning left to right, looking closely at each person who walks by. Then he spots me. Our eyes lock, and in that moment, I KNOW.

This happens during our visit to the truck stop. We pull up and park in front of the convenience store; well, to call it a convenience store is a joke. The sign outside advertises triple X film sales and what are known as ‘viewing booths’, which are small stalls with a T.V. playing porno videos. To put it bluntly, they are used by men to quickly jack off for a small fee, before going about their day. Though I’ve never been inside one, I’ve heard that most of the stalls have a hole in them that some men will stick their penis through in the hopes of receiving a blow job by whoever is in the next stall. If that’s what it does for you… Who am I to judge?

Instead of writing about the specifics of what happened here, I feel comfortable telling her what I remember as we sit in the car together. The truth is this story is Rebecca’s more than mine. Maybe that’s why it’s easier to talk about. The dead need to have someone to speak for them. So I’ll speak for her.

“They needed money, they said,” I tell my wife.

“The people who took you?”

“Yes.”

“Were they going to rob the store?”

“I’m sure they would have, but they didn’t need to. They had Rebecca.”

“But she was only twelve.”

“And I was only six.”

“I don’t want to hear about this…” she said, and then realized what that meant. “I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I wish this didn’t happen. Forgive me.”

I smile. “Always,” I tell her.

I look into the back seat.

“Hey buddy, you O.K.?”

“Yeah, Daddy?”

“Mommy and I are going to run into the store for a second. Is that alright?”

“We can’t leave him in the car,” my wife says.

“I won’t talk about this in front of him.”

I turn back around and smile at my boy.

“It will only be for a few minutes. You’re not going to cry?”

“Get me some cookies?”

“Of course!”

After grabbing Charlie a pack of Oreos, which he quickly tears into, my wife and I hold hands as we walk between and around big rigs, some attached to tractor-trailers and some without any cargo at all. All the while, we never lose sight of our car, and with the windows down, we can hear our son if he calls out for us. Countless trucks pull in and leave, tourists grab gas, and go. They never look around. They never really know what kind of place this is. As the sun begins to set, I feel the same sense of danger that I did back in 1987. This place hasn’t changed, I think; places like these never do. While we walk, I manage to find my voice.

“The man, the monster, he strutted us around the parked rigs, just like we’re walking now… And you got to know this is a common thing, soliciting to truckers… Anyway, when the truckers come in after a long haul for a rest, they’re looking to… unwind.” I pause and look at her to make sure she doesn’t have any questions. “Well, sometimes a man might see what he wants to see… So if a guy comes around claiming he’s got a sixteen-year-old who would like to spend some time, you know, keep them company for a while, and it’s only going to cost them a few dollars, well, they might not ask too many questions. Then there are the others… The monsters who don’t care, or they even prefer the company of… well, children.”

I sigh. “It’s not right. And a lot of them do end up in jail, but that’s how it is around a diseased hellhole like this. After dark, this isn’t a truck stop anymore; it’s a meat factory. Flesh being bought and sold.”

“So they sold her to these men.”

“Temporarily, yeah. By then they had her trained not to talk. It’s making me ill remembering how many trucks I watched her climb into that night.”

I'm not sure how to go on. We stop at a vending machine back at the front of the store where I grab a cold soda. I untwist the cap of the diet Pepsi and take several long swallows. After I finish drinking, I hand the bottle through the open window to Charlie, who has already finished all his cookies. Even after I do all this, it's still tough to continue talking.

"But…" I say, "If she hadn't been forced to do these things on this night, neither one of us would have ever gotten away from them."

We're just standing outside the car. It's getting darker, and people continue to come and go. I wonder how many of them have kids. Do they protect them? If everyone protected their family, if everyone spoke up or did the right thing…

"One of the truckers," I say, "he paid $15 to have Rebecca climb into his truck. He wasn't opposed to sixteen-year-olds, you see. Based on state law, even though prostitution is a crime, the age of consent is sixteen, but he wasn't blinded by his needs. Once inside, he grilled her until she told him her true age… and her name… Rebecca Harn. The trucker took a tire iron and climbed out of the cab, intent on killing the man… but the man was quicker. He deflected the blow with his arm and stabbed the trucker in the chest with a switchblade… Someone saw it all happen. He stabbed the trucker twice more before he grabbed us and ran. Sally, the woman, she already had the van running, so they were able to get away clean."

"The trucker didn't die?"

"He was able to tell the police the girl's name and described the scar before he…"

I happen to look up, and my heart stops. No. No. No. No. No.

"Hon?"

"…Died… Get in the car."

"What?" she says, confused.

"GET IN THE CAR!"

Seconds later I'm speeding down the highway. My wife is screaming for me to slow down. I'm switching lanes, and I'm passing cars at more than double the posted limit; meanwhile, I'm reaching into the center

console, and below the maps, pens, trash, and other unimportant things, I feel the handle of the Smith & Wesson revolver. It's the same model I had in my hands when Rebecca was killed.

I'm thinking, it can't be true… It's a brother, or a cousin, or just some stranger who resembles the man. That's all it is. HAS TO BE. He's dead. He's long fucking dead. We don't go back to the hotel. We don't stop at all until I'm sure he wasn't able to follow us.

"It's not him," I say, "can't be."

My son is crying, and my wife is screaming at me. I'm nodding, apologizing. I'm saying I'm sorry, that I made a mistake, it was stupid, I know, I know. The words coming out of my mouth are: I won't drive that fast again with them in the car ever again. I promise. Really. But what they don't know is that I was taught to be a master of tuning things out. For all the screaming they are doing, all the crying, and begging, all I hear is static.

And now I'm not sure of anything. Maybe I really did make a mistake? After all, I've gone through a lot. Most people would crack under this kind of pressure, right? At least that's what everyone keeps saying. I'm strong. I'm brave. I'm a survivor. But that was Rebecca…. Rebecca was all of those things. I'm weak. I'm a coward. I'm prey… I'm a guy who may have just lost his mind. What I saw can't be real. Even if… EVEN IF he were somehow still alive, which he can't be, there is no way he could ever have known where I would be at any given time. No way in hell. Only my wife, my son, and I knew. Except that's a lie. I've been updating my location for the past four days…

Please, God, if you're out there, help me.

* * *

12:12 AM, July 3rd, 2012. I'm taking the risk that what I saw wasn't real by saying this… We're heading to the mountain now. I'm going to find a safe spot for us to pull over and sleep once we get close. The revolver is loaded… and I am in a killing mood. I will protect my family.

Do you hear me? Am I making myself clear? I won't allow them to be harmed. Ever.

I know that I could have been mistaken. If I'm wrong, well, he'll know where to find us.

* * *

Dismembered bodies. Car crashes in slow motion. Funerals. Cold, dead hands. Burning wreckage. Drowning animals. Screaming. Screaming. Screaming. Featureless, melted faces. A rusted red van. A card for any occasion. Cold. Prison bars. Molestation. Bloody fingerprints. Screaming. Screaming. Screaming.

Screaming. Screaming. Screaming.

Chapter 3 – Arrival at Black Fog Mountain

Early morning, July 3rd, 2012. I wake up, covered in sweat, the gun still in my hand. The darkness has retreated far enough now where I can make out the branches of the trees that surround the car. It's time to get moving again. Just in case.

My wife and son are gone. Panic quickly grows to terror. Scared out of my mind, I whip back and forth, looking from the empty passenger seat to the car seat in the back, and then back to the empty passenger seat again, not believing they aren't there. How the fuck did he find us! I jump out of the car, spin in a circle, looking at the woods that surround me, trying to see some sign of which way he might have taken them.

I see movement, a shadow walking out from behind a tree. I want to scream, but I'm hyperventilating. My entire body is numb from the waist up. The shadow—no, it's shadows, more than one—draw closer. I drop to my knees and close my eyes. Just make it fast, I pray, please make it fast.

"What are you doing?" my wife asks.

My eyes snap open, and I see that it's my wife and son walking towards me. I jump up and run to them. I grab my son and kiss him on the cheek. I wrap my arms around my wife and squeeze her tight, but she doesn't return the hug.

"Charlie had to use the bathroom. We didn't want to wake you."

"I was so scared," I say. "Don't ever leave me like that again."

I try to take her hand, but she gently pulls it away. I know she's still angry from last night, so I give her some space. I take our son from her and walk him back to the car.

* * *

In the United States, a baby is born about every 7 seconds. That's 12,343 births per day. On a day like any other, out of those 12 thousand births, one of these babies is mine, and somehow I know I am blessed with the best one.

He is so small in my hands. I'm afraid to hold him. He isn't afraid of me, though, not one bit. He barely makes a sound when I reach for him for the first time. As I feed him, his eyes open and he looks around: observant, intelligent, wanting to learn about this world of possibilities. His eyes are wintergreen, just like his mother's. "We're going to call you Charlie," I say. I shake his little hand. "Nice to meet you, Charlie."

It is, by far, the greatest day of my life.

* * *

At breakfast, at some diner, in the town right below the mountains, I sit and stare out the window. I don't eat. I'm not hungry. I know which peak it is, and even though I know the clearing with the mobile home is on the other side, I imagine seeing it as the morning fog breaks momentarily. The mountains seem serene. There is a surreal quality to them, as if they exist only in a dream.

My wife sits across from me. She hasn't said a word to me since we left the woods at dawn. I sigh. She doesn't notice, or doesn't care.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You can't keep giving me the silent treatment."

Nothing.

"Please talk to me," I beg.

When she looks up, I can see how upset she really is, and my heart breaks. My wife has this innocence to her. When she looks at me, I wish I could shelter her from every drop of pain that she has experienced. I want to take it all on myself; any fears and unhappiness, I would gladly hold for her, just to see her smile again.

"You promised me you would never drive like that with us in the car," she says. I hear her trying to restrain the anger.

"I'm sorry!" I don't know what else to say.

The waitress comes over and asks me if I'm ready to order something yet.

"Go Away!" I yell. The waitress jumps a bit, startled by the outburst. I watch her slink back behind the counter as my wife raises her voice.

“Don’t take it out on her!” my wife screams. “It’s not her fault you’re an… an…” she says. “Charlie! Close your ears, honey…” He does. “… asshole. You’re an ASSHOLE!”

“I know,” I whisper.

“This is why I do the driving! You can’t control yourself. Always speeding. Do you have no regard for anyone?”

I put my head in my hands as I take the verbal beating that I rightfully deserve.

“What was that last night?! One minute, you’re fine, and then the next minute you’re pushing me into a car and driving like a maniac? And the gun? When did you get a…” she asks, lowering her voice. She checks to see if Charlie still has his ears covered. “…a fucking gun?”

She stops yelling, and I realize she’s waiting for me to answer her.

“I thought I saw someone… The man…” I say. “I thought I saw him.”

“Look,” she says, her voice back to a normal tone. “I know how difficult this has been for you. You’re always thinking about it. Always writing about it. All of this was my idea. We’re here for you, though. Please don’t push us away and don’t put us in any more danger than we have to be in. Okay?”

“I love you,” I say as I hold out my hand.

She takes it. “I love you too. But from now on, let me drive.”

* * *

Back in 1987, I’m in the backyard of the mobile home. The woman is holding my hand, and she is walking me towards a small metal shed. The man is carrying a large trash bag over his shoulder. Inside, I know, is the little girl. Not all of her, just the arms, legs, and her body. I don’t know what the man has done with her hands, feet, and head.

“Waste of damn time that was,” he says to the woman. “Chopping them up ain’t easy, ya know.”

“Well, you heard Tommy, that deputy is coming back, sure as shit. No time to straighten out the little prince proper.”

“Still. I’m all wore out,” the man complains, while wiping away the sweat on his forehead with a bloody hand.

He unlocks the door to the shed. The woman shoves me in. There is a rocking chair covered with a sheet of plastic. I see a Radio Flyer wagon; it’s red, and it’s missing a wheel. Rusted tools hang from small hooks on the ceiling. Old glass soda bottles sit on the shelves attached to the wall. Dust covers everything. To my surprise, the shed smells like flowers. Roses, like the kind my mom grows in our backyard.

“Hey kid,” the man says. “Did you know if you play Stairway to Heaven backwards, there’s a hidden message?”

I shrug. I don’t know anything about a backwards stairway.

The man sings, “He’ll give you, give you 666. There was a little tool shed, where he made us suffer, sad Satan.”

The woman kneels down and picks up an old, beat-up rug. Underneath is a steel plate. She grabs a pry bar from a shelf and wedges the small end in under the plate. When she pulls back, struggling with the weight of the thing, the corner pops up, just far enough for the man to get a good enough grip so that he is able to lift it the rest of the way up.

Underneath where the plate was is a pitch-black hole. The smell of roses suddenly gets stronger. The man rips open the black bag and dumps the body parts of the girl into the hole, then he throws the bag in after.

“Alright, Sally. You won the bet, so you get to deal with him,” he says. “How’s it going to be, quick and clean, or slow and messy?”

“I swear, you are dense sometimes. I don’t have time for a shower. We got to get a move on. Give me the needle.”

“Here.” He hands her the pouch with the needle in it. “There’s enough smack in that vial to kill a buffalo. Meet me in the van when you’re done. I’m going to finish packing up.”

He ruffles my hair as he walks out of the shed. “Goodbye, kid!”

Once he’s gone, the woman takes the needle and fills it all the way up with the liquid in the vial. She sticks me in the arm with the needle, but she doesn’t press down on the plunger thing on the end.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “There are friends down there to keep you company.”

I feel the hot liquid enter my arm. Everything turns black. I feel a sense of weightlessness, and I know that the woman has kicked me into the black hole. The one that smells like roses and is filled with bodies. The last thing I hear is the metallic thud of the plate being dropped back into place.

Edit 4:17 PM. Written at the Ranger Station.

* * *

A psychopath is a person who uses a combination of charm, intimidation, and sometimes violence to manipulate or control other people. Personality traits of a psychopath include, but are not limited to, glibness, superficial charm, pathological lying, and delusions of grandeur. They have no remorse, can’t empathize with others, nor do they accept responsibility for their actions. Yet they are able to fake all of these things easily. Typically, psychopaths are highly intelligent, but they are also dangerously impulsive and antisocial. The most well-known criminals are psychopaths. They can’t be rehabilitated. They will never change. Though many serial killers, rapists, and torturers were psychopaths, this may come as a surprise to some, but being a Psychopath doesn’t necessarily make someone evil. Some are fully functioning individuals who know they have a condition, but instead of always using their condition for their own greedy purposes, they follow a code and fake normalcy to allow them to fit in with modern society. If you suspect someone of being a psychopath, the best practice is to sever all ties with that person, even if they are functioning, or if they claim to be, ahem, reformed, or… getting treatment. By failing to do so, you risk being caught up in a web of chaos and destruction.

As much as I hate the people who ruined my life, I have to admit that there is a certain admirable charm to it. Imagine if you could possess those traits that make them not care, be driven, and get what they want without worrying about how they got it. The only negative side, or flaw, that I can

see with being a Psychopath is the inability for them to “turn it off” when it isn’t needed. Oh, the good that could be done, the wrongs that could be made right.

What if someone could turn something like that on and off?

What would they be then?

* * *

My wife follows the twists and turns of the pothole-ridden road up Black Fog Mountain until we spot the turnoff for the ranger’s station. She makes the left, and straight ahead we see the Ranger’s Station. It’s a small log cabin on a gravel lot. All of the parking spaces are empty, except for one. She pulls our car in next to the parked SUV, a GMC Terrain. There is a decal on the back window of a symbol I’ve never seen before. Underneath the symbol, in stylized letters: ~*A. F.*~

To the right of the Ranger’s station, next to the door, is a large green sign with white lettering. It reads:

NO TRESPASSING
BLACK FOG MOUNTAIN
HUNTING AND FISHING RETREAT
PRIVATELY OWNED & OPERATED
AXIS FOUNDATION -DESTINY NV
NO TRESPASSING

My cell rings. It’s Roger calling.

“You going to take that?” my wife asks.

“Yeah. Keep an eye out. I’ll only be a sec.”

I accept the call and place the phone up to my ear.

“Hey, what’s going on, Roger?” Not even pretending to be sick anymore. Besides, I was only half pretending before.

“Oh man, are you alright? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Um, what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Listen, the cops came by here looking for you. I didn’t believe it, so I had to go see for myself—”

“Roger? Calm down. Roger—”

“—You didn’t tell me. Man… Why not? Why didn’t…—”

“Roger!” I yell. I glance at my wife. She’s got a confused expression on her face. Is she confused? I wonder. Hell, I’m hearing the other side of the conversation, and I’m confused. “Now slow down and tell me what happened, from the beginning.”

“About the house?”

“Whose house? My house?”

“Yeah, they say they are investigating.”

“Investigating what?”

“The cop said they don’t know if it’s arson or not. And they wanted your number, but I didn’t give it out, you know, company policy and all, but you should call them A.S.A.P.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“Are you telling me that my house has burned down? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Yes, I’m telling you that your house has burned down… Well, not completely, but pretty damn much, yeah. Are you saying you didn’t know?”

“Out of town,” I say. My voice flat, dead, as if this is just some unfunny comedy deadpan. “Sorry, I had to lie. This isn’t some joke?”

“Jesus. I’m sorry. No joke, I swear. I didn’t mean to be the one to break it to you. If it happened while you were gone, I’m surprised the insurance company didn’t contact you.”

My son starts whining in the back. He wants his toys, he says; he doesn’t want them to be burned in the fire. My wife reaches back and wipes a tear away, and I hear her telling him that it’s all right; they’ll get him new toys, better toys.

“Shit,” I say. “All that stuff is set up under my wife’s phone number.” I make a motion to her, asking her to check her phone. We should have gotten a call. She shrugs and mouths the words: Left it at home. I sigh.

“Oh,” he says. “Well, call them. And the police too.”

“I can’t deal with this right now. The house is covered. It’s only stuff, right?”

“True.”

“Thanks, Rog. I got to go. Kind of in the middle of something important.”

I hear him asking if that means I’m not going to be in at work on Friday as I hang up.

“No way,” my wife says. “That couldn’t have happened.”

“Maybe I accidentally left the stove on or something. We’ll just have to deal with that later.”

“I know you think you saw someone. I hope you aren’t thinking it was that man?” she asks, sternly.

“No, dear. Even if I did see him, which as sure as I was, I still doubt… there’s no way he could have gotten to our house in that short of time.”

“Just checking.”

God, can this day get any worse? I wonder, as I get out of the car and walk towards the Ranger’s station.

* * *

I keep my right hand in the pocket of the Columbia windbreaker. It’s hot as hell outside today, and I’m sweating like crazy, but I’ve never done this before, and I don’t know how else to conceal a gun. My wife and son are in the car. I told her to honk the horn if anyone else drives up the mountain road or if she sees anyone walk out of the woods. I’m worried for them, but it’s safer in the car. There’s no way of knowing what I’m about to walk into.

A hanging bell chimes as I open the door. Gripping the gun tighter, I duck my head through the door, low, just in case someone was to shoot. No shot. That’s a start. I look in and see that nobody is standing at the counter. I cautiously walk inside and let the door swing closed behind me, the bell chiming once again. The station isn’t dilapidated, but it’s not in the best of shape; the wood paneling is rotting near the bottom as if it had flooded

before, perhaps during a rough storm. The walls are decorated with dead animals: birds of all kinds, foxes, a wolf, and in the center of the room a grizzly bear, 12 feet tall. They look alive, ready to attack. Though I haven't seen many taxidermied animals, and these are scary, no doubt, I think, nope, not Chuck Testa. Immediately after thinking it, I'm not sure if I've just got a great sense of humor or if I'm utterly insane. Is there even a difference?

"Hello?" I call out.

No response.

I call again, "Hello?" but this time louder.

"One Sec!" someone calls from a back room, which nearly makes me crap my pants.

I walk up to the counter and pretend to look at the maps of the mountain which are under a pane of glass. Really, I'm watching that room with the corner of my eye, ready to either duck, run, or shoot, depending on who comes out of that room, which doesn't really help me since I failed to consider a fourth possibility: Stand still and act cool. So when I saw a small, friendly-looking, chubby old man in a wheelchair struggle over the small bump in the doorway between rooms, I probably looked like I was having a seizure.

"Hello," I say.

"You lost, son?"

"No, actually I was looking for a place on the mountain."

"Not here, you're not," he says, correcting me. "You must be on the wrong peak; this ridge and the whole mountain are private property of the Axis Foundation."

Suddenly I feel like I just got kicked in the guts. I'm sure my face has gone pale because I've heard that line before, a long time ago, and that southern voice is unmistakable. Though I've never met him or have seen him before, I know this man. His name is Thomas Allen Pascal. Tommy. He looks harmless, but make no mistake: behind the wrinkled, balding forehead, thin white hair, thick glasses, and friendly tone, lives a monster.

Tommy's eyes squint, and for the briefest of seconds the smile flickers.

"You should be going," he says.

"Yeah. I think you're right. This is the wrong mountain."

He reaches out his hand, and on pure stupid habit, I grip it and give him a firm handshake. He doesn't let go. The smile vanishes, and he says, "Who the fuck are you?"

I'm trying to pull away, but he's strong, stronger than a man of his age has any business being. He twists my wrist in a way that makes my fingers stretch apart. His eyes widen as he gets a good look at the scars on my fingertips. Without warning, he lets go. I fall backwards; my shoulder knocks into one of the taxidermied wolves, knocking it over.

Tommy's rolling his chair behind the counter. He's reaching for something. I'm struggling to get my hand into my jacket. He rolls his chair back with one hand, which pivots it towards my direction. In his other hand, he's holding a sawed-off pistol-grip shotgun. As he's turning, I manage to get the gun free, but he's so damn fast. He fires, but I roll to the left, the shot missing my head by inches. I have my finger on the trigger, but I'm now lying awkwardly on my back. He's trying to pivot again by using his free hand, his finger trained and ready to fire the second barrel of the shotgun, but for me some dark hidden talent clicks on; things seem to slow down, I see his eyes and know which angle he's trying to get at so he has a clear shot at my head, and as he's making the turn and the barrel centers on me again, I push myself off the wall with my feet and slide into his chair, knocking it over on its side. Tommy's rolling out of the chair, raising the gun again, but this time I'm faster; I have the gun pointed right at his temple.

"Drop it," I say. And he does. "Push it away," I say. And he does.

I stand there, trying to think, trying to catch my breath, all the while I'm still holding the revolver to Tommy's head. Tommy does the smart thing and doesn't say a fucking word. But standing here isn't helping; I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do in this situation.

Outside, I hear my wife calling out. "I'm Fine!" I scream. "Stay there!"

I consider calling the cops, but he would just say I was trespassing and use that as an excuse for trying to kill me. This is what they call ‘a real pickle,’ I think.

“Okay…” I say. “I’ve got a few questions.”

“Fuck you.”

Though this is the first time I’ve ever done it, and I’m kind of embarrassed to admit it, pistol-whipping someone causes a pleasurable chill to run down my spine. I’m not really sure if I’ve done it right, so I say again, “I’ve got a few questions,” and instead of a ‘Fuck you,’ I get a “Fine. What?” I feel much better about this newly budding skill.

“There was an old mobile home on the mountain. Is it still there?”

“There are a lot of mobile homes on the mountain.”

True, I shrug. Then I pistol-whip him again, this time feeling much, much better about my technique.

“You know the one I’m talking about…” And to be sure, I give a little hint, “The one with the shed full of dead bodies.”

“Oh,” he says, with his bleeding mouth, “that one. Yeah. It’s still there.”

“Have you seen anyone else on this mountain the past few days, specifically, a guy with a scar on the left side of his face? You know who I mean.”

His eyes narrow. “Are you mad?”

I raise the gun.

“No, damn it, no,” he says, flinching, “not in years. I thought he was dead.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Does the place have power?”

“Yeah, it’s got a breaker still.”

“And no one is up there.”

“No, it’s been empty all season,” he growls.

“Good. You are coming with me. I want you to show me. Can you walk?”

He raises his hands in an ‘Are you fucking kidding me’ look.

“Crawl then.” And I use the gun to motion to the door.

I wish I could spare my wife and child the sight of me marshaling out a crawling, crippled old man, but it can’t be helped. I need time to think and figure out what I’m going to do with this monster.

Lucky for us, we have a big trunk.

* * *

10:50 PM, July 3rd, 2012. We’ve been at the trailer for a few hours. The place has been totally redone on the outside and inside. The shed has long since been demolished, and the hole, my grave site, has been filled in. There seems to be no trace left of the abuse and murders that happened on Black Fog Mountain. For that, I’m thankful. In one of the drawers in the kitchen, I found some duct tape, and I used it to secure Tommy to the chair. We’re as safe as we possibly can be for the time being. In the morning I plan to question Tommy further. I feel like he can provide some of the missing pieces to my history. I can’t be sure. I’ll probably beat him too; for fun. Well, not for the sake of fun. This bastard deserves it. This bastard is the one who got Rebecca pregnant. This bastard is the one who, until now, has gotten away with it. Maybe after I get all the answers I can from him, someone out there will know what I should do with him. I’ve never killed anyone… on purpose… but right now, I can’t discard it from the list of possibilities.

* * *

Before posting this update, I checked back in with my friends over at the forum and discovered that The Man From 1987 has made some more disturbing posts. I want to offer my deepest apologies to Sarah Anne. To all, please, please, please, DO NOT engage in conversation with this man. It’s true that he’s probably some imposter, but I swear to you, I’ve been around monsters, and this person… whoever they are, IS dangerous. Do

not let the fact that he is just an anonymous poster on the internet make you feel safe. To THE MAN FROM 1987, leave them alone.

The horrible thing is that by mentioning him and asking him to leave you alone, I've played right into his hands… fuck.

But I don't care… Focus on me.

I can handle it.

I'm done for today. Sadly, I doubt I'll be able to sleep. That's fine, though, because tomorrow is the 4th of July and it's sure to be an exciting one.

Good night.

* * *

What do you do if you see an impossible thing? One person can refuse to accept that what they are seeing is real. They will seek a logical explanation that will discredit their eyes. Skepticism is a valuable trait. We need people like this. Another person can refuse to accept that what they are seeing is not real. They are known to seek out any evidence that contradicts what they feel is true and find clever ways to discredit it so that their belief becomes possible. Faith is a valuable trait. We need people like this as well. There are militant factions on each side fighting a never-ending war to shape reality, each trying to destroy the view of the other side. How lucky we are to have this happen. If all people were allowed to disagree on something being real or not, and have them all still be right, to hell with arguing about it, well, our world would be a place of complete and utter mayhem. Those people would be insane. But… insanity is a valuable trait…

* * *

I find baked beans in the pantry. Not much of a dinner, I know, but I've convinced Charlie that we're camping.

"Daddy?" he says. "Why did you put that man in the chair?" he asks while I'm sitting in the small kitchen, trying to open a can of beans with a

steak knife since there's no sign of a can opener.

"Tommy and I are just playing a game. It's alright."

"Oh."

I finally manage to get a big enough hole in the can. I dump them into the pan and turn the gas stove on.

"Daddy?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"I got a joke for you."

"Okay. Go ahead, buddy."

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?" I ask, smiling.

"Tommy."

"Tommy who?" I ask, no longer smiling.

"TOMMY GUN, YOU BETTER RUN!" he says as he cracks up laughing.

"Cute. Where'd you hear that?"

"I donno."

After dinner, I ask my wife to leave again. I tell her to go back home and deal with the house. She won't ever consider it. She says I need her. I can't argue. I do need her, but still I try to get her to go. She won't do it. But we're almost done here. Soon this will all be over, and I can put the pieces of my life back together.

* * *

July 4th, 2012. A few hours pass by. I've been keeping watch to make sure nobody is sneaking around the trailer. Satisfied that we're not going to be bothered, I relax a bit. I'm trying to make sense of everything, but it's no use. I check to make sure both Charlie and my wife are sound asleep in the bedroom. After I'm satisfied that the room they are in is still secure, I go back into the living room and keep an eye on Tommy.

"I'll take the tape off if you're willing to talk to me."

He nods. So I pull the tape off his mouth.

“You should let me go,” he says, matter-of-factly.

“You tried to kill me.”

“Misunderstanding is all.”

“I don’t think you can call trying to blow someone’s face off a misunderstanding.”

“That was self-defense. I knew something was wrong the second I saw you.”

“How so?”

“You looked like one of those crazy meth addicts that come ’round time ta’time. Plus you had your hand on that gun in your pocket. I saw that too.”

Okay, I think, I’ll have to work on how to properly hide a gun; rookie mistake. I study his face as he speaks. He looks so innocent and friendly. His voice sounds sincere, like a grandfather telling a story from his past. I can feel myself wanting to believe him. But I know that lying comes easy to monsters, and as he’s talking, I think, wow, that’s another skill that would be great to have.

“It was the scars,” he says, nodding. “That’d be what made me act so rash. I was certain you were coming to kill me.”

“I still might.”

He stares at me… through me…

“No,” he says. “I don’t reckon you will. You got it in you, no doubt, but something holds you back.”

He’s right. I know it, and he knows it.

“You’re wrong,” I say.

“Na… Don’t think I am. They didn’t have you long enough to turn ya bad. Just some deep bruisin’. So let me go.”

“I came for answers.”

“I don’t have any for you.”

“I want to know why they did it. I want to… understand… people like you.”

“You don’t know me. I was nothing like them two.”

“No!” I scream. “Don’t bother lying. The police can’t touch you. You seem certain that I’m not going to kill you. Lying to me gets you nothing.”

“I’m not lying. I hated them two.” There is venom in the way he says it. “They took pleasure in causing pain.”

“So do you. You raped her!” I scream. “You sick motherfucker!” I’m vaguely aware of beating my fists into my head as I’m yelling at him, inches from his face, “It was your baby they found in her body! You should be rotting in a pit somewhere for what you did to her!”

“I took no pleasure in harmin’ that little girl.”

“Then why! Tell me! I! … Need! … To! … Know! …”

His head tilts to the side and his eyes narrow. A thin smile slowly appears. When he speaks, his voice is different. This is the monster that lives inside Thomas Allen Pascal.

“I did it because I was hungry. You don’t know how good they taste.”

The way he spoke sent shivers down my spine. Hunnnnnggggrrry.

“I would go after the ones who were already pregnant. If I couldn’t find one, I would take what I could find and get them pregnant.”

No, I think. Oh god…

“Five or six months… that’s the sweet spot,” he says. He’s licking his lips, and a thin string of drool hangs from his chin. “That’s when you want to use the coat hanger.”

I’m not doing it. I’m not in control of myself. I’m watching from above as someone else does it. I see my hands, balled into fists, beating Tommy in the face over and over. Odd, so very odd… I wish I had my family right now. I want to hold them and kiss them and tell them how much they mean to me. But Tommy is still laughing, and my hands are still beating him.

“Raw,” he says, while spitting blood. “Raw. They taste the best when you eat’em raw.”

* * *

Inadmissible. Not allowable; not accepted as valid. That which, according to established legal principles, cannot be received into evidence

at a trial for consideration by the jury or judge in reaching a determination of the action. The Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which is part of the Bill of Rights, guards against unreasonable searches and seizures, along with requiring any warrant to be judicially sanctioned and supported by probable cause. Therefore, in a case where a Sheriff's deputy decides to go sneaking on private property because he has a hunch that a suspect might be there, instead of getting a warrant to properly search the premises, and even if that search saves the life of a little boy and uncovers Polaroid photographs of a Thomas Allen Pascal that prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is a monster, that evidence becomes inadmissible.

* * *

In the morning, Tommy, though beaten, is still breathing. My wife had pulled me away from him. I would say he is lucky, but I don't think his own life or death means much to him since he's too old to be an effective monster.

After a hearty breakfast of leftover baked beans (surprisingly better the second day), I show my wife around the lot. Most of the old cars are gone, though the school bus is still there with a large oak growing through it. As we walk around, I don't tell her much, but after a few minutes of thinking, I point out where the shed used to be.

We walk over to the area, and I notice that while grass, plants, and trees have reclaimed the surrounding area, the place where the actual pit was is barren. Nothing grows there. The area seems to actually repel life. Curious, I kneel down to get a better look. The ground appears to be a shade of crimson, as if stained from the blood of the half a dozen people who were found here, though it's probably just a trick of the light, I think. I reach down and take some of the sand, and as I let it slip through my fingers, I am reminded of something that T.S. wrote… "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

"So you were down there?" my wife asks.

“Yes. I should have died,” I say.

“How did you get out?”

“There wasn’t much evidence that the man or Rebecca were on the mountain, so the deputy thought that a judge wouldn’t sign a search warrant.”

“No probable cause?” my wife asks.

“Right,” I say. “The sheriff told him not to do anything, to get the warrant like they were supposed to… but since someone leaked the story to the media, and his belief was so strong she was up here, he broke the law instead.”

She waits for me to go on.

“And he saved you,” she adds.

“No.”

“What do you mean no? You just said…”

“I said he broke the law to come up here. He could have saved both Rebecca and I, and stopped them… If he would have just acted right away instead of taking his time deciding what to do…”

“That’s not fair. You would have died if he waited.”

“No. What bothers me is that she didn’t give me the full injection. It was only enough to knock me out. I can’t figure out why she did that. For all the deputy’s good intentions, all he did was prevent the evidence from being used to convict Tommy.”

“He was trying to do the right thing.”

“I know that.”

“Are you saying that the other two got away?” she asks.

I laugh, “The bad guys can’t always win. If they did, everyone would be a bad guy. When I woke up… I was able to tell them which direction they were going…”

* * *

There was a roadblock, somewhere west. I don’t know where exactly. I don’t know how many states away they had made it, or how many other

people were hurt in their path, but there wasn't anywhere left for them to go. The FBI had gotten involved once they had learned that this was an interstate affair. Helicopters circled the area. Dog crews narrowed the perimeter. While a young boy who somehow survived a terrible ordeal lay in a hospital bed, an ATF sniper made his shot. A man, only caring about how many pigs he was going to take with him to hell, speeds towards the roadblock, firing a revolver. He hits two, non-fatally, when a sniper's bullet punches through the windshield and tears through his head. When the police pull the body from the wreckage, they remark that there isn't much left of his face, though the body does have an interesting scar on the left side of his mouth. No one else was in the van.

Hundreds of miles away, in New York, a woman walks into a police station. She claims that she was held captive, tortured, and forced to hurt people by a man with a scar on his face. She claims to have information that will lead to the capture of a pair of co-conspirators.

* * *

Early evening, July 4th, 2012. I'm standing in a bedroom of the trailer, one that I forbid my wife or son to walk into. I'm thinking about how the man came in here exactly twenty-five years ago. The things he made me do. I don't like this place. It's tainted by evil. Something needs to be done.

I leave my wife and son outside the trailer for a few minutes while I take Tommy on a drive some distance away from the trailer and the ranger station. Not far enough so he can't crawl back to either of them, just far enough so I won't have to worry about him trying anything.

Once I manage to get him out of the trunk, I can't resist a few final words. "I hope that you die," I say to him as I cut the duct tape. "But it won't be by my hands. I'm not a monster."

Back at the trailer, I collect my family. After a bit of last-minute clean-up, we are ready to finally get out of here.

I'm still the same man I was when I arrived at Black Fog Mountain, I think, as my wife turns back onto the interstate. In the distance behind us, I

can see pillars of thick black smoke rising high into the clear summer sky. Someone must have had an accident with fireworks…

"Where to now, babe?" my wife asks.

"Well… I think it's time to have a chat with Sally."

* * *

For those who wanted to know of my childhood experiences, this would be a good ending. Thank you for your help in reliving them. You have seen the last day of my sixth year, met my family, know the fate of the man who took me, come with me on my road trip, and you've seen that monsters are real. After this point, I can only give you a glimpse into other parts of my life and the troubles that I still face.

The sign says Do Not Enter.

What do you do?

Chapter 4 – Happy Endings Never Happen

12:01 AM, July 5th, 2012. Hotel. (Honestly, at this point, does it matter?) It's officially my birthday again. Not that it means anything. To me, it's just another reminder of all that happened. Who could celebrate a day in which you were forced to kill a little girl and then you were buried alive in a pit full of rotted corpses? I know it's wrong, but I get angry at anyone who dares to even wish me a 'happy birthday'. On my birthday, I don't want to see anyone or talk to anyone who might even hint at being happy that it is my birthday. In fact, on past birthdays, I would usually end up binge drinking at a bar somewhere. Never anywhere close to home, you understand, but places far enough away so that if I were to break down and spill my guts in public, or get into a bar fight, or commit some petty crime and be thrown in jail for the night, no one would know me.

My wife changed all that. Over the years, she had me in and out of Alcoholics Anonymous. I don't think I'm an alcoholic; I just started to go to make her happy. At first I hated being there, but over time I changed my opinion. Now I actually enjoy going to them occasionally. My longest stretch was 19 months sober. That was back when my son was born. I tried. I really did. But of course the months go by (as they do) and suddenly it's July again, and I disappear 'on a business trip' for a week. I can't remember everything that happened. I didn't wind up in prison, at least. When I got home, I broke down and cried. She took me to a meeting the next day. Like always, though, I never tell my story; I just nod as others do and tell them that it's okay. We're there for them. Stay strong.

I pull out my blue six months sober token. I flip it in the air, and it lands on heads. I read the inscription: 'To Thine Own Self Be True.' I bow my head and repeat the serenity prayer, or my version of it. "Lord," I say, "grant me the serenity to not accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to not care about the difference." Actually, I should modify it more; I don't want the serenity, I just want the fiction that I've spun myself to be true.

Since I drank myself into a stupor the other day, I have no right to carry this token anymore. I drop it in the trash. “One day at a time,” I say. It’s late. I’m tired… As I’m falling asleep, I remember that I haven’t had a drink all week, so maybe on Friday I can go to a meeting and collect a new one-week-sober keychain.

* * *

Back in 1987, I woke up in hell. It isn’t fire and brimstone. You don’t see any tortured souls being ripped apart by red-skinned demons with yellow eyes and black claws. You don’t hear the shrieking cries for mercy of every sinner disemboweled by Satan Himself. In hell you can’t see or hear anything at all; all you do is feel.

The things I feel in hell are bugs, a mass of maggots, constantly pulsating, covering everything. And bodies, how the skin gives way and breaks apart when you try to move. And the solid bones popping through dead flesh, covered in sticky, slippery foulness that was once blood and organs, wrap around you, creating a prison within the prison of hell.

Time doesn’t exist in hell. It never changes. In hell, the barriers blur until you become one with hell; you become silent… still… serene.

When the light shines in and time returns, when someone grabs you, when they tell you it’s going to be okay, you kick and scream and punch and bite. The worst thing about hell, the absolute worst thing, is that you never want to leave.

* * *

I imagine what it would be like to be truly evil, but good and evil don’t exist. All that matters is taking what you want. I want everything. I want it all to bleed. “I’m coming for you,” I say, while staring into a mirror. There isn’t a soul behind these eyes. Souls don’t exist. I say, “I’m going to kill you. I’m going to fucking kill you, kid.” The kid doesn’t matter. The kid is just meat. I pick up a razor blade and hack a jagged slice through the side of his face. “Much better,” I say, “much better, now.” The blood pours

from the kid's stupid face. "I'm doing this, kid," I say. "I'm doing this to you inside." The kid fights back. He resists my presence. That's good. I like when they fight. It's more fun that way. I bring the razor up to his eyeball and start to slice into it. "You can't keep me locked in here forever!"

* * *

I wake up screaming.

My obsession with understanding evil is taking a serious toll. But what can I do? Ideas are like parasites. They feed and grow from your experiences and memories. Since I've taken this trip to rediscover my past, I'm no longer blocking out the impulse to know evil. And I do know evil. I've studied the man. I can be the man. With a… need… like mine, side effects, such as vivid nightmares or seeing something that others might say can't be real, things like that are bound to happen.

But what if it's more than that? Is it possible? I think of THE MAN FROM 1987. What if I am doing all that? What if I was the one who is writing all those horrible things? The thought makes me shudder.

The morning begins with an early lunch at a nice pizza parlor. While I absolutely love the rustic flavor brought about by the traditional brick oven, the décor of the place is ghastly. The red and white checkered tablecloths and the green, white, and red wall tiles are a tired cliché. But as I said, the pizza is spectacular, and in my book, food always has the edge over bad decoration or service: 3 stars.

Since we're in the city and it's been a hell of a long week, I decide to treat myself to a barber's shave and a haircut (2 bits?), actually something like $42.50, damn inflation.

"You look great, daddy," my son says. "Can I get one too?"

Another time, maybe, I tell him. There's a meeting coming up, and I can't be late. Next I make my way to Nordstrom. I get a very flamboyant salesman to help me pick out a suit. He suggests the Armani Collezioni Two Button Windowpane Plaid.

“Sharp,” my wife says.

“I feel like a new man.”

* * *

She is wearing all black, but she outshines anyone else in the room. Her smile is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Her eyes are a unique wintergreen color, the beauty of which rivals those of the famous girl from Afghanistan. Though I was supposed to be grieving over the loss of my mother—who, out of grief, swallowed a bottle of Tramadol—all I can do is stare at this gorgeous woman, wishing I had the strength to talk to her.

She catches me staring. She excuses herself from the conversation that she is having and makes her way over to where I’m standing. I pretend to be busy adjusting a flower display, hoping that she will see how important it is and decide not to bother me. I feel a light tap on my shoulder. “Excuse me,” she says. I’m filled with dread as I slowly turn towards her. She touches my hand and says, “I am truly sorry for your loss.” All anxiety instantly melts away. I have heard those 7 words hundreds of times today, and out of everyone, she is the only one to mean it.

This is how I met my wife. This is why I will always cherish her.

* * *

Back in 1987, I woke up in a hospital bed. I notice the stitches in each of my fingers. It reminds me of a stuffed animal. It itches, and I want to rip them out. My hands aren’t the only thing stitched. It also itches… back there… too.

A nurse says that I’m extremely dehydrated but stable. I don’t know either of those words. I shake my head. No. The Doctor says I am still in shock. I shake my head. No. A policeman with a bite mark on his arm asks me if I can talk to him about what happened. I shake my head. No. The lady with the glasses and the clipboard says a lot of words I don’t understand. I shake my head. No. The man who brings me dessert asks how I’m doing today. I shake my head. No. Mom and Dad visit. They had

a little boy who missed them. I don't know where that little boy went, so when they ask questions, or try to touch me… No.

Someone normal-looking visits one day. He shows a badge with three numbers on it. At first I was going to dismiss him like all the others, but the way he looks at me is different than everyone else. Unlike the others, he shows no signs of sympathy or pity. "I know what they did to you," he says. There's no emotion in his voice. "I want to stop them," he continues. The way he's talking, it's as if I'm not some six … I mean a seven-year-old kid. "If you want that, tell me if you heard any mention of where they might be going."

"He wants to go to Destiny Nevada," I say.

He says something into a radio. Then he nods at me and leaves.

I never see him again.

Days pass. I'm moved to a ward in which I'm allowed to get out of bed. I don't, though; mostly I just sit and stare at the Over the Top movie poster that someone had tacked to the wall in my room.

One day, a lady, she says is a social worker, whatever that is, comes to see me. She tells me that my parents will not be coming back.

"Why?" I ask.

"I can't say. It's being investigated."

* * *

I'm waiting in the lobby of the Spring Grove Mental Institution. A nice receptionist named Michelle takes me to the meeting area. I sit there wondering what I'm going to say to Sally.

A buzzer sounds, and a heavy metal door with a wired mesh window swings open. My jaw clenches, and a surge of hate electrifies inside me when I see Sally walk through the door. Instinctively, I reach for my gun, intending to shoot her in the face. Sadly, it's not there. It seems I left it in the car.

* * *

Back in 1987, I'm taken to the foster home run by 'Old Mrs. Rose'. She smells like Vicks VapoRub, and she seems like a nice lady whenever anyone is around, but she likes to pick on me whenever we are alone…

She makes me lie down in her bed sometimes. She watches me until I fall asleep. Then I feel the pillow pressing down on my face. I try not to struggle because I know she'll take it off before I stop breathing. I still don't like it, though.

She tells me that my father is a monster. She says he knew the man who took me.

"That poor, poor woman… the things she went through." She says this while reading about the court case in the paper or watching it on T.V. "You're lucky she escaped. If not, they would have sent you home with that father of yours, and I wouldn't be getting the foster checks."

"He wouldn't do that," I argue.

"He would, and he did. People will do all kinds of crazy things to cash a check, especially an insurance check. You're too young to understand."

I don't believe her.

I run away (for the second time). Before I do, though, I put a pillow over her favorite cat, the one she's always petting, and I sit on it until it stops moving.

* * *

Sally, instead of sitting down across from me, sits down on my lap. She begins to kiss my neck. I push her away. She grabs the back of my head and forces her tongue into my mouth. I should be disgusted. I know that. But I'm not.

"Fuck me. Right here," she whispers. Her hand rubs my crotch. "I want you."

Two orderlies push through the crowd of forever wandering lunatics. They grab her by the arms and heave her off of me.

"Let go 'o me ya fuckin' shitheads!"

As they are dragging her away through the heavy metal door, I get up to leave.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait…WAIT!” she says. “I’ll be good. I’m done.” She stops struggling with the orderlies. “See?”

They look at me, and I nod, letting them know it is alright. They release her, and she calmly walks over and sits down at the same time I do.

“Hello, Sally.”

“Do we know each other?” she asks with a look of pure shock and confusion on her face.

It’s an act. I know she’s full of crap.

“I kept the cards you sent; very sweet of you to remember me on my birthday every year.”

She winks.

“Buy anything nice with the money?”

“Tainted… I wouldn’t even donate it to charity.”

“So, how long’s it been? About 10 years, right?”

“Try 25, exactly, I might add.”

“25?” she says. “Okay, sure… if you say so, sweetie.”

“How have you been?”

“Better than you, I imagine. They let us play on the internet so I’ve been checking up on all my friends.”

The bitch… The fucking bitch. Fucking bitch cunt, filthy slut whore of a… I want her dead… kill her…kill her… DIE… Cut off her fucking…

“That’s… nice,” I say in a very calm, even voice, while at the same time trying to ease the sudden, unexpected rage that rose up inside me.

“Suit looks good on you. Did’ja dress up for ’lil ’ol’ me?”

“Yes, actually I did. My father once told me that you should always dress nice when attending a business meeting.”

“So what’s your business?”

“I’ve been checking up on you as well. It seems you have a very important hearing coming up. I propose that you answer my questions and I will testify on your behalf.”

Sally considers what I am saying.

She says, “How do I know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?”

I look her dead in the eye for a good 15 seconds, and then I spit in my hand and hold it out for her.

She smiles. Spits in her own hand and shakes mine. “Deal,” she says. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to understand you,” I say. “I want to know why you threw me in that hole without killing me like you should have.”

She sighs.

“Didn’t we go over this last time? I told you, I just did.”

“What do you mean, ‘I just did’!”

She starts to play with her red hair, twirling it around her finger.

“Sometimes…” she says, seeming to choose her words carefully, “people notice they got a choice in front of them. Lot of times they got a choice, but they like to pretend they don’t. But sometimes…” she sighs, “people know what you should do… what it seems they got to do… but they just go ahead and do something else instead. You don’t remember this?”

“No. But I think I understand.”

“I could have killed ya. But I thought it would be more fun… and dangerous… if I didn’t. How long were you down there before they found it anyway?”

I shake my head. No. I’m not going to give her that.

“Same with your pa,” she says. “More fun to mess with him.”

“He killed himself over that accusation. People were very convinced by your performance.”

“Thank you. Hung himself, right?”

“Yes.”

“Your momma… her too, right?”

“Pills.”

“On purpose?”

“I like to think not.”

“The hits just keep on coming, don’t they?”

“I think we’re done here. Just one more question. How many lives do you think you’ve destroyed? 5? A dozen?”

She smiles, playfully.

“Come on, Sally, how many?”

She leans in close and whispers, “Thousands… Tens of thousands.”

I nod. Somehow I don’t doubt it. I stand up and walk away.

“Hey!” she calls. “It looks like you took my advice last time… Let the past stay buried…” A chill runs down my spine, but I keep walking. “It’s better that way… Remember we have a deal!”

I’ll remember, Sally, I think. And if they do let you out, I’ll be waiting for you. I dug up the monsters from my past, and now I know you … I can be you… I can destroy you. Then you’ll be ‘Two.’

* * *

In the car, driving away, my wife asks me if I’m alright.

“No,” I say. “I’m not alright.”

“But you will be. I know it in my heart. I think we need to visit your parents first, though. It isn’t far.”

I nod.

As my wife drives, I try to remember the details of the things I did while being passed from one foster care home to another.

* * *

I don’t see the point in torturing animals when I was twelve, but I do it because I’m trying to understand the little girl. I didn’t like it when I lit the dumpster fires at fourteen, but I thought I could learn something. I cut slices on my arms with a razor blade when I was sixteen, but the pain I was supposed to feel… simply wasn’t there. So at twenty-two, when I got the call that my mother was dead, I made plans to pick up a streetwalker with the intent of doing unmentionable things to her. That must be where the answers are hidden, I thought.

But I met you, my savior.

I went to see Sally once, after we started to see each other. She told me to bury all of this. I listened to her. Her advice, given because of her chaotic nature, allowed me to feel something again… I guess I should thank her because, in a way, she saved me.

This darkness will always be inside of me. I will always be on the edge of becoming another monster. Your shining beacon of hope reminds me I have a choice. Life is manageable, life is good… I feel. I feel happiness….

Until the day I saw the rusted red van once more.

* * *

Somewhere stuck between the past, the present, and the future, sits a man staring at the graves of his dead parents. He's on his knees. He's begging for forgiveness. Charlie, a sweet baby boy, hugs his father. His beautiful wife cradles him close.

"You've come this far," his wife says. "Let it all go. Don't turn back now."

* * *

December 31st, 2011. I'm at the party at Roger's house. 11:59:59. "HAPPY NEW YEAR!" I'm still kissing my wife, and in the background I can hear everyone singing.

Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and old lang syne?

1:15 AM, January 1st, 2012. I'm driving home. I'm alone. I've had a few drinks but not enough to be considered over the legal limit… No, it wasn't the drinking.

I was speeding, like I often do, when I am behind the wheel of a car, and it's night.

I see headlights behind me, and they move to the left and accelerate to pass me. When I look over… I see the old rusted van. I slam the gas pedal to the floor, and I hear screaming. The needle passes the 110 MPH mark… I'm looking over my shoulder to see if we are getting away… I never see the sharp turn ahead of me.

* * *

Somewhere stuck between the past, the present, and the future, sits a man staring at the graves of his dead parents. He's on his knees. He's begging for forgiveness. Charlie, a sweet baby boy, says, "Daddy, don't cry." His beautiful wife kisses him on his hands.

It should have happened that way. It should have! He screams. But it didn't! Oh god, Charlie and you were both in the car.

The man looks down, and instead of two graves, he now sees four. Next to the graves of his parents are two others, fresh; one of them is much smaller.

* * *

"When you both died," I say, "I couldn't take it." I had to end it, needed to. What other choice did I have? … All it would take is a bottle of pills and a gallon of booze, an easy exit. "I'm too far gone. I started to regress. I could feel the man crawling just under my skin."

My wife and son hug me as I let myself cry freely into their loving arms.

"If I ever lost you, it would just be him and me, and he's stronger. He has the power to take over. Someone erased everything I love from my story! Not this time… This time I'll write my own fucking story!"

"You brought us back."

"I did bad things," I say. "I know that. Really terrible things… I've caused pain and suffering to others. I don't deserve you… but I need you."

"Stop. You're a good person," my wife says. "You're a good husband, and father too. Quit being so hard on yourself."

“I can’t control myself sometimes. Things just… happen.”

“Daddy,” Charlie says, “I think you burned down our house. Don’t do it again.”

I laugh. How could I not laugh at that?

“We’re here,” my wife says. “We’ll always be right here with you. You had to understand that.”

“I think I do. That’s what I’m good at, understanding people. If I know enough, I can bring them back. That’s why he’s back too.”

“I don’t think he can hurt anyone as long as you stay strong.”

“Can your friend Rebecca come with us now, Daddy?”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“We always did want a daughter,” my wife says.

I shrug.

I hear someone walking up from behind, and we all turn around.

“You got big,” Rebecca says.

“I know.”

“You don’t smell like pee anymore either.”

“I don’t … Rebecca, this is Charlie,” I say as I’m wiping away tears.

She kneels down and takes his hand.

“Pleasure meeting you, Charlie,” she says. “I was going to name my little boy Charlie. Did you know that?”

He shakes his head. No.

Looking back at me, Rebecca’s face lights up with excitement. “Can we get a dog?!”

“Are you going to feed it and take care of it this time?”

“Promise!”

“Then yeah, we can get a dog.”

“So what now?” my wife asks.

“I’m not sure. The only question I think is left is: Are you really here? Or am I insane?”

“Both?” asks Rebecca.

“Shhh,” says Charlie.

“Do you think we’re ghosts, hon?” my wife asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think we’re imaginary, Daddy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know anything?” Rebecca asks.

“This is impossible… I know that… But you are real to me. I don’t care if anyone says otherwise. I just don’t know what that makes me.”

“You’re not a monster,” my wife says, firmly.

“But I can be. Don’t ever let me forget that. I can flip a switch and be as cold and violent as any of them.”

“So,” my wife says, “what do you want to do now?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “There are no happy endings. This one will just have to do.”

The End.



About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

What's Next?

LET ME TELL YOU HOW I LOST MY EYES

A Short Story Collection by Sammy Fowler

Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

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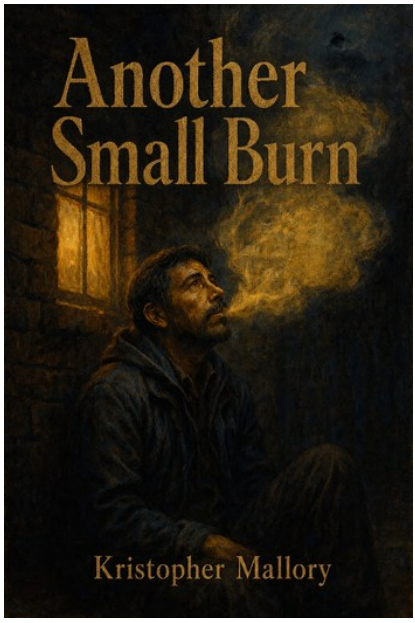
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Some stories are better heard in the dark.

Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane has a complete full-cast reading in digital voices: Scott Wo narrates, and every other character has a voice of their own. It runs 2 hours 38 minutes and it's free: play it online, or download it as an MP3 or an audiobook with chapters.

Listen free at stealthfiction.com

More from Kristopher Mallory



ANOTHER SMALL BURN

This quiet horror short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

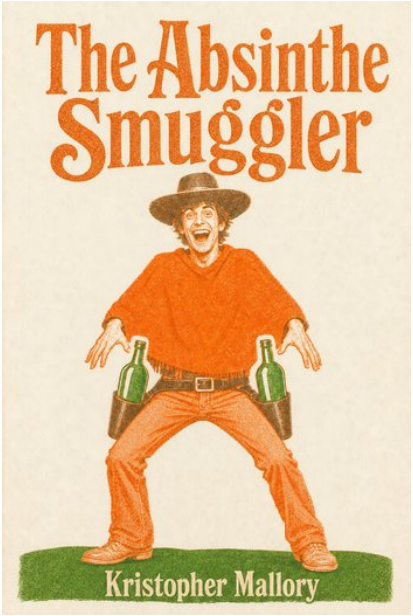
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Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

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Praise for Another Small Burn:

"That would make a fantastic Novella or novel, I was sad when it ended and wanted more." – *smoore*



THE ABSINTHE SMUGGLER

This comedy short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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A teenager on holiday in Madrid promises his friends two bottles of the green fairy, and customs turns out to be the easy part.
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THE SPECIAL CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS OF MR. EVERETT

This Christmas horror story is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

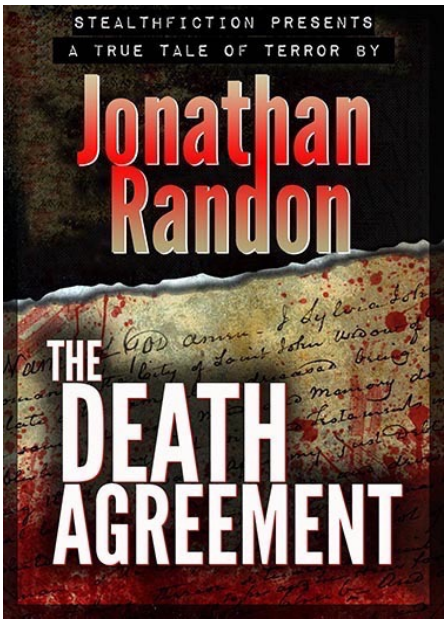
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Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

~~~~~

Praise for The Special Christmas Ornaments of Mr. Everett:

"Quite a story, mixing snowy Christmas magic with delightfully dark humored chills." – *leavnsoon*



THE DEATH AGREEMENT

This horror novella is now available. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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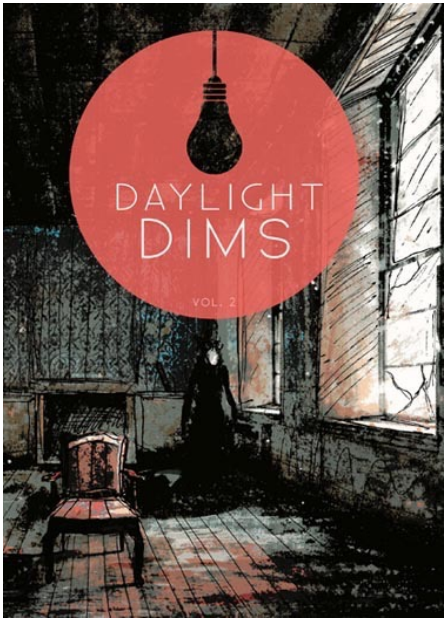
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

What you will find within these pages is a true recounting of a man's life as seen through my eyes. It's almost an impossible task when some of what you see can't be real and what is real you may refuse to see… My name is Jon Randon and I'm going to tell you a story.

Praise for The Death Agreement:

"This was one of the best things I've ever read." – *GrandMoffJed*
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More from Stealth Fiction



DAYLIGHT DIMS
VOLUME TWO

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

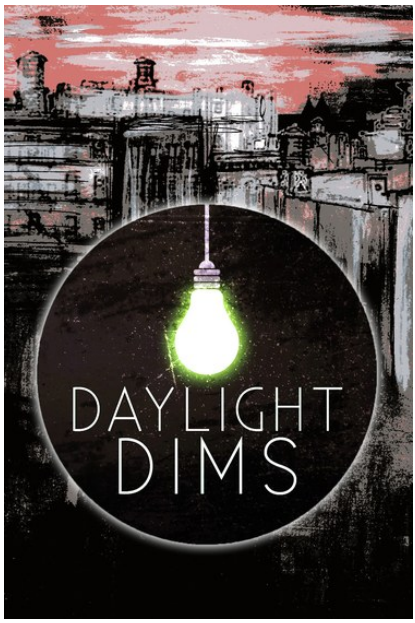
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Darkness descends again. Daylight Dims Volume Two features thirteen stories that cross the genres of surreal, dark fantasy, and heart-pounding dread. This annual horror anthology is guaranteed to twist your perception of horror. From the common, comfortable tropes to the more taboo, these handpicked tales have a literary aspect designed to showcase what true horror can be.

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Praise for Daylight Dims Vol. 2:

“This was probably one of the most entertaining collections of horror stories I've ever read. And I don't say this to suck up or to stroke any tail feathers. I was happy to have the opportunity to read through this before release, and I implore anyone on the fence about picking this up to do themselves a favor and take the plunge into the abyss. You will not be disappointed.” – *Human Gravy*



DAYLIGHT DIMS

VOLUME ONE

Second Edition — now with two new stories from the editors.

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

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The editors chose 13 stories from over 100 premium submissions. DD contains some of the best horror around.

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Praise for Daylight Dims:

"This is a fantastic horror anthology. All 13 stories are exquisite. The book was not what I expected initially, as I thought that it might be all vampire or werewolf tales. Not so! These are original stories from authors of the macabre. From dark fantasy and pure suspense to classic horror tales, it shows the extraordinary scope of fantastical fright fiction. The stories in this anthology are a tour de force of fear, which will haunt you, terrify you, and stay with you." – S. Mahaffey, *"neverjudge"*