

SUPERSTITION INTERVENES...

# Life Returns

Kyle Toucher

*Life*  
*Returns*

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# 1

“Uncle John isn't in bed—he seems to have been moved.”

I turned over, and there stood my sister Annie with a flashlight in one hand and a Scooter Pie in the other. I'd been pulled from a boy's dream, a fantasy of heroism and valor. Suzanna Reed, my crush since nursery school in San Diego, had found herself in some awful playground predicament, and I, her champion, gifted with superpowers and newfound fearlessness, swept down from the schoolyard's highest eucalyptus and whisked her away from peril.

As Suzanna swooned, blue eyes sparkling, face flush with gratitude, sure to reward me—*me*—Ian Emerson, an insignificant dweeb with an overactive imagination, with my first kiss, I opened my eyes to my redheaded, wide-eyed sister. Annie stomped her feet like someone with a terrible need to urinate, hurriedly munching a Scooter Pie while waving my Six Million Dollar Man flashlight all over the place. When Annie became agitated, she snacked, she wiggled, and tolerated nothing less than my total attention.

“What do you mean, *moved*? And get that flashlight under control.”

“He's not there. Not in his *Sospice*, or whatever that nurse calls it.”

I sat up.

“Show me.”

Annie pulled me out of bed to a floor cold as a tomb. Outside, Winter Howl, three nights of frigid wind screaming down the razor hide of Walpurgis Peak, announced the arrival of what the locals called The Dead Season. It blew through Walpurgis County like a choir singing the praises of the sheer hell that mountain promised: long nights, bare trees, iron skies, and endless snow.

Conspirators, we crept to the first floor like agents in some late-night subterfuge. Years ago, in our house in California, my sister and I had done this very thing to sate the burning curiosity brought by Christmas Eve, unable to wait until morning, eager to see what luxuries had appeared in front of the tree between the hours of eight and midnight. Steve Austin's bionic eye was on the case, illuminating the living room and the empty hospital bed standing where the sofa used to be.

In pale D-Cell light, Uncle John's deathbed looked like something salvaged from a haunted infirmary, a mangled pile of sheets in a corral where human livestock suffered and died. The bladder of his IV bag hung on its stand, and the tube, usually secured by tape to his left arm, lay in the bed like a sleeping snake, the needle its solitary fang. The yellow stink of illness was everywhere.

“You're right, he's gone,” I said. “But that's impossible.”

“He's been on *Dorphine*,” Annie added.

I love Annie, but some words never clicked in her head, and I stopped correcting her quite some time ago.

“Good. Stoned keeps him quiet.”

“The wind woke me, so I got up to get some water. When I saw he was gone, I grabbed a Scooter Pie and came to get you. We should look for him.”

I thought about it for a second. *Should we?*

She looked at me the way she used to Dad when one of her toys broke or a doll lost an eye.

“*Right?*”

The wind curled around the house, rattling windows, sending nails creaking and pipes rattling in the walls. On this, Winter Howl's third and final night, only God knew how many trees would snap and how many chimneys would fall. Annie and I had lived in Walpurgis County for a while, and even though we were *technically* home, we were a *long way* from home, and there was no way we'd ever adjust to three nights of shrieking banshee wind.



“Right,” I said, looking around. The house was old as silent films, built when mahogany was used for balustrades and banisters, brass for doorknobs and hinges. The kitchen was off to the right, the only acquiescence to modernity the Whirlpool fridge and dishwasher. The stove was an enormous match-lit relic, probably too goddamn huge to move out of the house and replace, certainly big enough for the forest witch to bake both Hansel and Gretel. The light fixtures were as dated—*retro* we’d say these days—as you could imagine.

A faint shuffling emanated from the nook behind the pantry, which led to the basement door.

Annie took the last bite, swallowed hard and said, “The basement?”

“Where else?” There was no place he’d rather be.

In southern California, cellars were few and far between. We envied all those cool east coast houses in films sporting downstairs pool tables and TV rooms, but in reality, most basements were the house’s cold, ugly underbelly, crammed with pipes, spiders, and forgotten things. At first glance, the cellar of 1864 Gethsemane Lane was no different, a brick vault with the immense weight of the old Craftsman upon it, a mausoleum for memories where its caretaker showed only on laundry day to use the Kenmores beneath the staircase.

I came to find it was something else entirely.

“Well, maybe he’s in the bathroom,” Annie said.

*Bathroom? He shits in a bedpan,* I thought, but right as the words left her lips, we heard a faint, muffled *thump*.

Best-case scenario—Uncle John had somehow crawled out of bed and ended up behind the pantry, propped up against the basement door, eager to return to his obsession. My mind’s eye saw him in a puddle of pee with his pajamas askew, banging his head like a loose shutter.

Worst-case scenario: he couldn’t wait to get down there again, morphine be damned.

Instead of doing the smart thing, the *sensible* thing—running upstairs, waking Aunt Mary, and telling her Uncle John had gone You Know Where—we crossed those old checkerboard kitchen tiles, nearly tip-toeing past the stove, a fiend forged in cast iron in harder times.

The thing was gargantuan compared to the electric range our mother had used. Its primitive robot mouth was shut for the moment, its hunger evident in the way it eyed us with its gawking ceramic handles, sensed our child-meat with the gaping holes of its burners. What horrors could be confectioned in such a monstrosity, a Sears & Roebuck catalog relic from the age of steam engines. Gas hissed in its warm, iron bowel.

Eager to be past the thing, it was Annie that rounded the pantry corner first, hand clasped around my forearm. When the flashlight beam fell upon the basement door, she offered a sharp little *yip* and squeezed.

“Are those *nails*?” she said.

“Keep the beam steady.”

A nervous circle of light hovered over the tarnished doorknob and keyhole.

Nails the length of a cigarette had been driven sideways through the heavy wood and into the jamb. A bizarre array of thorns protruded every which way, heads flattened and bent, the door panels marred as our mysterious carpenter worked.

*Thump.*

We flinched.

“He’s in there,” she whispered.

*ThumpThump.*

The knob rattled. The nails held fast.

Confidence boosted by this improvised deadbolt, Annie and I took a few more cautious steps. Ahead, wounded door panels and bent nails. Behind, the hissing kitchen. Beyond *that*, Winter Howl prowled the streets.

The keyhole—another relic—presented an opportunity too good to resist. I'd seen it done in a hundred movies and a handful of *Scooby Doo* episodes. Hell, my sister and I had even tried it ourselves when we first came to live in the old house.

I put my eye to the keyhole.

Nothing but a pyramid of light at the foot of the stairs, a dusty beam cast by the solitary bulb above the landing. And that was fine by me, I hadn't so much as set foot in the basement in more than a year. It was *his* domain now, and he was welcome to it.

*But you want to see. You want to know.*

*Whump!*

The doorknob jiggled, first from the impact, then from a hand twisting the knob from the other side. I fell into Annie, and down we went. The flashlight rolled away near the pantry, the beam now a carpet of light, illuminating the opening between the door and the hardwood floor. The black gap breathed arctic air into the nook.

In that dark slit, I saw it. An eye; a jaundiced, smoky eye, yellow from disease, dilated from weeks of morphine and basement darkness. Bloodshot and bulging. Intoxicated, yet lucid. *His* eye. A gray-green dust, fine as baby powder, spilled from the tear duct, tumbling down the side of his nose like a miniature avalanche.

“Ian, we go now!”

The wind screamed, a bully on a rampage whipping the trees. Something massive cracked out there, a giant bested by the fury of Walpurgis Peak, and fell into the yard with an awful noise. How could this house withstand a third night of abuse if the wind was powerful enough to snap a sycamore like a twig?

*You know who's behind that door, you know he's something else now—*

A pasty finger replaced the eye, tapping a madman's telegraph message with its long, filthy nail. It flipped over and curled in the beckoning gesture everyone knew.

*Come here.*

I recognized the split nail on his index finger—Annie too—but neither one of us wanted to say what our eyes already knew: Uncle John had gotten out of his deathbed and either crawled or fallen down the stairs into that benighted basement, among the spiders and pipes, the nexus of his illness, the source of his fouled mind, the crumbling dust, the *Shimmer*—

*Thump!*

He was something else now. Something *other*.

Uncle John smashed the door with a firm, deliberate fist. Fury and anger, a man not to be ignored.

*!!ThumpThump!*

*It was Aunt Mary, I thought. Who else could have nailed the basement shut, keeping him from view? Had she finally had enough? How could we have slept through noise like that?*

The finger corkscrewed like a prisoner shimmying beneath barbed wire, tapping and trembling, knuckles protruding through skin the color of spackle.

*Come here.*

Annie scrambled to her feet. Even with her slippers caught in her nightie, she managed to pull me up. Her eyes were wide and her breath hot as summer. She shuffled in place and crinkled her Scooter Pie wrapper.

“Ian, we need to go upstairs and wake her, right n—”

There was a flurry of thumps and whacks, followed by the crunch of pulverizing wood. Cracks appeared in the door's bottom panel. The crown of nails creaked, the door flexed, and the knob danced in its mooring. But that splintering, that *crushing*, was more frightening than the finger, more severe than the eye. It was a jailbreak, an escape. He wanted out, and a pair of freaked-out kids were in no position to stop him.

The first tooth appeared, sawing—no, *gnawing*—through the door like a mountaineer's pick. An incisor, of course, impaler and meat-ripper, both blunt instrument and delicate tool, seized a small section of the traumatized door panel and pulled it away.

More frozen air escaped through the frayed hole, our private Winter Howl. It snaked around our feet, found its way up my pajama legs and Annie's nightie. My teeth were chattering, clacking castanets. Annie shivered. We backed away, holding one another like a couple of trembling kids alone in the graveyard because tonight, as far as Walpurgis County was concerned, that's precisely where we were.

More savage gnawing, and the gash opened wider still. Poor, fallen Steve Austin brought all of it into vivid view.

Uncle John's final days had taken their toll on his looks. He'd been emaciated and gray long before he'd been set in his deathbed, nails yellow fungus-laden claws, his hair an oily nest of neglect. But now I could see his face through that ragged hole, and he was a bloodless, albino white, the color of the Meerschaum pipes my father used to smoke. Varicose veins (if that's what they were) had erupted all over his face and neck like rivers on a map. *Squiggly lines of arctic blue. He looks frozen, like Winter Howl.*

Then, crazier thoughts: *He is Winter Howl. He is Walpurgis Peak. He is Shadowless...*

"Uncle John," Annie said over and over. "It's Uncle John, unclejohnunclejohn."

Another violent bite and Uncle John ripped a second section away. His entire mouth filled the space now, a wet, open cave lined with bleeding, receding gums. The insane array of slender shards jammed between his teeth made him look like a man attempting to eat a porcupine.

Uncle John's spidery fingers found their way to the edge of that wooden wound, pulling at the loose ends as his teeth worked the perimeter. I was reminded of the films we saw in school, macro photography of caterpillars buzzing their way through leaves. It was worse than that; urgent and sloppy, furious and devil-driven.

His tongue flopped and lolled, eager to form a sentence too ugly to be spoken, a vocalization of those bizarre symbols scrawled on the books that lined his study.

He uttered a simple command instead, but his voice was *wrong*—a dead man's larceny, a robber of innocence.

*"M̄ARY. BR̄ING H̄UR T̄O m̄E."*

Annie screamed.



Wait.

I'm way ahead of myself.

I was eleven years old that terrible night in 1978, Annie no more than eight. When they uprooted us from sunny San Diego hauled us across the country to Walpurgis County, I was her age and she a delicate, wounded girl of five.

How did the two of us end up in such an awful predicament, parentless and imperiled?

*Since you asked...*

Aunt Mary was our father's sister—*semi-estranged* sister, I should say. In June of 1974, right after school let out for summer, our parents, Clyde and Emily Emerson, were set to embark upon a tenth anniversary, second honeymoon adventure to Hawaii. In a last-minute Hail Mary (no pun intended) after a couple of long-term babysitters had fallen through, Dad bit his bottom lip and called his only sister, inquiring if she'd fly out to San Diego to keep an eye on the niece and nephew she barely knew.

When he hung up he looked at our mother and shrugged.

"Mary jumped at the chance to get away, and was glad to pay the airfare herself."

"You think she's moved past all that..." Mom said, wiggling her fingers as a stand-in for words that eluded her. She finally dropped them into her lap and sighed. "All that *Witchiepoo* shit?"

"Well, she's still with John if that's what you mean."

My parents had deemed Uncle John an unwelcome influence upon my father's sister. Keep in mind these were the days of Transcendental Meditation and EST. Reverend Moon and Anton LaVey. and Richard Nixon in deep shit with the deep state. My mother thought Aunt Mary was a crystal-rubbing hippie hanging on to the Summer of Love's frayed ends, led around by some con man. A concubine for a creep, a gullible mark, not the ideal candidate to watch the kids for ten days while they were off boozing on Waikiki Beach.

To Dad she was the black sheep sister, a flouncy butterfly bohemian, but harmless. When her name came up he never failed to mention, *You know, kids, your aunt was the home run queen of the 1959 girls softball team. Ten touch-em-alls in thirteen games. A real slugger.*

"Married to that charlatan is bad enough, Clyde, but I don't like that we never know exactly *where* she lives. Remember when I tried, purely out of family courtesy, to send her a Christmas card? Did you know I couldn't find this Walpurgis County on any map, or locate its Zip Code in the directory? I mean *nada, bupkis*. Even Marty at the post office was dumbfounded when I asked him to use whatever resources he had to get that stupid card on its way, and he came up blank as a sheet of notebook paper. Finally he suggested Walpurgis County: General Delivery. It never came back, so for all I know it's in the ether somewhere, or it *was* delivered and she just doesn't give a damn. Mary doesn't call the kids, ever, and completely ignores birthdays. What kind of an Aunt does that? Stupid as I was to even *think* about sending her a card, you can honestly forget about her even *acknowledging* Christmas, with all her cosmic-commie-Godlessness. Last time we saw her, not long after Annie was born, she wore a pendant that looked...I don't know...blasphemous. She burned sage and spoke idiotic, hocus-pocus Age of Aquarius bullshit over both the kids. Remember *that? Jesus!*"

Dad rolled his eyes.

"It's that goddamn man she's with. Don't get me started on John Ingersoll; she worships that creep like he's some cult leader. You may not want to admit it because she's your sister and you love her, and I get that—but *that man is cancer.*"

"I know, Emms, Mary's a little out there, but she's the only move we have left. It's that or cancel our trip."

“Leaving Ian and Annie with a whackadoodle is worse than missing a few days in Honolulu. I can watch Hawaii-Five-O and live vicariously through Jack Lord.”

“Hey, come on,” Dad said. “We’ve been planning this for a year. We have one small problem, and you’re ready to toss it.”

“Jesus, Clyde, it’s *Mom-Radar*, and mine is *screeching*.”

“Well,” Dad said, tossing his hands into the air, which meant: *I’ve already laid out a bundle for airfare and hotels, and it’s too late for a refund*. “What do you want to do?”

Two days later, Aunt Mary showed up in a Yellow Cab, dressed in bell-bottom jeans and a floral-print top with flowing wizard sleeves. She wore enormous, purple Elton John sunglasses and a floppy Janis Joplin hat, which barely corralled a sprawling mane streaked with gray. She made her way up the driveway with an overnight bag and a big leather purse. Behold, The Home Run Queen of 1959.

Annie and I were excited to see her, having only met her once when I was younger than Annie, and she was a newborn, so Annie didn’t remember her at all.

Our mother watched from the kitchen window, arms folded, barely concealing a scowl with a smoldering Kent King bobbing in her lips as Aunt Mary stood outside the window and waved.

After an icy welcome from Mom and warm hugs from Dad, Aunt Mary took her shades off and looked at Annie and me.

“Ian, you’re big as a horse. Annie, you’re a beautiful redhead sure to break hearts. You two ready to have a little fun while your folks have theirs?”

The way Mom’s face crumpled like a paper bag, I thought she was about to pass a kidney stone. Instead, she quipped, “Just make sure everyone stays alive,” then left the room without so much as a glance at anyone.

Aunt Mary watched Mom stomp away, looked to us, sighed, wiggled her eyebrows and smiled bigger than Dallas.

“We have ten days of fun to plan,” she said. “Soon as I’m settled in, we’ll make a list. Sea World, the Zoo, burger joints and silly hats!”

We loved her immediately.

Six days after *that*, the two of us, ecstatic in a whirlwind of activities and staying up late, popcorn and movies, ice cream at the beach, and take-out food for dinner, our parents were killed in a sight-seeing plane crash on Oahu. I, of course, was not given the details—it was Aunt Mary who took the phone call, and the sorrowful way she looked at me with the receiver to her ear froze my heart—but the nickel version (if there could be one for such things) is their twin-engine Beechcraft slammed right into Diamond Head in front everyone and their dog, killing all on board instantly, then rolled down its slope in a trail of flames. I was told there had been television news coverage of the smoking aftermath, and to this day, I have never seen it, nor want to.

The big question after the funerals and wakes (as this story unfolds, I will talk about many horrific things, but I will never, *ever* speak of that) was, of course, what to do with us? Our paternal grandparents were already dead, and our mother’s folks were so bloody old that there was no way they’d could handle two traumatized grandchildren. Mom was an only child, and our Godparents were never named. There was, as they now say in conference rooms nationwide, *a resource deficit*.

Enter Aunt Mary and Uncle John.

Our unimaginable shock was compounded by the months-long process of selling our home and all its contents. In the meantime, family court filings circulated through the system, and the custody forms were notarized, circumcised, canonized, or whatever-ized. By mid-1975, Annie and I had become permanent residents of 1864 Gethsemane Lane under the guardianship of our father’s next of kin: John and Mary Ingersoll of Danielsburg, Walpurgis County.

We cried nearly the entire way across the country.

Uncle John, who was significantly older than Aunt Mary—a balding, six-foot-plus cornstalk of a man—drove the entire way and never once complained about fatigue, traffic, or weather. It was as if he was on the job more than a rescue mission, dedicated as a soldier, focused as a circus acrobat. Having never met the man until he arrived in California seven months after our parents died to sign the legal documents, I honestly didn't know what to expect other than the opinions fed to me by our mother, and Aunt Mary's half-hearted praises on the nights he'd call. I had spoken briefly to him on the phone, Annie even less, and his voice seemed neutral as beige paint. For all I knew, Uncle John was just a boring old man doing his wife one hell of a favor.

But there was an air about him, an indifference far beyond the aloofness of most middle-aged men. It's not that he seemed burdened by their guardianship but that Annie and I were something to be studied. That look in his eye alone made me fear for my sister.

We'd never been this far east or more than two hours from the ocean, and the road ahead was a vast black stripe laid across the desert. With our hearts broken and our friends left behind, it felt like we'd gone from paradise into peril, dependability into disaster.

When Aunt Mary occasionally twisted round to look at Annie and me, I saw that same heartsick expression when she took that call from the Honolulu Police that horrible afternoon. The year previous had planted dark seeds, and cynicism had begun to take root, so off her look, I suspected a sympathetic facade, the kind of happy face Mom put on after she and Dad and a little tiff, and I immediately chastised myself for thinking such a thing. Aunt Mary had wept deeply for her brother; she'd done her best to hold motherless children together as their world collapsed.

But when she looked at Uncle John, her demeanor changed to that of a dog that feared its master. The compassion in her eyes extinguished as they became round and sad, her rosy cheeks pale and hollow. Aunt Mary's shoulders fell—slight, but noticeable—the happy-go-lucky aging hippie transformed into the bedeviled wife. How she looked at us had been genuine, and worse—I began to think Mom had been right about Uncle John.

I remembered what Dad had said: *She jumped at the chance to get away.*

Our second day on the road found us on Route 60, headed east through New Mexico. Those gargantuan high-tension towers lined the highway, colossal sentries disappearing into the big nowhere. An old style gas station—even for those days—came and went.

Annie leaned into my ear and whispered, “Do you think Aunt Mary's afraid of Uncle John?”

Just then Aunt Mary's eyes appeared in the sun visor's little vanity mirror.

*Hush now, you two. He hears everything.*

Uncle John must have had some type of bully radar, because his barbecue smoke eyes immediately snapped to me in the rearview. The leading edge of a smirk pinched one cheek.

*She's right, boy. I hear everything.*

Annie stayed close to me from then on, so much so that we shared a bedroom for nearly six months after arriving at that brooding Craftsman on Gethsemane Lane. Aunt Mary *gently* nudged Annie toward having her own bedroom, just like in San Diego. After all that tragedy, Aunt Mary wanted us to have an everyday life.

But things were never everyday. Even our arrival in Walpurgis County felt like something out of those Hammer horror films Dad and I used to watch, where the first sight of Dracula's castle drives an ingot of terror into anyone unlucky enough to behold it—and Walpurgis Peak was no different.

After exiting the interstate, we entered a confusing snarl of turns egged on by orange arrows that read Detour. Uncle John, who clearly had driven this route before, finally steered the big Mercury onto a two-lane highway—Route 54.

After navigating a long, seemingly endless curve, we saw it: a mammoth fang, a sole ugly tooth. Walpurgis Peak pierced the tree line, casting a monstrous shadow over the forest below, the most colossal thing Annie and I had ever seen.

Annie gasped, not in wonder like when she first laid eyes upon Disneyland's Matterhorn, but as if she'd witnessed a car wreck, or worse—learned her parents had died in a plane crash. Her mouth dropped into a dark O, legs pressing against the back of the driver's seat. Her eyes bulged, trembling in their sockets, too overwhelmed to look away. Paralysis became tears, and she crammed her little face into the crook of my neck and bawled.

Uncle John chuckled, celebrating Annie's dread and anxiety by humming an ominous tune. It was years later I recognized it as *Night On Bald Mountain*.

He straightened in the drivers seat like a tower guard. In fluent German he said, "*Sie blicken auf das majestätische, eines der Wachberge der Welt!*"

"John," Aunt Mary said. "You're making it worse." She turned and saw Annie crushed against me, face red, tears flowing. She glared back at her husband, and if looks could kill, he may not have dropped dead, but he would have been in ICU for a week.

"It's not okay here," Annie said through spit bubbles and sobs. "I want to go home. I want to go to *our* house."

I wrapped Annie in both arms and asked Uncle John, maybe more pointedly than I'd intended, "*What did you just say to Annie?*"

Instead, he chose to gawk at that hideous mountain, marveling at its jagged hide and the crooked granite spine that kept it standing. "I didn't say it to *her*; I said it to *you*: *You gaze at the majestic, one of the sentinel mountains of the world.*"

Our eyes met in the mirror; his were smoke, a gray that wanted to be black when it grew up. He cracked that arrogant smile, the grin of an old man who gloats because he's outlived whatever friends he'd had.

"John, *honestly*," Aunt Mary said. She folded her arms and stared at her lap.

Uncle John didn't speak to either Annie or me for a couple of days after that.

\*\*\*

The nexus of Walpurgis County is, without a doubt, that ugly eyesore of a mountain, the deliverer of the Winter Howl phenomena I mentioned earlier. Some say a second tier of fallen angels landed on the slopes of Walpurgis Peak not long after the first drop of traitors at Baalhermon, dragging with them the knowledge of metals and elixirs, the workings of the cosmos, and *phramakeia*—all forms of magic and sorcery. Whatever the legend's genesis, the mountain is a vile, a blasphemous stack of blighted stone, crooked as every deal with Satan. It broods over its subjects, jealous and deranged. Insane.

I vividly remember my first day at Danielsburg Elementary, about thirty days after we arrived. I stood between the jungle gym and the carousel, unnerved by the sight of that monstrosity and the dreadful thought that the mountain was *looking at me*. As a southern California transplant, I wasn't accustomed to being in the proximity of large mountains—I'd seen them only in movies and books—and to be near a mountain that was certifiably mad brought a sense of dread that I still grope for the proper words to describe it.

No matter what direction I turned, Walpurgis Peak remained visible. Behind Danielsburg Elementary's central hub of brick buildings, the mountain loomed in the distant haze. I turned toward the town center, where Route 54 snaked up a rise in the landscape to meet Beltane Road, and there it stood in all its mocking arrogance, the light completely different—the *hour* of the light, I should say— clouds shunning it. East toward the morning sun, it's silhouette was a mammoth siege tower left behind by an invading race of giants.

Impossible? Absolutely. But not in Walpurgis County.

And that was par for the course as we adjusted to life without our parents and the upheaval of culture shock, all part of trauma's lingering spectre. The house on Gethsemane Lane was, of course, part of it; an old, shadowy place built in the time of iceboxes and chain-pull toilets; gas lamps and servant's quarters. As the months turned into years, we became not immune to the bizarre conditions in that house but certainly a bit desensitized. The weird tales I came to hear of Dead Neck Lake and Copperhead Farms added fuel to the fire. Walpurgis County always felt like the night before Halloween and the day after an earthquake.

So, please bear with me; we must detour further. My memories of Uncle John's odd unraveling should be told in as much detail as I can recall, as his dark identity fed an even darker obsession, culminating on the final night of Winter Howl.

And yes, it's all about the basement.



### 3

Annie had stopped blubbing by the time Uncle John took a right onto Beltane Road, but the pee-pee dance had gone on until we pulled onto Gethsemane Lane. The house was quite lovely from the outside with its dark green siding, white window frames, stained pillars, and wrap-around porch. We'd been raised in a small tract home a few blocks from a Stop 'N' Go and a walk-up burger joint, so to us, this dual-chimney mammoth nestled between massive sycamores was like moving into a mansion.

Uncle John pulled the Mercury into the garage, hauled the bags from the trunk, and disappeared without a glance. Aunt Mary showed us into the enormous old place, and once we'd had an eyeful of the grandfather clock, stained glass, and Persian rugs, she ushered us to the second floor on a staircase large enough for its own area code.

After an hour or two of exploration (both of us enamored of the Jack and Jill bathroom, just like in *The Brady Bunch*), Aunt Mary brought dinner: fried chicken and all the fixings. Despite the depressing cross-country drive and the unreal experience of gazing at Walpurgis Peak, this first night, at least, was off to a pretty good start—she did her best to make us feel welcome, and we didn't have to eat with Uncle John.

Several necklaces laid around Aunt Mary's neck, adorned with crystals, purple stones, hummingbird feathers, and tiny pewter doo-dads. All she needed was a silk scarf on her head and wrists jangling with medallions to complete her transformation into the county fair fortune teller, but this evening Aunt Mary was both chef and waitress—a different mixer of elixirs—and dinner smelled terrific.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," Aunt Mary said as she set the little table near a window partially obscured by one of the gigantic sycamores. Far away, the summit of Walpurgis Peak glared at the house like a wounded, ugly eye. Despite a slight tug of dark fascination, I managed to pull *my* eyes away. "He's not used to having kids around. Actually, neither of us is."

"He was mean to me," Annie said without hesitation.

"I know, Annie-girl. I'm sorry about that. I'll talk to him tonight, tell him to cool that hot streak of his."

"I'm staying in here with Ian."

Aunt Mary stroked Annie's big red mane then looked at me. "That okay with you, big fella?"

I was face deep into my second drumstick. I nodded. There were two beds in the room anyway, and even though at my age I preferred to be alone, this place was new and creepy, and that mountain had scared the piss out of Annie.

And me.

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Months later, not long after Aunt Mary had shuffled Annie off to her own room (by now I was more than ready after many Scooter Pie episodes spawned by her bad dreams), I began to wake around three AM, restless and anxious.

I was afraid that Annie's nightmares, always about the death of our parents, were somehow contagious, so if I woke up in the middle of the night before dreams settled in, then so much the better. I'd rather suffer fatigue than nightmares.

*I'll just say up. I have books. I'll be tired at school but who cares, it sucks anyway.*

After a few sleepless nights I began to hear murmurings downstairs, quiet at first, muffled and indistinguishable. It was easy for me to dismiss it as the TV, or even Uncle John and Aunt Mary talking. But at this hour? I knew the TV explanation was bogus the second night I heard the voices, as Uncle John's beige rasp was unmistakable, and Aunt Mary was in bed by nine.

*Is he speaking to someone? On the phone?*

Doubtful. The house was equipped with those ornate phones from old MGM movies, barely a generation removed from the antique candlestick model Yvonne De Carlo used in *The Munsters*. He was no fan of such things, so I dismissed it.

I got up and made my way to the top of the stairs. Nothing but shadows in the living room, a single lamp in the study cast a pyramid of light onto the parquet floor.

By the time I reached the spot between the kitchen and the study, it was apparent the noise emanated from the basement, and now that I was much closer, I heard a *mechanical* sound, a rhythm.

*Whurrrmp-Fwack—Whurrrmp-Fwack*

The picture it drew in my head was metal upon metal, rods on rails sliding back and forth. I'd only been in the basement a handful of times, and other than a Stanley toolbox, a few shovels, some garden tools, and an old wheelbarrow, I never took Uncle John for the handyman type. The study consumed his time, filled with books the size of a Rand-McNally atlas, covers scrawled in languages I didn't recognize, plastered in designs that looked like a cross between cave paintings and astronomy diagrams.

The study was bad enough, but if I wanted to know more, I'd have to traverse the kitchen's checkerboard tile, pass that hissing predator stove, and peer down those steep dark stairs.

Cross the hunger path of one ugly brute to perhaps lay eyes upon another?

Not tonight. No way, José.

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About three weeks after I'd first heard the night murmurings, Annie gave my shin a little kick beneath the dinner table. She flipped a nod toward Uncle John as he stared into his soup, one eye focused on the bowl, the other rudderless and floundering.

She mouthed the words: *Is he drunk?*

Unlikely. His neck looked like sagging chicken skin, moving sluggishly over the Adam's apple as he muttered and grumbled. He hadn't shaved in a few days, which was also unlike him. If there's one thing about Uncle John you could count on, he was neat as a pin. Now his hair was shiny and unwashed, forehead clammy and misted with sweat. Dirt under his nails. Grime on his fingers. He looked like a villain in a Clint Eastwood western. But drunk? I'd never seen him drink so much as a beer.

I shrugged and mouthed back: *Sick?*

"This house has been chosen, but nothing is free," Uncle John croaked. His voice was brittle, cracked as his lips. "We pay for the privilege, one way or the other. Bags hiss. Mighty ingots slide inside the great Machine—"

"John...*the kids*..." Aunt Mary interrupted.

He leaned and examined Aunt Mary with his single working eye. Soup steam eddied around his nose and long, convoluted ears. I noticed his gum line had receded since the last time I had a good look at him. Inflamed, fleshy pillows billowed from between teeth with their roots exposed, miniature piano keys carelessly stuffed into his skull at crazy angles.

Uncle John smacked the table with his open palm. Everything shook.

"Not a word from you, barren Aphrodite," he said, now pointing a filthy index finger at his wife. "A womb of old twigs and a snatch to match. A dime store witch harboring dreams of becoming a Sorceress. No need to scour the Undervoid for suitable dish to bake my seed, no need to sully my altar—"

"*Goddammit, John!*"

His mouth snapped shut, but not for long. He shifted his poison gaze to Annie and sneered.

“You may prove useful when you're old enough to bleed, Freshling. Only a few more summers need pass until we find out.” With his swimming eye, he winked at her. “Don't be like that corn husk at the end of the table.”

He reached out to touch Annie with his dirt-crusting fingers, but she sprang like a Jack-in-the-box, pushing her chair back until she was out of reach of his scarecrow's arm. Smart girl.

“Clyde and Emily. It took most everything I had to reach them from this distance. You know how hard these things are, Freshling? How much it takes out of a man to serve Those Others, *let alone* summon the guile to ask for a favor, access to their realm?”

“What do you mean *reach* Clyde and Emily?” I said.

“John, John...*no*,” Aunt Mary said. She curled all her fingers toward Annie in a rapid beckoning gesture. Annie went to her.

Uncle John spread his arms wide, dipping his shoulders side to side as his voice mimicked an airplane's struggling engine.

“*Neeeeeeeeer!*”

Pitching side to side, the lazy eye rolled. He focused the good eye on me from underneath cinched eyebrows, chin nearly in his minestrone, arms straight as a board.

“It was mayday for less than a minute, but what a long minute it was. That poi-eater in the left seat never knew what hit him when the stick became a dead weight. I'll bet he turned white as his Haolie payload.”

Aunt Mary wrapped her arms around Annie. She glared at her husband with an ire that I, even then, suspected had brewed for quite a while.

And then I read it on her face.

*You killed my brother.*

Uncle John's entire demeanor changed on a dime. When he spoke again, it was in the voice of our father, a perfect match of his cadence and timbre. He even mimicked Dad's facial mannerisms, down to his intermittently raised eyebrow when making a point. It froze me to my marrow.

“Guess we won't be needing the shuttle bus back to the Hilton, Emms, because *this* second honeymoon is *kaput*.” Arms still outstretched like the wings of their doomed Beechcraft, he twirled his index finger as Dad was known to do when he conveyed a royal SNAFU. His face opened into our father's lovable grin, the one that had charmed our mother, his clients and my little league coaches. “Hope you paid the life insurance and fed the cat, because this is it, Emms. We're tits up and tootle-oo!”

At the sound of our father's voice, Annie burst into tears. Aunt Mary was out of her chair and down on one knee before you could say Jack Robinson, a human shield around Annie.

“John, you monster!”

Uncle John's desiccated lips opened wide, every nightmare tooth visible as he cleared his throat then summoned his own rusted voice, still soaring on his makeshift wings, eyes never leaving mine.

“Everyone screamed when they saw the mountain come at them—don't think for a second they didn't know. They felt *everything*. And Diamond Head is a *pussy* hill, son—it's nothing compared to the *Master*, the Master outside these very windows, Sentinel to the Shadowless, a feeder of giants.”

*You bastard*, I thought, but too stunned and intimidated to speak it. He read my face, changing voices at will, and speaking now with the exaggerated drawl of a tent revival preacher.

“Mayday! Mayday! Can I get an Amen? Oooo Lawdy, weez gwine up to hebbin! *Neeeeeeeeerrrrr!*”

He dipped his arms again, enjoying his sick pantomime of that twin engine Beechcraft as it whined toward the volcano overlooking Waikiki Beach.

“Fadder, son and Holy Ghost, dat Heavenly Host done gots da most! Pass me dems grits and melba toast, cuz down we heads straight for da coast!”

When I looked for Annie, she was gone, ushered out of the dining room and halfway upstairs. Aunt Mary wheeled around to Uncle John, her mouth pulled into a horrible frown of disbelief, her eyes narrow, focused slits of hate. She may have grown accustomed to years of abuse and suffering, but now that abuse had been turned toward an eight-year-old girl. Not only had he mocked the death of our parents, but he summoned the audacity to re-enact it. John Ingersoll had finally crossed the line. She waved for me to join them.

But my God, had he really caused that plane to crash?

Uncle John moved with a snake's speed and seized my wrist, twisting so that I did not doubt his intent or willingness to follow through. *I will snap your bones, boy. Stay put.*

“Up to your room, Annie-girl,” Aunt Mary said. “I’ll be there in just a minute.”

I heard Annie's footsteps as she bolted upstairs, sniffing and snuffling, before slamming the door.

“You hear things at night,” Uncle John said, voice above a whisper, but not much. “A rhythmic sound?”

His smoke-colored eyes bored so far into me I felt every little secret, no matter how innocuous, was visible to him. Something had happened over the last three weeks, and if it was sickness, it moved through the man hell for leather.

“Answer me.”

My thoughts were jumbled, and my emotions frayed. “Yeah, I do,” I said. My voice had gone thin and girlish, the pressure behind my eyes near the breaking point. If I cracked and blubbered, it would only get worse. My God, how I wanted my parents here; Mom shaming him while Dad beat his ass with a nine iron.

“Your sister is closed off, but you're beginning to see. Do you want to see, Ian? Do you want to know what thrums beneath Walpurgis Peak? How it feeds?”

The very mention of that mountain made me squirm.

“There are doorways here in The Purg. *Shimmers*, we call them. And this house sits atop one that opens at will. It can stay closed for years, decades, even, but lately, ever since you arrived...” He looked over his shoulder to the pool of light spilling from the nook behind the pantry. The basement door was out of view, but its presence was suddenly felt.

“Come to the coal chute. You'll see it.”

I tried to pull away. He squeezed. It hurt.

“There's a spark in you, Ian Emerson. Why else would I have gone so far out of my way to get you here? It took over a month's recovery time after reaching out all the way to Hawaii. You think that was *easy*?”

*My God, he's serious...*

“Your stupid aunt put on a show for nearly a decade, had me fooled that there was nothing special about you. Why else do you think she ignored you and your sister for years?”

I didn't know what to say. I hoped for Aunt Mary to sweep in and break up this little heart-to-heart.

“But that Christmas Card from your mother changed all that. Once I touched it, I knew. A mother's connection runs very deep, and hers was no exception. It was all over that stupid red envelope.”

I recalled Mom's agitation at trying to get that card to Walpurgis County. That was in 1970. By the time Aunt Mary arrived at our house in the summer of 1974, Mom had written her off. But she was right about one thing: Uncle John had Aunt Mary in his grip.

“Your aunt was never *disinterested* in you. She thought she was *protecting you from me*. I have plans for your sister, yes...” His eyes narrowed, and he licked his lips. I'd broken my nose when I fell off my bike in second grade, and it bled like crazy. I wished that for him now.

“...but *your* talents need to be steered. Coached. You were born for Walpurgis County—you *just don't know it yet.*”

The table shook again, a greater violence than Uncle John's flattened palm.

Aunt Mary stood at the foot of the table, leaning into an old, battered Louisville Slugger that she'd slammed business-end smack-dab between the pork tenderloin and Corningware bowl of green beans. Her locomotive stare had all the steam of a woman who, at least this night, had had enough.

“Reliving your glory days again I see.” Uncle John released my wrist. I was out of that chair so fast I think it surprised him. He looked at Mary with that smoky, disconnected sheen. When someone says glassy-eyed, they don't know what they're talking about, but one look at John Ingersoll would change that. He flicked his hand toward The Home Run Queen of 1959 as if shooing a pest.

“Get up stairs, Ian,” Aunt Mary said, her breathing deep and steady. Her chest and shoulders heaved, but her hands trembled. The end of the Louisville Slugger tapped out a faint rhythm on the table.

“You leave those two kids out of all this, John. That's *not* why they're here.”

I backed up to the sideboard and stood there like one of those guards at Buckingham Palace; arrow straight with a PhD in Shut The Fuck Up.

Uncle John tilted his chair back, cool as a crime boss. “Heroin doesn't suit you. Stick to the tourism of crystals and tarot. Be the carnival spook you were meant to be and stay out of business beyond your scope and vision.”

When Aunt Mary's face flushed red, Uncle John's lit up. He'd hit paydirt, and meant to collect.

“You're more amateur than auteur. A bumbler in the shadow of greatness. Consider your great fortune, allowed to stumble through a series of parlor tricks and the whims of lesser gods while in the presence of the Master.”

She appeared crestfallen. I thought about her talismans hanging in the windowsills and the sage burning on the mantle. There were framed pictures in the bathrooms of smiling, coy fairies and watercolors of butterflies leaving steams of brilliant light in their wake. All hippie-dippie stuff, a manifestation of too much Avalon and Middle Earth, Ren-Faires and coffee houses.

In Uncle John's study, it was heavy, leather-bound books with unreadable nonsense on their spines, an odd device that looked like a cross between a telescope and a sextant near the window—always pointed toward Walpurgis Peak—and several taxidermy crows mounted in flight above the fireplace. If it was a pissing contest over who was more ooga-booga, well, Uncle John had that title in the bag.

Aunt Mary frowned. His insults might have gotten under her skin, but they would travel no further.

“There's no excuse for this. You're saying terrible things to them, let alone *me.*”

“I've seen *it*, Mary. Here, through the Shimmer. The boy should be privy to it. Open his mind's eye.”

She jabbed the bat into the table. The silverware clanged.

“No.”

“It has *needs.*” He purred the words. “Sustenance. Continuance. Longevity.”

She did it again, harder this time.

“No.”

“It's true, all of it. I was haunted by doubt, but no more. It's there, thrumming under Walpurgis Peak, keeping one of *Them* alive. I told the boy this and now I'll tell you: it never revealed itself to me until they came to live here.” He held his hands up so Aunt Mary could see. “Look at my filthy hands. I labor because there's a treasure beneath this house that they want, and in that sweet Freshling upstairs.”



She turned to me, but never let her grip on the bat falter.

“Ian, out. *Now.*”

I didn't waste any time and made for the stairs. Before their conversation became muffled, I distinctly heard Uncle John say:

“They chose this house, Mary. They'll have their way.”

Uncle John did something I'd never thought him capable: he laughed. It was the laugh of someone that has discovered gold on the family's back forty, a cry of glee and disbelief followed by the cackle of a man determined to keep the gold for himself.

When he'd finished, there was a moment of silence.

Aunt Mary said, “Not on my watch.”

## 4

Following his cruel performance at the dinner table, Annie and I gave Uncle John a wide berth. He spent his days in the study, his nights in the basement. Aunt Mary, on the other hand, had grown more doting and loving—especially to Annie. How my mother had ever misinterpreted her behavior will always be a mystery to me.

Weeks passed. Nights came and went, and I rarely slept them through. With greater frequency, I heard Uncle John leave the bedroom and creak down the hallway, wheezing as he limped down the staircase.

He'd become gaunt as a gravedigger. I couldn't remember the last time I saw him eat, and on several occasions, I heard him puking in the bathroom. Aunt Mary seemed immune to his retching; she never once raised a finger or inquired about his welfare. She'd made her point that night with the Louisville Slugger.

Uncle John couldn't care less, as his focus was clear. Every night it was up out of bed, followed by a brief struggle down the staircase. Not long after, I'd hear the murmur of his sandpaper voice and the cadence of some device—whatever the hell it was. I had thought it some kind of pump or lathe, but what did I know at eleven?

Of course, I did know. He'd looked me straight in the eye and said it at the dinner table over his soup and murder confession.

The Machine.

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Most mornings found Uncle John at the dining room table, eyes rheumy and bloodshot, skin and lips cracked like a man who had crossed the Mojave on foot. Aunt Mary waltzed right past him without a word, although she never failed to fetch his coffee and, I think, gloated at his inability to consume it.

“There is one beneath every sentinel mountain of the world,” an ashen Uncle John muttered, hissing as he pulled back from his steaming cup. From underneath his deteriorating eyebrows he shot a rueful look to Aunt Mary, then focused on me as I ate my cereal. King Vitamin, if you must know.

“Follow me to my study.”

I froze for a moment with my spoon halfway to my mouth, milk dripping. I glanced toward the kitchen, hoping to catch Aunt Mary's attention, but Uncle John's voice, now the timbre of a much older man, brought my gaze back to him.

“Do it.”

He disappeared into the study. I'd only gawked at the room from the outside, wondered about its flock of stuffed crows, and the brass scope pointed at the mountain. I never dared enter, and not out of some sense of obedience. I *knew* the place was wrong. Still, at its threshold that morning, a rush of adrenaline tempted me otherwise.

I wanted to see. I wanted to know.

Plus, I'd been invited.

He leaned against a brute of a desk, and whatever he'd been up to in the basement was all over his rumpled shirt and khakis. Even the hair on his forearms was filthy. He set the cup down and crossed his arms.

“You can stand out there if you like, Ian,” he said. He looked over to the brass scope. The early morning light cast a soft beam through the window, painting the apparatus in fire. “Or come in here and hear the unspeakable secret of secrets.”

*How do I say no to that?* I wondered.

Instead, “Are you feeling okay?” was all I could think to say.

“None of that matters.”

I stepped inside. There was no rush of cold, no whispering voices from the Blank Dimension. Just a room filled with pursuits foreign to me, books and carvings that would have never been allowed in our house in San Diego.

Uncle John studied me. Not with his eyes—they were closed. He took a deep breath and exhaled an ultra-fine plume of dust from his nostrils.

“You fight curiosity,” he said. “A barrier built in an old life.”

I felt as if I'd been called on in class and hadn't been paying attention, but his voice harbored no anger or discipline.

“You can't stay at the top of the stairs forever. One night you will come down there, *with us*. They're all over the world, young Ian. And one is here, the beating heart of Walpurgis Peak. Each one keeps one of *Them, The Shadowless Ones*, alive in stasis, a dream-fugue state beyond our comprehension. Wonders. Terrors. *Magnificence*.”

“What's all over the world?”

Uncle John grinned, a wide rictus of a smile, the eater of children in a fairy tale.

“Machines. Grand Machines. The price we pay to fuel its might is high, but the reward worth the effort. When the day comes the world will gawk; idiots speechless in the presence of greatness.”

He turned his head to the window, and I refused to follow his gaze. Uncle John couldn't help but adore his precious mountain, crooked and snarling atop the wilderness. How many hours had he spent with his eye to that elaborate device of his, part mariner's sextant, part astronomer's lens? The unspeakable secret of secrets.

Instead, I examined the bookshelves. Packed to the edges, several large volumes laid atop rows of books to accommodate the overflow. Lots of leather and gold leaf, but very few titles in English. Some bore no title, only weird, geometrical symbols, things I'd seen in old films, set dressing from a wizard's lair or perhaps the home of the witch from whom that oven was stolen.

“They'll emerge,” he said, voice like gravel, eyes still on the window. All he needed was a skull in his palm to complete his Hamlet impression. “Tethered to their miles upon miles long apparatus. Imagine this.”

Uncle John raised one hand to the ceiling, craning his neck as if to glimpse the top of some enormous skyscraper. “Beings high as the sequoia, fierce as any war, roaming this world—*their* world—in anticipation of the Master's arrival.” His hand dropped to the desk with a soft *thunk*.

“Master?” my voice was barely above a whisper.

Uncle John leaned in. For the moment, I'd utterly forgotten he'd taken responsibility for my parents' murder, leered at my sister, and abused the Aunt I'd come to love. He smiled like a harlequin on the verge of suicide, a skin mask of puffed gums and loose teeth, tongue white and dry as a bone. To his right, the flock of stationary crows cast deep shadows on the wood-paneled walls.

He breathed the words with a penitent's reverence.

“The Architect of Zero.”

*What happened to him in the basement? He's losing his mind.*

“Not yet. The mind will go last. I know you yearn to come down the stairs, cross the threshold.”

He raised his palms, dust pattering the carpet as his fingers unfolded. His blistered fingers never had time to callous; he'd worked his skin raw.

“These hands have maintained a small part of a grand design, helped nurse the Broken One in its convalescence, repaired an old, hurting warhorse. And yet, my service, though small,

does not go unnoticed. See how the sun burns through the window, how bright it is, how full of hope? Now, look at the desk, Ian. See my reward.”

I looked at the desktop. To my amazement, Uncle John cast only a *partial* shadow, half as opaque as my own, as if he'd been rendered translucent. The light simply passed through his body.

I looked at his hands and back to the desk, hands to the desk, resembling a simpleton enthralled by a bouncing ball.

“Yes,” he said. “*Becoming. Becoming Shadowless.*”

*Impossible, impossible...*

“No, Ian, with *Them*, all things are possible. All things can be seen. When The Gate finally opens...” After a deep breath rattling with pebbles of phlegm, Uncle John ran the tip of his tongue underneath his upper teeth. A few surrendered to the pressure, moving like the piano keys I imagined them to be. “I said you were born with a gift that needs to be developed. Down below, there, in the basement, *I* can teach you. Young hands means faster work, but old hands show them how.”

What adventurous boy would refuse such a thing, even if offered by a shadowless ghoul? In the days of Evel Knievel, decades before Playstations, you found your fun at the risk of a broken arm or a twisted bicycle. But foolish childhood bravery notwithstanding, I *feared* that man. Maybe no longer physically—he was too weak—but he'd been inside my mind easy as pie, not to mention he claimed to have slaughtered our parents remotely, *supernaturally*, from thousands of miles away.

*That* scared me.

He eyed Walpurgis Peak with a cult member's allegiance, Renfield grovelling as his master defiled him.

“I am no more than soup for it's belly.”

\*\*\*

Every night I heard the rumblings from the basement. As the grandfather clock turned over to yet another small hour after midnight, gurgling pumps passed fluid into the deepest regions of some awful, gibbering device.

And each night, as Uncle John said, I stood at the top of the basement stairs, staring in wonder at the wash of green light from below, eager to join him. Eager to know.

He knew I was there, absolutely.

*Whurrrmp-Fwack—Whurrrmp-Fwack*

*Cancer, Mary, Dr. Friedman said. Metastasized, spread to his organs and bones.*

*I thought as much, Dr. Friedman.*

I had an idea of what a woman might sound like when receiving bad news, but Aunt Mary was not it.

*He's unreachable, he doesn't really speak to me anymore.*

A few weeks had passed since Uncle John revealed his fading shadow when Dr. Friedman pulled up in his blue Oldsmobile Delta 88. I'd seen the doc a couple weeks ago when he disappeared into the study to talk to Uncle John, and a half-hour later, the good doctor left wearing the grave expression of an undertaker. Upon seeing the Oldsmobile roll up a second time, and too curious for my own good, I ducked between a bookshelf and an end table, staying mouse quiet. He was in a private meeting with Aunt Mary, breaking patient confidentiality.

Annie reveled in Uncle John's decline. She smirked every time he limped past us with his bowed back, toothpick legs, and hollow cheeks. After he passed, she imitated his old crone gait and trembling jaw, then looked over to me and giggled.

"I can smell the sick on him," Annie said one Friday night as we endlessly switched between the four available channels. *The Incredible Hulk* was a rerun tonight, so we had a gap to fill.

"Well, he's not bathing," I said.

"I know. He's covered in dirt."

"I think he's going crazy. I hear crazy people stop taking care of themselves."

"He's worse than crazy, Ian."

There was a clatter as the antique telephone fell to the floor. The phone's interior bells dinged, and Uncle John hissed as he struggled with the cable coiled around his ankle. When it pulled taught, he stopped, sneered, and with great effort, untied his leg and moved on. The phone remained on the floor, dial tone blaring, collateral damage from a much larger war.

"I think he's *gutagious*," Annie whispered after he shuffled past, reeking of sour sweat and dirty clothes. "He'll give us crazy germs."

He stopped, and I mean *statue* stopped. The only thing that moved was the tunnel of his shirt sleeve. He kept his back to us. His bald spot was now the size of his fist.

"It's *Contagious*, you shitwit."

"See what I mean?" she said into my ear. "Even *he* knows."

*Oh, he knew. He knew just where he was headed.*

That day, crammed between the bookshelf and the end table, I learned I had a knack for eavesdropping, and a new word to boot: *Metastasized*. Aunt Mary listened to Dr. Friedman, a man so old school he still made house calls.

"But it's the speed, Mary, the velocity at which it spread, it's...it's *uncanny*, that's what it is. I did a blood panel and X-Rays on John a year ago and he was clean as a whistle. A cancer that moves this fast is rare, and usually caused by either some sort of continued exposure to a localized toxic source—and I mean like Times Beach, that town killed by Dioxin—or another cause that's pretty unlikely."

"So what's the other cause, the unlikely cause?"

"There's a congruence with what's happening to John and radiation sickness."

"What?"

"I know, I know. But there are similarities between certain cancers and radiological contamination, which is carcinogenic all on its own."

My eyes widened.

*Just what was that dust all over Uncle John? Would she mention it? She had to have noticed his fading shadow...had Dr. Friedman noticed?*



“So I wouldn't be overly alarmed at that being a possibility,” Dr. Friedman said through a sigh. “It's not like he works at a nuclear power station. If he hadn't had his annual checkup a couple of weeks back, none of this would have come to light. It was like pulling teeth, but John eventually gave me a blood sample. Honestly, I think he did it just to get rid of me.”

“That sounds like John. So cancer it is.”

Dr. Friedman stammered for a second or two; perhaps her candor caught him off guard—cancer was rare in those days. “Hard to say exactly where it came from. Nevertheless, I took the liberty of inquiring about space at the Oncology Center in Kansas City, and they *definitely* want to see him. That's why I'm here. Do you think you could talk him into considering such a thing?”

Aunt Mary's barely contained chortle said just about everything. I knew, but did Dr. Friedman?

“John is very stubborn, Willie,” she finally said. “Nearly unreachable.”

“We're likely beating a dead horse trying to get that man to go for treatment, I agree, but with the rapidity of it's advance...maybe not tomorrow but soon...he'll be immobilized.” He paused for a moment, either waiting for that to sink in or looking for a way to phrase what came next. “You'll need to be prepared for the inevitable.”

“So how long does he have?”

I think Willie Friedman heard only despair, but I heard hope, anticipation.

“There are hospice agencies I can point you toward, a medical service that allows you to take care of him at home and ease his pain. He can face the end with his family, not in some hospital full of strangers.”

“I never knew such a thing existed.”

“It's new, and a case like John's is a perfect fit. A specialist will work with you.”

“That's very compassionate, thank you.”

Voice tip-toeing to the edge of laughter, Aunt Mary paused, waiting, I think, for the right amount of time to satisfy the doctor that the tragic news had struck home. The grandfather clock in the foyer ticked and ticked. Finally she said:

“When did you tell him?”

“Last Friday. Early.”

For the past week, Uncle John had spent nearly every waking hour in the basement. For the last two months, it had only been at night. Now he had the pedal down.

“How he ended up with something tantamount to radiation sickness really chaps my ass, Mary. ”

“Well, they say cancer runs in the family.”

“Try not to let John's cancer run yours.”

## 6

So there it was. The ticking clock. Uncle John knew his time was short, and he'd thrown himself entirely into his...work. Occasionally I saw him in the study, shadow no more than a gray ghost following him about the room, muttering, scrawling away with one hand as he leafed through his immense antique books with the other.

I recall when he looked up from his reading and, as the saying goes, *looked right through me*. When I turned, Annie was near the grandfather clock, sneaking a peek at the cadaverous old man. He leered at her like a decades long castaway, a bizarre union of desperation and starvation. He had plans for her, and there was little doubt The Machine, which I now began to hear even during the daylight hours, was central to it.

Annie looked at me quizzingly every time I raised the issue of the noises from the basement. I could buy that she hadn't heard a thing in the middle of the night. But at two in the afternoon? *On a Saturday?* Impossible to not notice. But oblivious she was, and now when I saw that unholy thirst in Uncle John's eyes I knew. Through some power of his, *he had made it so that she could not hear it*.

So when Aunt Mary found him the morning before Thanksgiving, passed out, face down on the kitchen tile in front of the witch oven, blood leaking from his nose and ass, greenish dust all over the place, she made the call. By nightfall, the hospice service had the bed and other medical gear set up in the living room. They'd cleaned up Uncle John and given him his first dose of morphine.

Thanksgiving was utterly ignored. Instead of the house filled with the aroma of roast turkey, we smelled Uncle John's sickroom. I'd thought the study best, among his secret books and front-row seat to Walpurgis Peak, but Aunt Mary had made her choice, I think, as a final jab to keep him away from the things he really cared about. So in the living room he lay shadowless, waiting to die.

Aunt Mary was heartsick—not about Uncle John on his deathbed, but about Thanksgiving being completely torpedoed—and after a couple of hours in her room with her sage and bells, candles, and crystals, she came downstairs all smiles and bright eyes.

“Get straightened up and grab your coats, loved ones,” she said to Annie and me. “We're headed to the Golden Bear. Best damn Chinese food this side of the Ozarks, and we'll have our own Thanksgiving.”

“Can we just leave him here like that?” I said. “He's only been in that bed for a day.”

Aunt Mary didn't so much as cast Uncle John a glance. “He's going nowhere but down.”

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We went about our lives. I began to sleep the night through without Uncle John's nocturnal outings to rouse me, and I never came near the basement. Aunt Mary took to locking the door once the nightly trips ended. Reasoning that whatever had given him fast-moving cancer had come from there, I dared not go into the place...Machine or no Machine. The morphine—or *dorphine*, as Annie called it—kept him at bay most of the time.

But there were incidents.

Annie was always at the center of it.

After dinner one evening, Annie was fishing around inside the refrigerator, bold as can be with her back to the hissing stove, when Uncle John, whose last known location was dead to the world in a dope haze, suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs in a language so fierce, so *brutal*, Annie shrieked and dropped her RC Cola.

Aunt Mary and I arrived at the same time; she with a handful of herbs and polished stones and me from the foyer. We found Annie standing closer to the bed than she would ever dare,

gawking at Uncle John, who was now upright, eyes bulging like ping pong balls, one tight, focused, and bloodshot as hell, the other a lazy, watery egg.

“*Vgnrr! HDÖr!*”

His jaw hinged open, wide and long, the yellow stubs of his molars and dark fillings a collection of ruined stones. Just looking at his inflamed gums made my mouth sore.

“*Release him,*” Uncle John croaked in a voice that was not his own. It was a rope of voices coiled together, an awful choir trapped in a harmony between the notes. Impossible but it was so. “*We taught him fire and spells, the ways of metals and the angles betwixt the stars. When your breed shat in holes and fucked like brutes, it was We who lifted you from primal mud.*”

Annie looked to Aunt Mary, then to me.

“*Release him. Send him to Us, to The Machine.*”

“You shut your mouth,” Aunt Mary said. She nudged Annie away with her broad hip, holding her morning glories (or whatever in hell they were) above her head like a priest with a crucifix. “I cast you out of this house!”

Uncle John brayed with laughter as his hands sprang up. Arms wide, nails the color of cheap yellow plastic, dust pittering from his nostrils, and mouth twisted in a sneer that was all malevolence, he looked like a gargoyle telling a fishing story.

“*Bring Us the FRĚŞHLÏŪĠ. Our Breeder.*”

“I said shut the hell up!”

Aunt Mary waved her pitiful handful of stones over Uncle John like a Navajo Medicine Man. She muttered something that, for all I knew, could have been Greek, Gaelic, or Gibberish. His face opened into a terrible yawning rictus, and he laughed a hyena's, feral, mocking whine. The tendons in his neck pressed against skin that looked the way stomach aches felt.

Annie stiffened at the sound.

“*Mary the bungler, the she-witch of the carnival midway. Your unworthiness of this conjurer and supplicant is an insult to the Shadowless Empire. Lowly, crippled by delusional frailties—*”

“God damn your mouth!”

Snakelike, he flicked his tongue in the air between himself and my little sister. When satisfied, he turned to Aunt Mary and raised his eyebrows. The inflamed channel of his eye sockets were caked with the greenish, dirty ore.

“*But this FRĚŞHLÏŪĠ...she is of interest to Us.*”

Faster than Uncle John's ruined anatomy allowed, those gargoyle paws reached out toward Annie, a profane sculpture brought to hideous life. He clawed at her hair, managed to pull a few strands free, then took a second swipe before a stunned Annie could retreat. With the back of his hand he brushed her cheek, like a tailor smoothing a garment. The lazy eye wandered, the good eye locked with hers. His throat purred until that ribbon of voices spoke again.

“*Our hand tastes pure innocence. The Machine will see to you, keep you well until you are warm of womb. Brother will assist us.*”

“*Bastard!*” Aunt Mary hissed. She slapped Uncle John's arm away then balled her hand into a fist.

Uncle John pretended to sniff Aunt Mary with a Labrador's urgency, limp tongue wagging, dust and saliva dangling in dark muddy strands. His face puckered in revulsion.

“*We smell a failed witch. The sixty-year-old apprentice.*”

Instead of driving that fist into Uncle John's teeth, a red-faced Aunt Mary grabbed the IV regulator and flung it away. Grimacing, she fumbled with the apparatus until a massive dose of morphine plunged down the tube.

Annie and I looked at one another with our mouths wide open.

“*Ahhh, the Nightwater...*”

Uncle John's hands dropped into his lap, his neck went limp as rope.

*"Release him..."*

And he was out like a light.

Aunt Mary snatched Annie's stolen hairs and stuffed them into her pocket. When the tears came, they were in great, hitching sobs. We rushed to her and for a short time the three of us stood crying like lost children.

"Release *you*?" Aunt Mary whined. She looked at Annie and me. A moment later, she spoke exactly as she had to Dr. Friedman. "I'll release *us*."

Annie gazed at her with her doe eyes. "I don't care what *he* says. I love you Aunt Mary."

"I love you too, Annie-girl. Did he hurt you? Are you all right?" Aunt Mary snuffled back a wad of snot and wiped her eyes.

Annie shook her head. "I'm okay. *He's* not."

Shadowless and emaciated, every breath a wheezing bag of crooked pebbles, that mysterious dust intermittently fell from Uncle John's red, inflamed nostrils, even as he slept. For all I knew, cancer dried you out, and that's why people withered. Perhaps he'd spend his last bedridden days mummifying from the inside out.

"I'm sorry if this sounds cruel, but he's not leaving this bed until he dies. But this isn't like your parents; this is not a tragedy. Your Uncle John has become...something else. You have to believe me when I tell you it's for the best."

Uncle John, the discarded mannequin. For a second I wondered if she had overdosed him. If she had, I swore myself to secrecy. I'd never tell another living soul.

Aunt Mary pulled us in as tight as she could, and at that moment, in a sleeping demon's sickroom, we became a family.

“*MARY. BRING HUR TŌ ME.*”

Annie screamed.

Even after all we'd experienced during Uncle John's decline, insatiable child's curiosity had gotten the better of us; we made the idiotic decision to approach that goddamn basement door, knowing the awful thing in its deathbed had returned to the scene of his obsession. He gnawed through the wood like a beaver out of some wretched cartoon, chomping and spitting, gushing that awful voicecoil. Dust streamed from his eyes and nose.

We turned tail and bolted for the stairs, Annie leading the way. We skidded on the landing, regained our footing, and shot up the final flight. Down below resounded the relentless ticking of the clock and the stove's serpent hiss.

Annie was not to be slowed by protocol or manners. She burst into Aunt Mary's room a one-girl SWAT team, all noise and clatter.

“Aunt Mary! Please get up!”

I flicked the light on, and my aunt was sleeping peacefully—but the night had just begun. A purple scarf had been tossed over a tassel-shaded jade lamp, and a sprig of incense burned on the mantle above the glowing fireplace. The light was subdued and mysterious, every detail of her heavy furniture wreathed in shadows. Had it not been for the red wine, Sominex, upended Stanley toolbox with nails spilled all over, and the Louisville Slugger leaning by the bed, I would have likened her *boudoir* to a fortune teller's wagon in an old werewolf movie.

Annie climbed on the bed and shook her. Her breasts swayed, her eyes opened for a second and rolled. She murmured something unintelligible.

“Aunt Mary get up now!” Annie screamed, shaking her again.

I looked at the floor. Hammer, nails—make that *big* goddamn nails. Aunt Mary had been busy, alright. All under our noses as we slept.

Aunt Mary groaned and pushed Annie away. My sister slid off the bed and stamped her feet in her famous peep-pee dance. She had finished her Scooter Pie, so she rumbled the little foil wrapper over and over, close enough to Aunt Mary's ear to rouse anyone.

I cast a quick glance to the dresser on which the jade lamp stood, and there, in a circle drawn from lipstick, was my missing toothbrush and the stands of Annie's hair snatched from Uncle John's hand. The circle was far more than a circle—a *magic circle*—like the hex symbols emblazoned on barns all over Walpurgis County. It was all true, of course; both my Aunt and Uncle were deeply into the occult, but I'd tried to put that into a safe box labeled Passing Interest, like a man with an expensive telescope or a woman who collects colored stones because they're pretty.

The Scooter Pie wrapper worked its own type of magic, and Aunt Mary opened her eyes. One look at my sister stomping her feet was enough, and she sprang straight up, sweeping Annie to her bosom.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

I saw horror and fatigue etched on Aunt Mary's face—she'd coped the only way she knew. She'd hidden the problem in the basement, then drugged herself unconscious. Winter Howl had its own opinion on the matter, lowing through Walpurgis County with the name of every ghost on its lips, an accuser calling to all whether they cared to listen or not.

Annie pushed from foot to foot, but now, safe in Aunt Mary's arms, words no longer mattered when sobs would do. Annie looked to me to speak for her.

“Talk to me, Ian,” Aunt Mary said. She cast a wary glance to the open door, cocked her head for a second, listening, then returned her attention to me.

“It's Uncle John!” I shouted. “He's...he's...” My eyes fell back to the scattered nails and a well-worn rubber mallet. Years of being around my father the contractor had me thinking: *she drove nails with that thing? Where's the claw hammer?*

She waited for me to have my look then locked eyes with me.

“Oh Goddammit, Ian...*he's what?*”

“He's...he's...Uncle John is eating his way through the basement door!”

There was a series of bangs downstairs, followed by the unmistakable sound of splintering wood. Aunt Mary closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them, the woman pulled from sleep was gone. Mary Hazel Emerson Ingersoll was present and accounted for.

“Bastard,” she said, and pushed Annie back to arm's length and looked at her. “He didn't touch you, did he? Either of you?”

Annie and I both shook our heads.

“Speak to you?”

I nodded.

Outside, Winter Howl brayed.

Inside, Uncle John bellowed.

“*MARY!*”

The volume of that voicecoil was astonishing, the tone horrendous. I wondered how something could rival the thunderous bale of Walpurgis Peak, but it had, and with that, Aunt Mary was on her feet, passing Annie to me.

“Watch your sister, stay back here. Do *not* follow me, do *not* let her go. Do you understand, Ian? Your Uncle wants her, and I already stopped him once. I'll sure-as-shit do it again.”

“What *is* he? What did you *do*?” It was all in front of me, of course; my missing toothbrush, Annie's hair, the magic circle, wine, even the Louisville Slugger at the ready. I picked up one of the nails and held it out.

“There's no way we slept through all that noise.”

The lights flickered as a stunning blast of wind carved its way down Gethsemane Lane, trumpeting winter's arrival.

“I cast a harmless sleeping spell...” She cracked a half-smile, no doubt pleased with her success.

“You *what?*”

Her crooked smile was all the proof I needed she'd been telling the truth. What had Mom said all those years ago? *You think she's moved past all that Witchiepoo shit?* Well Mom, the answer was a hard no. The sage burning, the little talismans hanging in the windowsills...more Ojai hippie than a cauldron-stirring witch, true, but perhaps she had a trick or two up her sleeve after all, despite Uncle John's constant insults about her abilities.

“I cast a harmless spell to keep you and your sister quiet while I worked downstairs. You're a smart kid. If your Uncle John is right about anything it's that you're eager to see. *You* didn't know what went on inside this house? My God, Ian, I went so far out of my way to shield you from him for all those years, and now he wants you to follow in his footsteps. He has designs on Annie, wants to turn your sister into some sort of horrible blood bag for that monstrosity he worships. God damn me to the darkest Hell if I allow that.”

“*MARY!*”

Deeper, louder. He was nearly out of the cellar. I was sure of it because I saw it in my mind's eye—not an image conjured from my imagination, but here, present as any sight that had ever played out upon my retinas. Uncle John lay on his belly, partially through the hole he'd gnawed, writhing a worm's best effort, skin like old bread dough that had failed to rise, hand extended, that finger curling. Beckoning. *Demanding.*

*You were born for Walpurgis County, you just don't know it yet.*

“*ČŌMĚ HERĚ!*”



Winter Howl answered in its aching whistle. Walpurgis Peak threw its full fury at the house, shaking window panes and loosening shutters. A blast of cold air found its way inside through whatever imperfections existed in those rickety windows. The trees slapped the glass like a coachman's whip.

*Why do you think I went so far out of my way to shield you from him for all those years?*

Uncle John served Walpurgis Peak, he'd said it many times, made every effort to let me know. It was no leap to assume the mountain *wanted* us awake, thwarting Aunt Mary's amateur spell. I asked again, "What *is* he? What did you *do*?"

Her tone was exasperation, but her body language was all business. She took a slug of wine from the bottle and thumped it to the nightstand.

"Your Uncle John is a sorcerer."

*"MARRRÆÆÆ!"*

"And I stopped him."

From Walpurgis Peak: *Duhurrrruhh....*

Annie's hands dug into my shirt.

Now with bat in hand, Aunt Mary tested its weight. Her mouth curled into a sneer, neck tendons like bridge cables. She turned to Annie and me with one raised eyebrow.

"Did you *kill* him?" I blurted.

She didn't say anything.

"You *killed* him? He was nearly dead alre—"

"That son of a whore needs to stay where I put him," Aunt Mary said, cutting me off.

She stomped out of the room like Buford Pusser in those Walking Tall movies, shoulders wide, bat in one hand, the other balled into a fist. She hung a left at the doorway and was out of sight. Her voice carried from the top of the stairs.

"Don't follow me, you two, I'm serious."

We stayed put.

That lasted about ten seconds.

Annie planted her feet, but damned if I'd leave her behind. I'd come this far, endured Uncle John's cruelty, his confession for the murder of our parents, his ramblings about The Machine and the Shadowless Ones. Hell, my sister and I had tip-toed around the man as he lay dying in the living room, for God's sake, because he'd gone utterly insane, possibly driven mad not only by that pitiless mountain but a stable of night-filled books on the shelves of his study.

I'd paid my dues; I was going downstairs. I'd earned the right to see. To know.

*Your Uncle John is a sorcerer.*

*And I stopped him.*

Maybe not.

“She killed him...she killed him...oh my God Ian, *she killed him...*”

Annie said over and over as we moved toward the stairs. Below I heard Aunt Mary's heavy footsteps and Uncle John's ugly gibberish, that same unholy language he sputtered and spat the evening he'd torn Annie's hair out. All around us, Walpurgis Peak snarled in the wind.

“Not all the way,” I said.

“No. Not dead *anymore.*”

I'd seen a lot of weird things in this old Craftsman—and Walpurgis County as a whole—but even I wasn't willing to believe *that*.

As we reached the bottom step, Aunt Mary flipped the kitchen light switch.

Uncle John lay on his belly near that beastly antique stove, the exact spot where he'd collapsed the day before Thanksgiving. His pajamas were the shredded rags of a hobo in a TV comedy skit. Misaligned shoulder blades moved underneath that doughy bleached skin like a pair of dorsal fins, his spine an ugly centipede. Behind him, a trail of smeared dark blood, lumpy with the dust that spilled from his ears, mouth, eyes—and one horrendous wound.

Uncle John was on the floor with a hammer through his lung. The handle pointed away from his scapula at a steep angle, the stanley logo obscured by tacky blood. I now had my answer about the mallet—she'd used the claw hammer to drop Uncle John, and the mallet to drive the nails.

But Uncle John hadn't stayed locked away.

“John, you're dead,” Aunt Mary said.

“Death is its own Shimmer. The Blank Dimension.”

Annie said, “I told you...I told you...*I told you.*”

His face widened into that jester grin, splinters the size of cactus needles in his bloody gums. He laughed like a carnival fortune teller, dust tumbling from his mouth and nostrils, clumping in the places where it encountered leaking blood. His eyes never left his wife.

Moving with the grace of a rolling cinder block, Uncle John swung one hand onto the lip of the stove and hauled himself up. The hammer dangled, the claw caught between two of his ribs.

It was a stupid thing to do—a dumb horror movie thing to do—but we crossed the kitchen threshold, roosting ten feet behind Aunt Mary.

*Because you want to see*, Uncle John's voice rang in my head. *Because you want to know. You were born for Walpurgis County, you just don't know it yet.*

Once upright, Uncle John leaned with his face over the cold burners, chest heaving like a man panting after exertion—yet he wasn't breathing. There was a hissing sound, however; the stove gas sounded its warning like a snake in a hole. The claw hammer, its head matted with green ore and black, awful blood, had pounded its last nail.

His jaw swayed as if broken, and perhaps it had been, whether by Aunt Mary or as he chewed his way out of the basement. Whatever its genesis, it was gruesome to behold; his mouth movements did not match his words, yet for the moment, his voice was his own, not that ghost choir.

“Old hills, Witch Hazel,” Uncle John said. Even postmortem his barbarous sense of humor remained. “With even older rules. And I know them all.”

“Get back in your hole,” Aunt Mary said. “You love that basement so much you can stay there.”

She raised the Slugger.

“I'll kill you again, John, I mean it.”

“In front of the kiddies?”

He looked straight at Annie and me, the lifelessness in his eyes betrayed by the wisdom of the dead, veins breaking beneath the skin of his cheeks and nose. He spat a wad of phlegmy dust clear across the room at Annie. It fell short.

“My *Freshling*.”

Aunt Mary wheeled around. She extended one arm and pointed straight at us.

“Don't you two so much as *look* at him.”

The urgency in her voice, her grimace, that Louisville Slugger wielded like a battle axe, proved a powerful persuader. I took one step back, but as soon as she turned to face Uncle John, I held my ground—I stubbornly and selfishly held my ground.

“They want young hearts, young spirits, Mary. The fuel for The Machine...it's the *ore*, the one I found—the one I was led to—under this house...it feeds on the fruit of these old hills, and the old rule is that the ore must be delivered in the flesh or The Machine rejects it. Tethered to its might, this Freshling will provide decades of ...”

Uncle John, brutalized and dead, looked at Annie. My God, those terrible eyes.

“Receptacles.”

With the same reptilian speed he'd seized my wrist at the dinner table, Uncle John's arm snaked past Aunt Mary—way, way past Aunt Mary. The sound of breaking bones filled the room as his arm extended beyond the limits of human anatomy; humerus freakishly elongated, radius and ulna pulled like taffy, elbow snapping. His skin resembled a sick, rubbery putty as it conformed to his arm's new dimensions and faced the dubious task of keeping it all contained. Still, even magic had limits, and lacerations appeared as the fabric of his body could no longer pay the price for such sorcery.

His dirty warlock fingers wrapped around Annie's neck, and for a brief instant, there was a tug-of-war between a man dead on his feet yet balefully alive and me. But the sight of that ten-foot arm and the desperation of Annie's squeal as he squeezed her neck made my vision swim and my bladder ache to let go. I looked to Aunt Mary, hoping for some heroism—a swing for the center field fence into Uncle John's temple, for starters—but even she temporarily froze in that shocking instant.

His tongue pushed those loose, long piano key teeth forward. Dust spilled as it unrolled into a sticky, matted carpet. Then, that *voice*.

“ZŪRĚŪDžř ħHš BRĚĚĎER, bðA!”

The wind bawled...*Dhuruuuuhh*...fervent applause from Walpurgis Peak. At that moment, I realized I had a piece of it: that rope of twisted voices, many in one, was the will of that cruel mountain, or more accurately, whatever slept beneath it, and it could use Uncle John at will—*because Uncle John was willing*.

I clenched my teeth and brought forth everything I had, hands slick with sweat and wrapped around Annie's tiny wrists with nothing more than a boy's hope and the love of his sister as a bulwark against the clutches of a monster.

That anaconda of an arm yanked Annie from me. It retracted in a grotesque snarl of flesh and soft bone, and my sister slid across the kitchen floor in her little slippers, still clutching her Scooter Pie wrapper, face painted with terror, half obscured by her scarlet hair. Finally, I screamed, partially out of fright but primarily guilt. I'd done this to her. I'd put her in harm's way, and look what happened. *Look what happened, you stupid, clueless kid*.

Winter Howl punched the house, a fist threatening to smash the walls. The lights flickered again as Annie shouted, “Leave me alone! Let me go!”

Uncle John squeezed, choking her words. Every inch the villain, he licked Annie's cheek with a crumbling waterfall of dust, followed by a deep, satisfied grunt. The hammer protruding from his back crazily reminded me of Stegosaurus.

He began his retreat, crunching through wood splinters, fallen dust, and that smear of filthy blood. Annie's splayed hands, two little starfish, shot straight out toward me.

*“Ian!”*

“I’m taking this one with me, a bubbling egg sac for the Broken One. She will beget a new bloodline in the Undervoid. She’ll last a few good years, then—”

Aunt Mary spat on the floor. “The *fuck* you will.”

Simultaneously, Aunt Mary and I launched ourselves at Uncle John. She thrust the bat forward like a fighting stick and hit him hard, driving the frail scarecrow—and Annie—around the pantry and into the nook. I followed up with a linebacker drive into his hip. There was a dry *crack!* as some part of his pelvis gave way.

Annie yelped, Aunt Mary screamed, Uncle John bellowed, Winter howled, and the entire snarl of us crashed through the ruined basement door and down the stairs.

After the world stopped spinning, I saw a lone bulb above me, its jaundiced glow painting the brick walls with heavy shadows. Shadowless Uncle John was first to his feet, rags hanging, hammer buried in his back, Annie prisoner in his fierce stranglehold. Her breath fogged like cigar smoke.

Aunt Mary made it only as far as her knees. Dazed and bruised, she fumbled for the Slugger.

The basement was everything it needed to be: cold and filthy, filled with abandoned things. A sheen of frost clung to the concrete walls, the galvanized pipes, and the narrow windows that peered to ground level. A hole the size of a washing machine had been excavated directly below the coal chute, and shadows filled it; no telling how far down. The creepy bastard had been digging by hand, as shovels, pickaxes, and a wheelbarrow stuffed with that ugly green dirt stood nearby.

In that myriad of voices Uncle John croaked, “BěħǝLD.”

The wind pushed against 1864 Gethsemane Lane, and the coal chute's heavy iron door, which likely hadn't been opened since the late forties, rumbled in its frame. Below, in the derelict concrete vault—currently the site of Uncle John's late-night excavations—formed a searing line, a *slit* of green light. I can't state it any simpler than that; this glowing fissure merely *appeared*, and yes, it *shimmered*.

The light bloomed, slathering the basement in pale green, Annie's hair black in that seasick glow. Behind that throbbing warble of the Shimmer, I recognized the thrum of Uncle John's machine.

*Whurrrmp-Fwack—Whurrrmp-Fwack.*

Aunt Mary groaned to her feet, scraping the bat across the concrete. Elbow locked and ready, she didn't pay the Shimmer so much as a glance.

“Let Annie go. I don't want to hit her by mistake when I break your skull.”

Uncle John's lifeless eyes, smoky as ever, narrowed into slits. His nose leaked dust like a broken hourglass.

“ṚHĪZ BRĒĒĎER İŞ TRĒΛZİRC ANİ ĞÖMİİĞ wıTĥ—”

She leaned into the swing, and Annie, God bless her, managed to dip a fraction of an inch. It was enough. The Home Run Queen of 1959 caught Uncle John right across the chops.

His jaw shattered and tumbled down his chest in a miniature, dusty rock slide. His lower teeth rolled to the floor like dice. Pendulums mandible dangled from exposed tendons and ligaments—hell if I knew the difference—but severe damage had been done. The full brunt of the Louisville Slugger spared his upper teeth, which trembled from the inertia of the blow.

Blood? A lot of it.

It sprayed from the tear in a wild fountain, a great ugly jet of it, then, as I suspected, dust followed in filthy plumes.

He did not howl. He did not scream. He stood in that green light, a stick man with half a head, pawing at the space where his jaw used to be.

Annie, however, did scream. It was ear-piercing and heartbreaking.

The dead man brought my sister closer to the ruined cave of his mouth, poised like a vampire about to bite, tongue prairie-dogging from the open tunnel of his neck. Annie squirmed and screamed, tiny hands clawing. A rain of dirty blood and shreds of skin fell into her hair.

Just as Aunt Mary reared back for a second blow, the coal chute exploded with a dazzling flash. The Shimmer shrieked, swelling to the breaking point, agony from *Elsewhere*.

A sheet of blazing green, a thousand emerald flashbulbs firing at once, and the Shimmer opened. And through that near-blinding overload of light, a window into the filthy workings beneath Walpurgis Peak ripped into existence.

Alarming cold, the *true* breath of Winter Howl, and the awful presence of Walpurgis Peak forced their way into the basement. This tunnel connecting *here* with a distant *there* was beyond something from a dream, and through that glowing membrane, I saw a network of mammoth tunnels bored into ancient ice and even older rock.

The coal chute was a pathway between the house and Walpurgis Peak at best—a portal to the Blank Dimension at worst.

Machine noise was everywhere; loud, brutal, and unrelenting. A deathstink soured by centuries in this tomb accompanied it, undoubtedly the atmosphere of Uncle John's coveted Undervoid.

I saw it; I saw The Machine, certainly not in its entirety (its scale had to have been colossal), but merely a portion of its workings. Gashes the size of railway cars had been opened in the walls of those immense catacombs.

*Those are claw marks. A living thing made those.*

Within these wounds, enormous bars reciprocated and cycled, similar to the coupling rods of a steam locomotive's driving wheels. They were vile, angry things, covered in bloody grime, dripping ochrous gobs with every thrust. Behind these rods were bags, bellows, organs—nearly fifty years later I still don't know what to call them—that hissed and breathed, expanding and contracting, pumping a dense fluid into bent pipes that vented reeking steam.

This fissure, an umbilical if you like, connected to the rotten gut of Walpurgis Peak. I assumed a far greater danger lay at the end of these ancient tunnels, which were merely the outskirts of a bedchamber harboring something Shadowless.

*“Thê ηΆCHΨC.”*

Even with his mouth destroyed, Uncle John spoke in that ugly voice from Elsewhere. With his tongue a wagging worm and jaw gone, speech should have been impossible. In the moment, no one thought to be stunned by such a thing.

Winter Howl responded with a dreadful lowing and an unimaginable blast of cold. I felt the snot in my nostrils crystallize.

*“BEŊÆIΨH EŶĕRY Sĕn!ŋ'EL MÓUŊLΔFN óT TH3 WJOrLd.”*

*Whurrrmp-Fwack—Whurrrmp-Fwack—*

*“It will end me, use me for fuel, soup in the belly of the Broken One—but only after my burden is shed. It wants a Freshling.”*

Despite The Machine's roar, the frigid wind, the searing light, *I was* drawn to it—Uncle John was right about that. If I stepped through that throbbing light slit, into the stinking dungeon beneath the mountain, what knowledge would be imparted to me? What would I see, what would I know, would I too become shadowless, no longer a citizen of this world or any oth—

*“Ian, stop!”*

I snapped out of my trance, eyes suddenly wide as saucers, my right foot a few inches above that dark, excavated hole—the border of this world to the next. Uncle John brayed with laughter.

*“Two Freshlings if it can get it.”*

“John,” Aunt Mary said. “You should have stayed in that shitty bed and died like God intended.”

Uncle John pinned Annie to the wall, that horrific arm fully extended, and stepped toward Aunt Mary. Terrified by the man with half his head gone, Annie looked to the unholy rip of the Shimmer instead, gawking like an ape mesmerized by fire as the mechanism bellowed, breathed and hissed.

“Don't *look* at it Annie!” I shouted. “He wants you hypnotized. Look at me instead!”

Aunt Mary rushed the monster.

Uncle John extended his other hand into a bizarre Heisman pose. Aunt Mary leaped to close the distance, hair wild, eyes wilder, oblivious to The Machine, concerned only for Annie.



She brought the Louisville Slugger down like a broadsword and chopped at that unholy ten-foot arm, repeatedly bludgeoning the shoulder joint. Although Uncle John's black art allowed him to defy physics, Aunt Mary's maternal drive was beyond his sorcery's reach. After several blows, the rubbery skin gave way, the malleable bones beneath collapsed, and, finally—*finally*—Uncle John howled.

“*Duhruuuuuh!*”

Walpurgis Peak drove an ingot of hate into the house. It shattered every basement window, knocked several pipes loose, flipped the wheelbarrow, and sent the Kenmores sliding from their moorings beneath the stairs. The hanging bulb exploded, leaving us in the Shimmer's seasick green light and the wretched stink of the Undervoid.

He screamed, not from pain, but his lost grip on Annie. He failed in his mission, failed The Machine and The Shadowless Ones.

*It hit me:* Aunt Mary nailed the basement shut because she *knew* resurrection was imminent, servitude to Shadowless Ones Uncle John's guarantor. In her mind, the only way to keep him away from us was to seal him below. Who knows what story she planned to make up the following morning, but I think she cast her sleeping spell on us and went downstairs intending to overdose Uncle John on morphine. Perhaps she found him in the basement, staggering around in his Machine Fugue State, digging his hole, rolling around in the dirt, whatever. Harsh words and threats were spoken, the toolbox lay open, and she grabbed the first thing handy. Old rage and resentment took over; when one blow would have been enough, she landed several, and that frail old man dropped to the floor. Selling his death as an accidental OD was off the table now, and needing time to figure out what came next (although I suspect she may have had plans to toss him into his hole or the Shimmer) and fearing the inevitability of resurrection, Aunt Mary hauled the toolbox up the stairs. She nailed the door shut with the rubber mallet, then staggered off to chug wine and pop Sominex until lights out.

But what waits below Walpurgis Peak would not be insulted, let alone bested.

Annie ran to me, half laughing, half sobbing, all joy, and we wrapped our arms around one another. Her hot tears and breath steamed through my shirt, and my heart pounded to the cursed machine's insane rhythm. I had to get her out of here. I looked up toward the stairs (a stack of shadows in the Shimmer's green light) and saw the inevitable.

She had him pinned against the wall Adam-12 style—*up against the wall, feet back and spread 'em!*—her foot at the small of his back as she smashed that Louisville Slugger into the dangling hammer, driving that nail home into a savage, gaping wound.

“Fucker!” she screamed with every blow.

Wham!

*You WHAM Will WHAM Not WHAM Take WHAM These WHAM Children!*

I tried to shield Annie's eyes, but she would have none of it.

“Get him, Aunt Mary!” Annie screamed. “Kick his ass!”

Outside, Winter Howl raged.

Below and within, The Machine roared.

I pushed Annie up the first few steps and followed. I turned when Aunt Mary called.

“Topside, Ian,” she said, winded from her caning session. “Stack anything heavy you can find against the door.” She tipped the Louisville Slugger toward the monster at the foot of the stairs. “This rotten bastard's not leaving this basement, but still, *get your sister far away from him.*”

“Where?” I said.

Aunt Mary impatiently waved that away. “Winter Howl ends at sunrise. Go to Miss Geraldine's across the street, understand? She'll know what do to. Do NOT look at the mountain when you leave. Do NOT look at Walpurgis Peak *ever again.*”

Uncle John, shirt gone, dressed only in his shredded castaway pants, turned around. His ruined head was a bizarre blend of dangling teeth, poisoned ore, and pulped human meat. Those eyes, pearls of smoked glass filled with nowhere, watched us. One arm was gone, the tear unimaginable in its ferocity. What remained of his upper lip curled into a sneer, puppeteered by some vile thing sleeping on the damned side of the Shimmer. Impossible to be standing, let alone speaking, but it was so, and in this moment of desperation, the thing actually attempted to bargain.

*“The Machine wants her, Mary. Needs her. The Freshling will provide vessels for sustenance. Someone will take John's place, and the boy is of age. We will train his eye, sate his thirst. In return, we will grant you the powers you always coveted. John's powers. He will not be needing them.”*

Annie flew up the stairs. I began my backward ascent, eyes on the sorcerer and the wannabe witch.

A winded Aunt Mary, bloodied, bruised, sweat pouring from her brow, followed in uneven backward steps. That was when Uncle John came at her with a leopard's speed, hand reaching over his shoulder like a warrior retrieving an arrow from his quiver. He produced the hammer she'd buried in his back and held it over that mangled half-head, tongue wagging, spit, blood, and dust flying.

*Whurrrmp-Fwack—Whurrrmp-Fwack—*

*“MARRRĒĒĒ!”*

“Ian! Go!”

She swung and missed.

Dawn found Annie and me in Aunt Mary's room, curled up in front of the fireplace.

A finger of sunlight shone through the lace curtains, casting intricate shadows on Annie as she slept. She'd been through hell in the grip of that thing Uncle John had become, far more than anyone her age should ever endure. She slept fitfully, bottom lip trembling, hands opening and closing. Her Scooter Pie wrapper lay nearby, certainly worse for wear. I noticed it then in that golden glow, a streak of white had appeared in her luxurious red mane, streaming away from her forehead, just north of her temple.

I parted the curtains to Winter Howl's handiwork. One of the sycamores had split in half—we'd heard that early on—and several other trees along our street suffered severe damage. Enormous sheared branches lay drunkenly against leaning telephone poles, the lines down. Limbs the size of eighteen-wheelers populated the street, mammoth prisoners shot during an escape attempt. Numerous cars were covered in debris, nearly all their windshields cracked or shattered. Roof shingles everywhere. A wooden doghouse sat atop a manhole cover neat as you please. Despite its disarray, Gethsemane Lane was dead quiet, utterly at winter's command, yet not a single snowflake had fallen. It was clear, biting, cold—so much so that I winced when I touched the glass.

I tossed another piece of wood onto the coals and blew the flame to life. A trip downstairs was imperative, and it was best to do that while Annie was still conked out, but I wasn't leaving that bedroom without a weapon. Like Aunt Mary, I made the obvious choice: I picked up the mallet.

When I arrived at the kitchen's threshold, I replayed what we'd heard from Aunt Mary's room. Uncle John's hideous multi-voice had uttered the ugliest things, vile and personal insults in tandem with repeated blows. We listened to the doomed clank of the Louisville Slugger falling to the concrete, her dreadful lanced cow scream, and it was then that Annie and I abandoned hope for her and assumed the worst. Surrounding us, the awful, bloodthirsty bellow of Winter Howl's ire singling out this house.

In lock step with Uncle John assault had been The Machine's gibbering glee as its knocked, hissed and spat. My God, Uncle John referred to Annie as a breeder, and Aunt Mary risked it all to keep my sister and me out of the clutches of darkness.

And I'd left her there.

I had put my sister in ridiculous danger, exposed her to horrors and trauma. I couldn't leave her alone in the bedroom, nor would I take her with me. I'd left my Aunt—my sweet Aunt Mary who defended us—alone in the basement with that goddamn monster.

I flicked the light switch. Nothing. The fallen trees had seen to that. The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed the hour—loud as church bells as it counted to six. The stove hissed its snake warning as I crossed its path.

The table and chairs we'd stacked against the basement door were where we'd left them, our work shoddy. Anything could have gotten through that maze with so much as a push and a harsh word. It took even less than that for me to wriggle my way through. I held my mallet tight as I pulled open the door Uncle John had gnawed to splinters.

No machine noise. No ugly deathstink. No cancerous green glow.

Blasphemous cold came up from that dark hole. Winter Howl may have turned the place into Ice Station Zebra, but a fair amount of early morning light still found its way in through the broken windows. A soft pyramid of winter dawn lay at the foot of the stairs.

I stopped on the third step, allowing my eyes to adjust—allowing everything to adjust. My heart was a swollen ball bearing. The mallet shook.

“Ian? *Ian*...is that you?”

Aunt Mary's voice was haggard and spent, but there was something else: the hoarseness of illness and the brittle crack of kindling.

A hand reached from the shadows, Aunt Mary's to be sure, covered in grimy, tacky blood. Three of her fingers were smashed. Despite all I'd seen that night I still gasped.

"Don't come down here, Ian. Where's Annie?"

*What happened to her voice?*

"She's sleeping in your room. By the fireplace."

"Good boy, good man. My *brave* man."

"No. No I left you, I *left* you..."

"I *told* you to leave. He'd have dragged your sister into the Shimmer...I thought after I severed his arm I'd have the advantage...but you saw him, you heard him speak with most his head gone..."

The last I saw of Uncle John, he was an unstoppable, horrendous half-headed thing pursuing my aunt up the stairs as he pulled a Stanley claw hammer from his back.

Her arm moved into the light. Wrist broken, her right hand faced the wrong way, the elbow a swollen eggplant of bruises. Finally her head appeared, but just the crown. What remained of her gregarious hippie hair was a bloody snarl peppered with that same greenish dust. The rest had been torn out and strewn about the bottom landing, a sludge-pile of torn skin and long gray locks.

Her hands pushed through the muck as she hauled herself up the first couple of steps. One of her legs had been broken so badly she was forced to drag it along, calf split, shoe missing, foot swollen and purple. It hurt my heart to look at her. Without thinking, I trotted down a few steps.

"I said don't come down here. It's over, there's nothing for you to do."

"What happened?" I was so close to tears the word *happened* sounded like a balloon squealing as the air is slowly released.

"He had me face down in that wheel barrow, shoving that awful dirt in my mouth, into my wounds. I thought he meant to drown me. No. He wanted me to share the same fate."

Aunt Mary avoided my eyes. She leaned against the stairwell and hissed as pain launched her into a series of hard contractions. She threw her head back and screamed. Nearly scalped. Crushed eye socket. Those hideous broken limbs. Uncle John had beaten her to a pulp the very hammer she'd used to strike him down.

"Then something reached out of the Shimmer," she said, as if she didn't believe her own words. "It happened so fast. I was barely conscious—but I *saw* it."

"The Machine?"

"The thing that *feeds* The Machine. Looks after it. I don't know how I know...I just *do*. Oh Ian, it looked like a stomach with legs." Aunt Mary sobbed, the image in her mind too hideous to reconcile. "He would have given your sister to that thing I'm sure of it."

I took another couple of steps toward her.

"It squeezed through the Shimmer and snatched him. Snatched him with its big asshole mouth. I saw its body on the other side, Ian. Under Walpurgis Peak, it was a slimy, fat thing with *too many legs*. When it passed into the basement...the part here, in this room, became invisible. It *Shimmered*."

Had not Uncle John said he would die as soup in his master's belly? Aunt Mary had fought hard and done the right things, she'd taken the fight to the edge of the Shimmer, and this Harvester, whatever that was, had done the rest.

"It took him like a bird takes a worm. After it gorged its belly it looked at *me*. Those eyes, like lobster eyes, on stalks. It looked at me. *Marked me*."

She coughed. A red glob trailing dust flew from her mouth. It was then she looked up with sad, exhausted eyes. Green deathdust crusted her ruined face, her swollen, beaten lips. The Home Run Queen of 1959 had touched 'em all for the last time.

I ached inside. She didn't have to explain what came next. Dr. Friedman had been clear about that.

"I'll stay here. I'm what The Machine wants now. There's no going back once you're infected with this...I don't know. Uranium? Plutonium? Dr. Friedman was right. Whatever it is, *it's so fast*...I can feel it burning me from the inside out."

"I'll get an ambulance!" I said, desperate for any solution, ready to turn tail and call for help. I dropped the mallet. It bounced down the stairs and landed in the sea of shadow.

"Oh Ian. Ian I'm so sorry I can't be here with you and Annie."

"We'll get you out of there, I swear." Blubbering imminent.

Aunt Mary on the stairs in thick mats of blood and hair, offered a weak smile and shook her head.

"No sweetheart."

The cast iron door of the coal chute rattled.

Aunt Mary raised her one good hand and blew me a kiss.

"I love you, my brave man. And tell Annie her Aunt Mary loves her more every day."

The Shimmer ripped open with that terrible, shrieking noise, flooding the basement with hideous green light and raucous machine clatter. I could not see the actual fissure from the stairs, but it was clear that something was coming, headed down those ancient catacombs of the Undervoid to the wounded belly of 1864 Gethsemane Lane.

It was the late nineties when Annie and I finally made it to Oahu. We stood on Waikiki, and stared at Diamond Head.

Annie had tried several times to remove or dye her white streak, but, as The Purg would have it, no dye ever took, and that area grew back faster than any other. Scars are like that, you know. They never allow themselves to be forgotten, and you only pretend they don't hurt. Believe me, I have plenty of my own.

Annie's sons sprinted to the warm water. Her husband Kevin cracked a Primo lager and watched them from the beach. It was good to see unbridled happiness like that, young boys with normal lives and parents who loved them.

Annie and I didn't speak for a few minutes, we buried our toes in the sand and stared at the slope of the long-dead volcanic cone. As Uncle John had said one night long ago: once you've seen Walpurgis Peak, most mountains are just pussy hills.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't imagined over and over Uncle John in his study, poring over his sorcery books to crash our parents' Beechcraft into the mountainside while Aunt Mary toiled away in her room, repeatedly failing to concoct a love potion from a grimoire she'd purchased at Waldenbooks. I wished those evil forces would have turned on him that night, but in the end, I suppose they had—it had just taken a few years. He's part of that ugly mountain now, as is our lovely Aunt Mary. The willing and the unwilling seem to be fed upon with identical fervor.

"For years I never wanted to come here," Annie finally said. She wore big Gucci shades and a floppy hat Aunt Mary would have envied.

"Because it's a crime scene," I said.

"Sure, that's part of it. But I hate that I always knew the day I finally stood on this beach and looked at Diamond Head, I wouldn't be able to think about Mom and Dad—all I'd think about is that asshole who took them from us. Here we are twenty years later, and I've never said a goddamn thing about it, Ian. I never let anyone know what I know...let alone what *you* know. Not my husband, not anyone."

"I understand."

"*Do you?*"

The little girl in the strange house full of shadows was long gone. She looked at me like an expensive attorney waiting for an answer.

I nodded. "I think so. You have good reason to live in the flat lands."

"I'll never live near a mountain ever again. How can you *stay* in that place?"

Annie. She was allowed to leave, despite whatever designs The Machine had upon her. I often wonder what her dreams are like, and what she thinks about when she is alone in her thoughts, waiting for sleep to come. Whether she has Scooter Pies in her refrigerator, I cannot say, but when I looked down, I saw the slightest pivot from foot to foot. The pee-pee dance was, in its way, still alive and well.

Annie and I are not estranged like our father and Aunt Mary, but we are nowhere near as close as we used to be.

And I know why.

*You were born for Walpurgis County—you just don't know it yet.*

Turns out he was right. I never left The Purg, though I'd tried repeatedly. Every time I packed my bags, navigated that snake pit of detours and made it to the Interstate, an hour later I'd look at a road sign and find that I was on Route 54 or Beltane Road, the two main arteries of Walpurgis County. I eventually figured out that I was free to *travel*, but would not be allowed to *live* anywhere else. Yes, just like the line in that Eagles song...*you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.*

Shimmers and the occasional resurrection are nothing new in Walpurgis County, and over the years, I've assembled an encyclopedic history of the place. Copperhead Farms, Eldritch Wood, Dead Neck Lake, the Vanderbaum House, hell, Beltane Road itself...the list of haunted places and benighted things goes on and on.

I kept Uncle John's library and the brass device through which he'd gazed at Walpurgis Peak. It still, to this day, points only at the mountain, even though it's in a crate that's nailed shut and stored in the attic. The unspeakable secret of secrets.

So best I leave you here, on the side of the road with your suitcase at your feet, before we come to the sweeping curve that affords you your first glance of Walpurgis Peak.

Best I leave you in a state of blissful naiveté.

Before superstition intervenes.



# The End

## Excerpt from *Live Wire* by Kyle Toucher

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### Storm Signal

“Lightning, Dad—dead ahead,” Caleb said.

Caleb's eyes never left the windshield as he wrapped the headset's cable around his Walkman. He rarely saw towering thunderheads in his native southern California, and upon witnessing this searing bolt of plasma, New Mexico had his full attention.

Behind the wheel, Pale Brody kept an eye on the fine line of the eastern horizon. An endless procession of high-tension towers guarded Route 60, while above, distant, bruised, and bloodied, the clouds shed a curtain of rain, which set to work in smearing that perfect boundary between earth and sky. The lightning flashed again, enormous and impressive. He silently congratulated himself for changing the wiper blades on his '68 Fleetwood before leaving Los Angeles.

“That was just *huge*,” Caleb said. “I can't wait to pass through it. I guarantee the day will not be able to get any cooler than *that*.” He jabbed his index finger toward the sky show.

“You're right, Playboy,” Pale said. “From here all the way to the Atlantic, the thunderstorms are really something else. We used to drive right through some certifiable whoppers back in the day. Did I ever tell you that in Nebraska we almost got caught in a twister?”

Caleb turned away so his father would not see him roll his eyes. “I've heard that story a couple times.”

“That's why I change it every time I tell it, buddy.”

*Back in the day* for Pale meant when he anchored the lead guitar position in a band called Mac Daddy. Mac Daddy was a mid-level hard rock outfit out of Pasadena, signed to a major label subsidiary. Pale likely would never have joined a band like Mac Daddy—his guitar pastor preached Hendrix over Page—but the club scene in LA had only one lane in those days, and if you wanted to play pro, you drove in it.

Fun days nonetheless, those road trips, as Mac Daddy roamed North America, played loud, played hard, drank absolutely *everything*, and met absolutely *everybody*.

Caleb was just past the toddler stage when it all became airborne, and Valerie remained at home base with one eye on their son and the other scrutinizing the label's A&R guy. On a few occasions, Pale flew Valerie and Caleb out for shows in New York, Denver, and Miami. Those times had been good. Never rock star spectacular, but good.

Four years into the band's slow but steady climb up the ladder, they suffered a self-inflicted, humiliating blow. In 1988, Mac Daddy released a highly mocked, syrupy MTV power ballad called “I Wish You Missed Me,” right as tastes began to change. Their upcoming album, *Relentless Boulevard*, absolutely died in the stores because of it, and the label tossed Mac Daddy like incriminating evidence.

The second whack in the balls came a month later, right in the middle of rescue negotiations with Capitol Records. Because of *Relentless Boulevard's* dismal performance, Mac Daddy was replaced in the direct support slot for a major act's European tour; not bumped down a peg to opening band, just *gone*. Upon *that* news, Capitol stopped returning

their manager's phone calls, then canceled future meetings. Within four months, the wounds proved fatal. The band split up.

Five years later, with the Nineties pendulum firmly set toward grunge and his marriage in the rear-view mirror, Pale hit the road for Austin, son in tow, eager to enter the world of record producing. Pale's old pal Billy Gaines and his crazy talented batch of post-punk-chicken-pickers were set to record a follow-up to their debut record, *The Tornado Alley Cats*, which had made some real noise on the alternative charts. It was not only gracious of Billy to ask Pale to produce their sophomore effort, but it couldn't have come at a better time, as Los Angeles was filled with ghosts; the house he was forced to sell, the shuttered clubs on Sunset, the handful of friends who had lost it all to drugs. If *The Tornado Alley Cats*' second record made waves, it could really kick-start a new career. *Produced By Pale Brody*—a future he could get behind.

"I'm glad we didn't fly—we'd have missed all of this," Caleb said. He squirmed as he did when his dad took him to see *The Empire Strikes Back* re-release on the Fox lot. The Imperial Walkers on the big screen blew his mind. "Just *look* at that."

Here on Route 60, part of Pale's slow road to Texas—when they could have just powered through on Interstate 10 and hooked a left at San Antonio—the scenic route revealed its treasures as God took X-Rays of the world. A purple river delta of lightning flooded the sky.

"Behold!" Pale said. He turned to his son and wiggled his eyebrows. "There's going to be a hammer—"

The hammer whacked the Cadillac square across the nose. Caleb had heard thunder a few times at home, rumbling far away in the San Gabriel mountains, but he'd never experienced such deliberate, solid brutality—and his dad was friends with the guys in Slayer.

"That's just crazy loud!" Caleb said, eyes wide as pancakes.

"Really is," Pale said. "Pretty deafening for a storm so far away. Maybe it's closer than we think."

Caleb leaned toward the windshield. The sun was nearly finished for the day, and soon it would light the underside of the storm, a promise of magnificent color.

"Sound at sea level travels at seven hundred sixty miles per hour," Caleb said. "We're about...what in New Mexico? Sixty-five hundred feet, maybe? So, it's a tad slower, seven-fifty, I'd guess, but that's still pretty fast. So maybe you're right about it being closer than we think. I love it, though."

"How the hell do you know all that?"

"I actually pay attention in school, Dad. That and, well, The Learning Channel is more awesome than you think it is. There's physics, biology, astronomy, all kinds of great stuff."

Pale shook his head and thought, *did he grow up when I wasn't looking?* "How come I never knew you were so smart?"

"Lots going on, I guess."

Pale sighed. Caleb had endured a lot of bad news since his mother's abrupt departure and had witnessed both parents at their worst. Still, the kid brought home A's and B's, had more than a passing interest in Yolanda Rivas two blocks over and had never kept a library book past its due date. His stomach wormed at the thought of uprooting his son, but the compass pointed to opportunity, and it had to be followed. Best of all, Caleb seemed to understand.

"By the way, I took one of your Marshall amps apart last year." Caleb tried to keep one eye on his father and the other on Route 60's descent into heavy weather. He wasn't sure how the old man would take the news his son had been screwing around inside a vintage 1972 Super Lead, but currently emboldened by the compliment, if he was going to brag a little, now was the time.

Pale frowned, but his eyes smiled. “No, you didn't. How the hell could you do that? You were *eleven*. I never even saw a screwdriver until I was twenty-seven.”

Caleb nodded. “I did. I mean, not all the way like unsoldering everything, but I took out all the power tubes, cleaned the contacts, all that. I removed the whole thing from the chassis and fixed a speaker output connection that was close to failing. I figured out how the effects loop you had installed works by reading one of the amp-nerd books you bought—but never opened—and also became fascinated with re-biasing. I didn't have the gear for that or the desire to electrocute myself, so I scrapped *that* idea.”

“Dismantling that amp would have bought you a one-way ticket to military school, but amazing work nonetheless. Your mother always said you were born with special skills. When I was your age, I was into T. Rex and Little League.”

“Most kids my age are into weed, Soundgarden, and *Penthouse*.” Caleb watched another jab of God-fire plunge into the desert.

Voice drained of boyishness, Caleb said, “And, well, Mom never really...got it.”

“She had a hard time of it, you know,” Pale said.

Caleb scoffed. “Sure.”

“What's *that* supposed to mean?”

*Please, not now. The ride's been great, the storm is awesome. Not now, Caleb, please.*

“Nothing.”

Pale felt compelled to plead his case, a man in a traffic stop.

“Your mom, and hell, me too, I suppose, expected the good times to keep rolling. I think she was holding out for the beach house and the Benz. We never made it past Tarzana and Hondas.”

Pale thought: *But it was far more than homes and cars or the rock star wife-life. It sidwinded beyond depression or anxiety. After a while, she turned her back on her maternal instinct and had the audacity to blame her son.*

Caleb shrugged. “She was weird. When she came home with those fortune-teller cards and mint cigarettes, I knew something was way wrong.”

*Tarot cards and Kools*, Pale remembered. Valerie sulked in the guest bedroom for hours, greasy-haired and cross-legged on the bed like some strung-out Yogi, sheets twisted into a battlefield. Many times he'd walked in to find her with her face buried in her hands, muttering cosmic hippie nonsense. She obsessed over cards such as The Hanged Man, The Magician, The Tower, and The Fool. *The soul is in the blood, Pale*, she'd said while laying the cards out in a carnival huckster's version of solitaire, fingers yellowed, eyes exhausted and rheumy, the room hazy with smoke. *And that's why Caleb marked mine.*

A crack of thunder snapped Pale out of his unpleasant daydream. “Caleb, seriously. She loves you.”

Caleb bent his face into a smirk.

“She had a strange way of showing it,” he finally said. “I was there when you weren't, and Mom was...preoccupied.”

“Playboy, let's not wade into the 'you weren't here' swamp.”

Caleb remained unmoved when his mother finally packed her bags and split. On several occasions, prior to her withdrawal into the guest bedroom, he'd witnessed parents sloppy drunk, a pair of arguing idiots on public display while the valet at El Cholo or Musso and Frank brought the car around, followed by the silent, tension-filled ride home. By the time Mom stopped coming home on weekends, followed by lame excuses about “losing track of time with the girls,” Caleb knew the writing was on the wall. He never suspected that she had another man, although he couldn't say the same for any suspicions his father may have had. Caleb's instinct was pure and unfiltered: she simply didn't want anything to do with *him*, and

Dad was part of the package. Not long after, Tarot and menthol. She never ate. She stopped doing laundry—and you could forget about cooking.

The old man smartened up, cut off half his hair, put the brakes on the booze, and resumed running sprints at the park. With Mac Daddy cold in its tomb—with only a failed power ballad to keep it company—Dad began to receive road job offers from bands that had steady work. *Jimmy's in rehab, can't tour. Mark's wife is nine months pregnant; he won't travel.* Caleb finally figured out his father truly believed he'd be able to salvage the marriage if he stayed put and figured that later he'd be able to put his own band together if things turned around at home—so he passed on the gigs.

Caleb knew his father made a point to sound as hopeful as possible around the house. He never complained about the situation or the loss of income and dutifully manned the bilge pumps in an attempt to keep the SS Brody afloat. But when he was alone in his little home studio, Caleb could see the truth on his face as he sat behind the console, staring into nowhere with the guitar in his lap, amp buzzing, expended reel spinning, the tape leader slapping.

Despite Dad's efforts, it wasn't enough to stem the tide of Mom's detachment and isolation. She'd punched her time card a while ago, ate pills like tic-tacs, and once the Ooga-Booga Express arrived at the guest bedroom station, she covered the mirror in bizarre cutouts she'd harvested from various magazines, installed blackout curtains, hung weird little talismans, burned sage, the works. She smoked Kools as if they'd fallen under threat of a moratorium and flipped Tarot Cards like a dealer at the Bellagio. She only looked at Caleb if she absolutely *had* to speak to him.

Caleb had never told his father, but when he watched Mom back her car out of the driveway for the last time, he was relieved to see her go. Even before the meltdown, she'd always been on the icy side, kept him at arm's length. What loss was it to have her gone?

He'd always known he didn't belong to her.

Within a year of her departure, Dad had done several sessions around town (from prog-rock to pop, it all paid nicely), word got around, the phone rang more often, and things looked like they'd smooth out. When the discussions for Austin began, Caleb hoped it would pan out for the old man because neither one of them genuinely minded leaving LA. Caleb knew he would miss the ocean, but the world was covered with water. He'd find another sea.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “Let's talk about something else.”

Pale nodded and smiled. “Next time, try the Fender Champ for your science projects. I can afford to lose that to experimentation.”

“Give me a little time, and I'll turn that runt into a growler.”

Caleb turned his eye to the electrical towers, which in his imagination resembled colossal prisoners, *a Louisiana chain gang of captured robots*, he mumbled to his father. New Mexico lay bleak and unhurried beneath those giants, resigned to whatever punishment the sky saw fit to dole out.

Caleb said, “I can't wait, this is going to be intense.” He whipped his hand around and snapped his fingers, a trick he'd learned from his father's guitar tech. “Showtime,” he added.

Just as the words left the boy's lips, the leading edge of the storm flashed alive with forks of feral energy.

“This is the coolest thing I've ever seen, Dad. Seriously.”

“Cooler than rummaging through your old man's Super Lead?”

Caleb shrugged. “Once you've looked inside the magic Marshall box, the mystery is gone. So don't make me choose.”

“Listen up, Playboy,” Pale said. He fished around for his nicotine gum. One left. Once Valerie had begun smoking like the 1950s Pittsburgh skyline, he'd become less enamored with his fealty to Camel filters. But a monkey on your back always dug in its claws, and after several setbacks, he had finally left that gibbering little imp at the side of the road. He

glanced at the fuel gauge. “The old gal's tank is getting low, and unlike hers, mine is full. I'm also out of this shitty Nicorette gum, so keep your eyes peeled for an exit.”

“Roger that.”

“The weather guy said it would be high eighties and clear today, but what do you think, Mr. Speed of Sound?”

“I think we hit the weather jackpot, so who cares?”

When Caleb saw one of the electrical towers take a direct hit, the flare so dazzled his eyes it was like paparazzi inside the Cadillac.

“Wow!” Caleb said. “Did you see that? *Did you see that tower get hit?*”

Pale had seen it, and for a moment, his balls tightened. A half-mile away or so, one of the hundred-foot giants had been jabbed by a spear from heaven. Sparks blew from the impact, but the tower stood fast. Wires swayed; dust blew. Soon the rain would find them.

“No, I missed it,” Pale said. He knew Caleb wanted to file a report. “Tell me about it.”

“The lightning just came down like...like *a missile*. It hit the tower like *Ba-Boom!*” He flipped his fingers out and raised his hands to simulate an explosion. “Millions of sparks—and that glow!”

Caleb tossed the Walkman into the back seat like a toy outgrown. He pressed his hand to the passenger window, a starfish in an aquarium. In a minute or so, the stricken tower would be at their side, and there was no way he was missing that.

“These desert thunderstorms can get pretty wild, but in my experience, they pass quickly,” Pale said. “Enjoy it while it lasts. But we need fuel, and my whiz reactor is about to go super-critical.”

“Maybe we could just find a bridge, like in that awesome tornado footage you see on the news. People park under bridges, and the sound gets all crazy. You can pee in the bushes.”

“Keep your eyes out for an exit, buddy. Bridge will be the last resort.”

Caleb shrugged. “Might be more fun under the bridge.”

Pale grinned. *More fun? This kid is fearless.*

“This is it!” Caleb said.

As Pale slowed the Caddy, Caleb rolled down his window. The injured tower stood in dim silhouette, a mighty steel lattice. At the crown, where the impact had occurred, the tower sustained an enormous black scar. The raw power coursing through that lightning strike had been tremendous, but the tower endured.

The wires hummed. At their connection point, a faint glow was still visible.

“What's that ray-gun-looking thing between the wire and the tower?” Caleb said, marveling at the giant.

Now that Pale thought about it, the dual rows of glass discs *did* kind of resemble a ray gun from an old science fiction movie.

“Insulator,” Pale said, “Supposed to keep the power from running into the tower instead of flowing through the line. That would break the circuit, I guess. We have similar ones on the telephone pole behind our house, well, the *old* house, but these insulators are just gigantic.”

“They're still glowing. Man, they must have taken a real beating.”

The air felt alive, crisp, prickling with tension—everything to Caleb seemed to be on the precipice, like the apex of a roller coaster. He turned to his father.

“Smells like...like electricity? Is that possible?”

“Ozone,” Pale said. “The smell of a thunderstorm.”

“What happens if lightning hits the car, Dad? We're metal too.”

Pale snorted. He threw up the index and pinky devil horns.



They both laughed, partly because it was mildly funny but mainly because the storm showed it could become a close, dangerous reality. Caleb put his window up, and Pale put the pedal down.

A quarter mile later, Caleb spotted a rusted sign that read:

**THOMPSON'S KWIK-GAS  
3 MILES  
NEXT RIGHT**

Caleb pointed. *"There's our exit plan."*

"Right on time," Pale said, but his voice was drowned out by rapid bashes of thunder, artillery fire from a sky-borne adversary.

-2-

**Otis and the Canary**

By the time the big red Cadillac pulled into Thompson's Kwik Gas, the wind had throttled up. Debris and loose paper skated across the gravel yard of the filling station, chased by tiny dust-devils. Caleb watched as a toppled trash can coughed up a salad of soda cans, hot dog wrappers, and blue paper towels.

"Man, this place is old school," Caleb said.

Beneath the slanted, fifties-era awning stood four gas pumps past their prime, complete with rotary indicators and manual levers. Fluorescent tubes glowed above, struggling in the omnipresent static electricity. The color fluctuation produced a weird funhouse effect, and Caleb wasn't sure if he dug that or not. A few yards away, an old swing sign advertising Chesterfields—*Put A SMILE in your Smoking!*—swayed like a man at the gallows.

As Pale pushed the door open the wind defied him, nearly slapping him back into the driver's seat. He crabbed out of the Caddy and dug for his wallet while Caleb, already at the pump, nabbed the hose.

"Hey!" Caleb said, "The wind's warm like the Santa Ana."

"That's a little freaky," Pale agreed.

Santa Ana winds were hot, dry, miserable, and threatened fire, never accompanied by clouds, let alone thunderheads.

At the horizon, lightning raged.

"We would have missed *all* of this on an airplane," Caleb reiterated.

"Or we could have flown through it, which might have been worse. Listen up, Caleb—keep your eyes open. If I don't pee right now, I'm going to burst, but I'll be right back."

Caleb scoffed. "I'm not six," he said. He flipped up the pump's manual lever and pulled down the license plate, exposing the fuel cap. "I'll be fourteen next July. And look, we're the only car here."

"Stay in the car until the tank's full. I know the storm is cool, but with the wind and everything...or your...just sit tight." Pale handed Caleb the Visa. "In case I take longer. Back in a flash."

*I almost said, "or your mother will kill me," but she likely wouldn't have noticed if you'd gone missing.*

A memory dashed through his mind, Valerie dumping the contents of her nightstand into a paper bag, flustered and hurried, hair askew, suitcases already in the hall, clothes poking

from the seams as if their escape had been thwarted. She wore her rabbit fur vest. A cigarette bobbed from her lips.

*We both know he's not right, Pale*, she said as she rolled the grocery bag shut.

*What's wrong with you?* Pale fired back. *You're his mother, for God's sake.*

Caleb rolled his eyes as his father jogged toward the illustration of a pointing glove that read PIT STOP.

"Fill 'er up?" The old man's voice came out of nowhere. "Welcome to the wide-open between Pie Town and Datil, the only gas on Route 60 until Magdalena."

Startled, Caleb whirled around.

Thunder crackled. As the wind toyed with an aluminum sign, it tapped a madman's rhythm. *I Believe In Crystal Light Because I Believe In Me!*

"Fill 'er up?" the old thing repeated.

White kinky hair beat a retreat from the man's forehead, and crags like the dry riverbeds of Mars flowed from the corners of his eyes. He clearly hadn't shaved in a few days, but the unkempt appearance stirred no anxiety in the boy. The man's teeth, the few stubborn enough to remain in his head, were soured with the same tint of yellow that had conquered the whites of his eyes. He was as black as a witch's cat.

"Sorry if I scared you there, son," he said. "I know it's hard to hear over the wind and such."

"It's fine," Caleb said. He handed the old timer the hose, flipped his eyes over to the restrooms, and back. His father was already inside. "I had it all ready to go, though, Mister. You take Visa?"

"These old pumps, you know, they can be fussy. Some machines, I find, all they'll *ever do* is disobey. Your pop has a fine old road schooner. I'll bet he treats her real nice. And yes, I take plastic, paper, and gold." His face stretched into a wide, friendly grin.

Caleb nodded. "The Caddy used to belong to my grandpa, but he died when I was little, so my dad has always had it. My mom called it Red Zeppelin."

Across the road, a blade of wind howled through the scaffolds of the electrical towers. A dust devil the size of a bus whirled past. In the far away, the sun suffocated behind the wall of the storm. It coughed one last ray of orange into the sky before it choked.

"Name's Otis Thompson, and this is my place," he held his hand out to indicate the filling station and his double-wide, which poked out from behind the mini-mart. Next to the trailer stood an enormous satellite dish that looked more like a spider web than an antenna.

Caleb watched the old man, who began to squeegee the windshield. Probably habit, but full-service gas was something he'd very rarely seen, so he let it go and watched the show.

"Caleb Brody. My Dad's in the restroom. He'll be back right away."

"I was securing the air hoses when I saw you and your pop pull in here. The first thing I thought: I wonder if they'll have the sense to stay off the road for a bit because the sky is bound to open up, nice and wide."

"I think the storm's pretty neat, Mister," Caleb said.

"Love is always fascinating at first."

Caleb's expression was unreadable. "The hot wind is weird, though."

"Let me be true to tell you, I saw a Winnebago get hit by lightning once right here in front of my Kwik Gas. It flashed white for a second, then *Pow!* Exploded just like a grenade. *That* was some heat!"

"Wow." Caleb grimaced and took an unconscious step backward. "That's gnarly."

"Everyone got electrocuted, too," Otis said through a sigh. He moved to the passenger side of the windshield and got to work. "You've never heard such screaming. A Really tragic scene."



He finished with the windshield and began to start on the rear window. “Desert weather moves fast, don't you know, and I don't mind if people hole up when the sky becomes crabby. Happens all the time. Better safe than sorry, as they say, and I could use the company. I never close up shop, though. No-sir-eee.”

Caleb couldn't shake his uneasy feeling about the wind. He'd been in Hawaii once with his folks, and yes, it rained even when it was eighty degrees, but this was different. This was a *fire* wind, and fire wind blew the sky clear—never clouds, and never lightning.

“It hasn't rained a drop on us yet,” he said.

“It will,” Otis said. He set the hose back, plunged his hands into his pockets, and rocked on his heels. “It'll howl through here like the Devil in a speedboat, then be on to bother someone else.”

Pale, fresh from the restroom, picked up the pace when he noticed the old man in the gray jumpsuit chatting up his son. Under the fritzing fluorescents, the big red Fleetwood looked the color of blood. He crushed his empty Nicorette pack and dropped it into the trash can next to the fuel pumps.

“Two points and right at the buzzer,” Otis said. With Pale's Visa, he tapped a peppy rhythm on his calloused fingers. “Twenty-two dollars and fifty-five cents.”

“Thanks for taking care of everything,” Pale said.

“I was just telling your boy here that it's alright by me if you folks wait out the storm. They don't last too long, and the market is stocked to the rafters. You also look like a man that could use a nicotine refill. Don't smoke anymore myself, my Ruthie saw to *that*, but I understand the habit, sure enough. Takes courage to quit, but that gum tastes awful. I'll have to run inside to run the Visa, Mr.—” He read the name on the card. “Mr. Brody. Follow me, and you can grab your gum and such.”

Pale said to Caleb, “You want anything from inside? Pop, chips, nuclear reactor schematic?”

“I'm fine—”

A blazing sword of skyfire stabbed the desert, cutting Caleb off in mid-sentence. A second later, a cannon blast of thunder rolled across the New Mexico plain. The clouds opened, and down fell Otis' rain, pushed by Caleb's fire wind.

Caleb hopped back into the Caddy and watched his father and Otis dart across the yard to the mini-mart. A moment later, the exterior lights popped on.

Night and the storm arrived in tandem.

\*\*\*

“My offer is still good, you know,” Otis said. “It's wet 'n wild.”

Pale entered his PIN on the Verifone reader. He pocketed his gum, thanked Otis for his offer, and stepped outside. When the wind grabbed the door and the needles of driving rain stung his face, he immediately regretted his decision.

Headlights approached. Pale could hear a big rig's diesel engine knock and grumble as the driver downshifted. He double-timed it back to the Caddy, relieved to be beneath the awning.

Pale stood at the passenger door as the eighteen-wheeler hissed to stop. The Peterbilt and the trailer it towed, both painted a blaring yellow, boasted they were the property of the Canary Trucking Company, Omaha, Nebraska. On the trailer, a winking cartoon bird wearing a trucker hat presented an eager Thumbs-Up.

The Caddy's passenger window fell in a grumbling, electric whir.

“Dad, it's getting pretty bad. I can barely see a hundred yards down the road.” He nodded toward the big rig. “Even the trucker pulled off the highway.”

A tall figure clad in a hooded rain slicker scaled down the big rig's cab. Head lowered against the rain; he approached the Cadillac. In one hand, he carried an enormous black flashlight.

Pale had experienced many a Maglite-toting State Trooper back in the road dog days, blasting their vehicle with light, searching for drugs, guns, and drugs. There had been several pullovers and a few close calls, but all the Officer Friendlies had ever found was a tiny bag of weed in Minnesota and a twenty-year-old groupie so desperate to leave Syracuse she chose Mac Daddy as the avenue of escape.

Pale turned and nodded, barely able to conceal his misery from the wind and rain. "Hi there. Something we can do for you?"

"I don't mean to interfere," the trucker began, his Native American accent unmistakable. Water ran down the slope of his nose in a shiny line. His eyes were so brown they were nearly black. Big black braids dangled from his hood like sleeping kingsnakes. "But you look like you're getting ready to head out. Not a good idea to be on the highway. Road is uneven, the low spots will fill if they haven't already, and that means hydroplaning, especially in a boat like yours. Best to stay put for a while."

A mammoth thunderbolt brained one of the transmission towers. Hot light spewed from the target as a crowbar of thunder yanked everyone's ears open. Insulators glowed orange, then blue, and finally buzzed themselves back to normal.

"*Jeezus!*" the trucker gasped. "See what I mean, Paleface? A few miles back, I saw that happen multiple times. *Purple* lightning." Looking directly into Pale's eyes, the trucker raised a breadstick of a finger, which sported a turquoise ring nearly the size of an egg. "For your boy's sake, at least."

The trucker shoved his flashlight into his slicker and hightailed it to the mini-mart.

*Paleface? No way this guy recognized me. He was just being facetious.*

"Dad, everyone's telling us to stay put. We should listen."

Otis had put a touch of fear into Caleb (even though he thought that story about the Winnebago was kind of spooky-cool, actually), but the Indian trucker, his expression as he looked right into his dad's eyes, for some reason, sealed the deal. Besides, it might be fun just to sit and watch the storm from the big picture window in the mini-mart, toss back a couple of dogs and a bag of chips, and maybe sneak a peek at a naughty mag if the situation presented itself. One thing was clear to Caleb: you could not get entertainment like this on an airplane. *Ever.*

"Let's stay awhile. Huh?"

Pale felt like an idiot. *The old guy and the trucker must be just shaking their heads and having a good laugh at the clueless California twinkie.*

The rain and hot wind just didn't jibe. Pale wanted to be out of here, but that massive submarine of a car, its ancient drum brakes, and how it handled like a B-17 with its tail blown off would be nothing but stress on a slick road and gusting winds. *Hydroplaning*, the trucker had said, and he had the sense to steer his big yellow canary off the road and wait it out. Was he willing to put Caleb into that peril, especially if he fled now with his ego bruised? A pussy would run into the storm out of embarrassment; a man would see his son's safety.

"Grab your stuff," Pale said. "We'll rustle up some mini-mart vittles and watch the show."

Pale thought about his guitars in the trunk—he never liked to leave instruments in the car, especially in heat or humidity. But the delay would likely be minimal—how long could a desert thunderstorm really last—and he'd just hump his fiddles into the motel later.

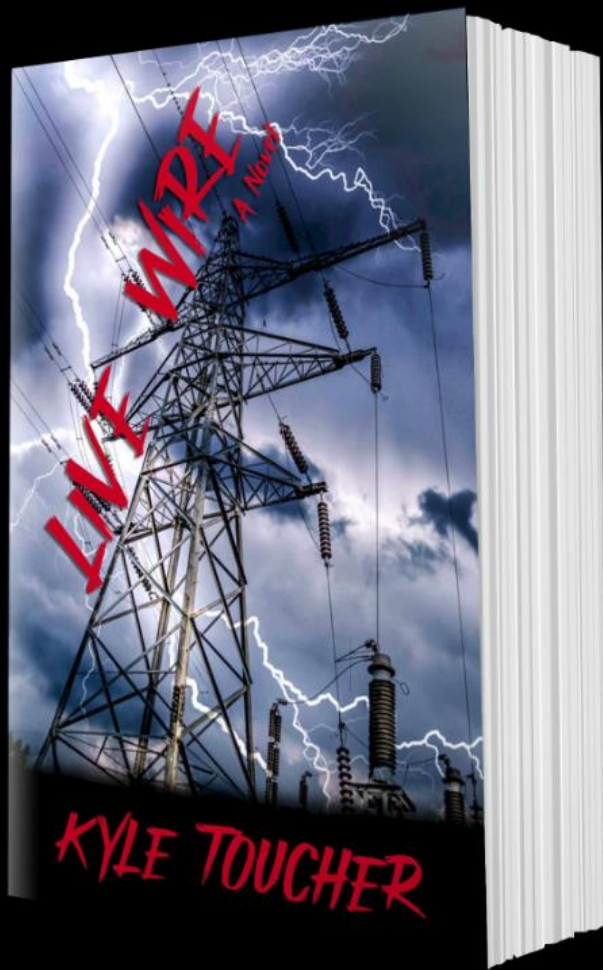
"We'll probably be done with all this in an hour," Pale said. "Then it's up the road to the motel in Magdalena for the night. French toast in the morning. Let's make it happen."

"Win," Caleb said.

The track of Route 60 yawned wide as night took dominion, the road slick now with long sleeping oils. Across the road from Thompson's Kwik Gas, the wind moaned the name of every ghost through the chain gang of electrical towers, daring the storm to spill its worst—be it from God, Magician, or Madman.

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# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kyle Toucher (rhymes with *voucher*) was raised on a diet of Frankenstein and Godzilla, Black Sabbath and Black Flag, Lovecraft, Blatty, Barker and King. Through his twenties, he fronted the influential Nardcore crossover band Dr. Know, made records and hit the road. Later, he moved into the Visual Effects field, which led to eight Emmy nominations and two awards for *Firefly* and *Battlestar: Galactica*. Recent credits include *Top Gun: Maverick*, *The Orville*, and defense industry clients.

He lives with a lovely woman, five cats, two dogs, and several guitars in a secure, undisclosed location.

Crystal Lake Publishing has run several of his stories in their Patreon-only Shallow Waters series, most of which have ties to one another, and some to the novel you just read.

[FLIGHT 2320: Wire-Witch](#)

[December 21st, 1984](#)

[Witchfyndre](#)

[Exile From Cicada Street](#)

[The Red-Eye to Salem](#)

[This is a Greedy, Jealous House](#)

[We Should Be On Our Way From Here](#)

[The Nightman's Last Shift](#)

[Note to Sanderson](#)

[FLIGHT 2320](#)

[Freezer Burn](#)

Furthermore, his stories “Strange Acres,” “Billy Beauchamp: Discount Exorcist,” and “The House on Beltane Road” appear in the anthologies *Halloween Horror: Volume 3* and *I Cast You Out!*, and *YEAR FOUR: Dark Moments and Patreon*, respectively.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you, truly, for taking time out of your busy life to read *Life Returns*. The story has a long history, beginning with a Dr. Know band rehearsal in 1983 when I came up with the big slow metal riff that opens the tune. If I remember correctly, the song came together pretty quickly—we were all very young, and creativity flowed like wine. I was just shy of 21.

I remember singing the song publicly for the first time that summer at a good-sized show at the Oxnard Community Center. The response was positive, and the pit churned. In February 1984, we recorded it at Mystic Studios, live and crazy, warts and all. It opens side two of the album *Plug-In Jesus*.

When we re-assembled for shows between 2011 to 2015, *Life Returns* often opened the set, and the response was always generous. By the time I came back to fiction writing with the intent to pursue it seriously (I'd written off and on my whole life, but other interests and responsibilities often took precedence), the song had a nearly forty-year history. Not bad for a band that never really made it past the club or large hall level.

When my novel *Live Wire* was signed to Crystal Lake Publishing in July of 2022, it was as thrilling to me as those early days recording *Plug-In Jesus* and *Burn*. We were on the radar, people noticed, and we loved what we did. But a question nagged me: how do I let the people who supported Dr. Know for all those years know what I'm up to now? And moreover, would they give a damn?

The lyrics followed your basic horror scenario: revenge from the grave, complete with gory imagery, simple and uncluttered. It was more or less a two-dimensional approach, but in a short, hardcore tune, that was enough. Reflecting on *that* was when it hit me—perhaps there was more to the story of Uncle John and Aunt Mary. What if there were far more sinister things afoot in that house? What if Uncle John was not the victim or agent of retribution we thought him to be? And from whose point of view was the story told?

This telling of *Life Returns* ties events depicted in the song into the world I've built in my fiction. A bridge, if you will, between that era of output and this burgeoning one. I hope it took unexpected turns and serves as a fair introduction to the permanent night that is Walpurgis County. We'll be spending a lot of time there if you're of a mind to come along.

So if you were left by the side of the road with your suitcase and spared the sight of the pitiless, unholy ogre of Walpurgis Peak, you could still walk into town.

There's a room at Hotel Jasper but be advised: the Shimmer is powerful there.

Tell them I sent you.

*Kyle Toucher, March 2023*