

Chaotic Deities in Genre Fiction

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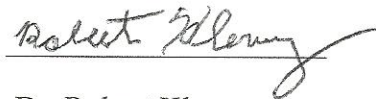
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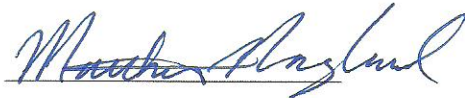
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Abstract

H.P. Lovecraft and modern bestselling authors Stephen King and Neil Gaiman suggest the importance of man's relationship with chaotic gods through their fiction. In addition, while the scholarly component involves mythology as it relates to man's understanding of these deities, the creative portion furthers this idea through a reimagining of the Nordic god Odin.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, SWL. You are the best.

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Chaotic Deities in Genre Fiction

Mythology plays a major role in fantasy and horror fiction, acting as a means to test the character of man and define his place among chaotic gods. Through the centuries, man has questioned the existence of gods, their nature, and, in the end, whether these “gods” provide protection or, as suggested by H.P. Lovecraft’s work, fear. The desire to believe in something greater is ubiquitous, but what if that “something” only affirms man’s insignificance? Of the many answers to this question, three authors offer useful interpretations. Lovecraft’s “Call of Cthulhu” depicts a bleak relationship between man and divinity, one where humanity means nothing: man is the accident of an omniscient being all too ready to destroy him. Stephen King’s *IT*, on the other hand, demonstrates that man has the right to exist, and no god, cosmic or terrestrial, can overcome man’s perseverance, allowing him to stand defiant in the presence of an evil deity. In contrast, Neil Gaiman’s modern fantasy novel *American Gods* proposes divinity sharing a mutual need with man. There is equality between man and god. Focusing on the work of these authors, the purpose of this thesis is to suggest the importance of man’s relationship with chaotic gods in fantasy and horror fiction. In these fictional worlds, man’s decisions upon encountering mythical gods reveal his character and show significant variations in the fictional treatment of the divine, in addition to alluding to traditional Christian mythology that further develops each author’s views.¹

In Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), originally published in *Weird Tales*, any encounter with the cosmic Elder Gods causes madness in humans. His work, as expressed in *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*, depicts man in conflict with them. As the story describes, Cthulhu, banished by the Elder Gods and abandoned on Earth, sleeps,

dreaming at the bottom of the sea. In this state, he inflicts those unlucky enough to find him with thoughts of suicide and moments of delirium. Here, the significance of man in relation to the universe and mythical gods lies in man's passivity. Man cannot experience the gods without some kind of punishment. The very sight of Cthulhu—an immense creature with squid-like features—causes madness and any relationship with him is impossible. Thus, man is insignificant. For example, Lovecraft's narrator states, "It was nightmare itself, and to see it was to die. But it made men dream, and so they knew enough to keep away."² The narrator emphasizes the distance (or divide) between man and god. There is no relationship, other than one of fear. Man cannot approach these gods without risking his very sanity.

The protagonists in Lovecraft's work, upon meeting divinity, become mentally overwhelmed. In "The Call of Cthulhu," John Raymond Legrasse, an inspector for the police, follows a trail of ancient manuscripts and rumors, all of which bring him closer to something called the "Cthulhu Cult"—and Cthulhu himself. This cult, one "totally unknown to them, and infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles"³ worships the god (Lovecraft 59). However, these cult members do not share any real connection with the actual god and do not converse or interact with him in any way. According to the story, they simply try to resurrect the "sleeping" god, but are unsuccessful. Instead, fishermen accidentally awaken Cthulhu. Professor Angell, the narrator, who tells the story of Legrasse in past tense (often through the reading of his letters), uses the inspector's notes as a way to track down those involved with the god. He eventually searches for Cthulhu too, with the aid of primary sources, those who survived contact with the god. These "survivors" dream of the ancient god, and these dreams play

an integral part in Lovecraft's assertion of man's place in the universe. The narrator adds that the dreamers see "some terrible Cyclopean vista of dark and dripping stone, with a subterranean voice or intelligence shouting monotonously in enigmatical sense—impacts un-inscribable save for gibberish" (Lovecraft 55). Of all the ways a god could interact with man, Cthulhu only connects through horrifying dreams filled with sublime sights and visions, which cause madness in the individual and halt the progress of their journey. Lovecraft depicts his gods as "beyond good and evil," and they seem to exist solely in isolation from man (74). However, as a means to deter man from finding them, they send delusions, shattering the perceived safety of their dreams.

Scholars of Lovecraft build on this understanding. For example, in S.T. Joshi's critical analysis of Lovecraft's gods in the *Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos*, the position of man in the universe is also one of irrelevance. Joshi argues that man, not having the capacity to understand the existence of these "gods," cannot view them or comprehend their purpose. Any attempt to do so by the story's many protagonists result in tragedy. According to Joshi, even dreams are a playground for these gods, and humans have no shelter, even in their sleep. Going deeper into man's infinitesimal position in the universe, he states, "Cthulhu serves as a symbol for the vast, unknowable cosmos in which all human history and aspirations are as nothing."⁴ Joshi's analysis of Lovecraft's mythology unveils man's inability to overcome indifferent gods, and depicts the passivity of man in relation to cosmic fears. Further developing man's role through a religious approach, John Engle reflects on the "Cthulhu Cult," stating, "While Lovecraft himself was not taken with any religious or spiritual fancies himself, it is quite easy to see how someone susceptible might be swept up by his rich prose."⁵ Engle's statement parallels

the mindset of the cult in the short story. As with most religions, some people seek the mystery of god, even if there is no actual interaction. It is the belief that matters. Joshi's argument closely mirrors this idea of religious belief. He notes, "The majority of human religions explicitly or implicitly establish an intimate connexion between God or the gods and the human race" (Joshi 20). It is fair to assume, based on the evidence, that Lovecraft's deities do not have this "connection," and thus depict man as beneath, or subservient to, the gods.

Lovecraft himself was an atheist. He saw the idea of god as frightening, something sinister, and he viewed believers themselves as a dangerous force.⁶ To Lovecraft, man has no right to "see" or "understand" god. It does not matter if god exists, but if he does, then man does not deserve an audience with him. Engle's reference to being "swept up in his prose" transfers to the idea of god in Lovecraft's stories, that the god's power (or perceived power) draws followers, even if these followers are insignificant in the eyes of the god they worship. In fact, Engle calls the gods "a malevolent chaos waiting to boil into our reality and extinguish all life" (93). This assumption matches Lovecraft's, who wrote about Cthulhu as a sleeping force waiting to toss the world into darkness. Man is nothing to Cthulhu, and he cannot, and will not, share his world with man.

In the combined theories of Engle and Joshi, Lovecraft's depiction of the gods as they relate to man's place in the universe is one of terror. The narrator in the short story declares, "No man had ever seen the Old Ones" (Lovecraft 61). Thus, man cannot see the gods because they do not want to be seen by man. In addition, man cannot view them because man is neither worthy nor capable. Psychosis or death follows any attempt to

know divinity. According to the text, only the cult manages to come close. There is no reason for this, but Engle's idea that they are similar to the "blackest of voodoo" gives the reader a window into the true nature of the gods. While Lovecraft viewed the gods as neither good nor evil, the existence of the cult, and their sinister nature, only furthers the idea of a malevolent, apathetic deity wanting no relationship with man. Early Christian mythology, according to August Derleth, a contemporary and critic of Lovecraft, provides another suggestion. He states that the portrayal of the gods is "basically similar to Christian mythology, particularly in regard to the expulsion of Satan from Eden and the power of evil" (as cited in Joshi 205). Lovecraft mentions that the Elder God, in this case Cthulhu, comes from the sky, and that he brought his symbols with him—his artifacts. Humanity worships these artifacts, but the god hates the worshippers and wants to remain unburdened by them. Derleth proposes Satan's fall in the garden parallels Cthulhu, meaning that, at some point, Cthulhu fell from his place in the stars, much like Satan from paradise, and that man, somehow, could be the reason. Both Satan and Cthulhu hate man, but only Satan actively pursues man, harming him. Lovecraft's work, however, does not go into detail on this, other than mentioning the god's fall. Perhaps Derleth's theory explains why humanity in the short story finds obstacles when seeking divinity and might offer a reason for the harsh nature of those obstacles. The gods in Lovecraft's story, once again, want no relationship with man, and while man does seek them, he finds only disaster. In the end, the gods leave man with no alternative to madness. They seek to distance themselves from man, and they reveal their general indifference to the universe by only accidentally or incidentally inspiring followers who are ultimately meaningless to them.

Stephen King's works, on the other hand, harken back to those of early Gothic writers. Unlike Lovecraft, who implements the Gothic in his fictional architecture, such as with the sublime castle in his short story, "The Outsider," King continues Gothic tradition through how he depicts the resistance of supernatural forces. In the novel *IT*, an ancient creature from the stars, one similar to Lovecraft's Elder Gods, attacks the imagination and dreams of children, using their own fears against them. King's "deity" comes from the "multiverse," a place where several universes meet. Pennywise the Clown, the novel's alternate name for "It," comes from a realm where people worship his powers, his abilities, but only the characters of the novel see his true form.⁷ However, unlike Lovecraft's passive protagonists and apathetic deities, King's characters aggressively fight Pennywise's oppression. The children eventually use their imagination to call the god into a physical form that they can effectively fight: a massive spider. As opposed to Lovecraft, King's characters persevere, challenging their infinitesimal place in the universe.

In Lovecraft's work, the protagonist's dreams are the soil from which the seeds of fear grow, but the reverse is true in King's characters. The novel itself splits into three parts: when the characters are children, when they are adults, and when the two merge, creating a new whole. This "whole" refers to the characters' memories, since between the two early stages of the novel they lose all knowledge of their experiences with It, which make it impossible for them to grow emotionally and mentally. As with Lovecraft's gods, King's deity creates traumatic experiences for the characters. Some of them commit suicide when confronting the possibility of meeting Pennywise the Clown again. However, as opposed to the terrifying dreams that Lovecraft's characters face, their

conscious imagination is what It attacks, making them see things that are not there and perceive situations that are not true.

The god takes an active approach in the novel when dealing with man, but the outcome is the same: madness, death, and suicide. While Lovecraft's characters lack any means of using their position against Cthulhu, King's characters use their imagination against the god. For example, when Eddie Caspbrak leaps at It toward the end of the book, he triggers his asthma aspirator, and all of his childhood belief in medicine comes back to him.⁸ Early in the novel, Eddie is confronted with the reality that his aspirator contains water—not some magic medicine that heals asthma. In other words, his belief that it *was* magic caused it to function that way, when in actuality it was his immature mind that made him believe it. In that same manner, later in the novel, Eddie harkens back to a more imaginative, more adolescent mindset: that whatever he believes is true. He attacks It with the aspirator, believing that battery acid, instead of water, is inside it. This “belief,” or system of childish ideas, is how It initially attacks the children, called the “Losers Club,” but it is also how they defeat him. Lovecraft's protagonists display an acceptance, an unwillingness to contradict the nature of divinity. However, in Lovecraft's work, man's belief that these gods cannot thwart that influence, or circumvent that treatment, leads to their acceptance of failure and eventually their demise. King's god does something similar, but his characters express defiance by using the instrument of their torture against It. Man may still be insignificant, but he can still choose to defend himself.

Further illustrating the importance of imagination, the narrator, when referring to the condition of Pennywise after the children's attack, says, “The slicker itself seemed to

be dripping, running in bright blots of yellow. It was losing It's shape, becoming amorphous" (King 996). This depicts the result of the character's defiance. Confronted and confused, It cannot sustain the shape he uses to terrorize the characters. When the adults regain the mindset of a child (quick to believe, quick to act), they are able to defeat the god. In contrast to Lovecraft's cults, who ineffectually worship Cthulhu, King's characters take the source of the god's power, imagination, and remove his influence over them, shifting the balance against the god. Finally, and another departure from Lovecraft, King allows "good" the victory, the result of man's perseverance in the face of the gods. Man might remain infinitesimal, but he does matter.

In contrast to Lovecraft, King's characters and themes emphasize man's importance, showing that regardless of supernatural pressure, he can and will overcome all obstacles. Margaret Carter's theory on King furthers this, posing that "Two principal factors, the presence of the other—God—and the central importance of belief and imagination, especially as embodied in children, differentiate King's vision of cosmic horror from Lovecraft's."⁹ This idea of "imagination" makes for the whole of the novel. It highlights the central problem with Lovecraft's characters and their dealings with chaotic gods. The protagonists in Lovecraft's "Cthulhu" view the gods only with awe, as entities of great dread and ultimately as the deciders of humanity's fate. King's protagonists do not function this way. Though Pennywise at times uses their imagination against them, his characters' innocence and power through their imagination allow them to overcome him.

In addition, according to King, good must and will win. C.W. Sullivan observes, "fantasy has upheld general notions of good and evil and, again drawing on traditional

tales, has shown the good being rewarded and evil punished.”¹⁰ This “good” manifests in King’s novel through the way his characters protect each other. The Losers Club is a group of seven children who view themselves as social outcasts. One stutters; one is fat; one has asthma; and another has family problems. All of them are “different,” making them more vulnerable to Pennywise’s assaults. However, the children band together and form a collective whole for strength. Heidi Strengell notes, “King seems to be pursuing completely different, non-Lovecraftian directions: first, his characters have a choice between good and evil; second, love, mercy, and responsibility for one’s fellow human being can often beat the indifferent forces.”¹¹ All of the characters in the Losers Club use their differences to combat the violent, chaotic deity Pennywise, and through their belief in one another, they stand in defiance of the god’s oppression. Lovecraft’s characters exist in the same isolation as the gods, without a sense of community; they remain isolated when facing the prospect of insanity or suicide. They succumb, whereas King’s band of misfits finds strength in themselves and one another.

As with Lovecraft’s Cthulhu, King’s deity “came to the young world out of the sky,” and like Cthulhu, the latter burrowed deep into the Earth, where it waits, “dreaming” (Lovecraft 60). There are many similarities with Lovecraft and King’s gods, but the most important difference between them emerges in the personalities of the characters. The unnamed narrator, Professor Angell, and Inspector Legrasse in Lovecraft’s short story all feel one-dimensional and bereft of any motivation to outwit the god’s mental deterrence. They cannot fight. They can only allow things to happen: madness, death, and terrible, horrifying dreams resulting from man’s dealings with indifferent gods. In contrast, King’s main character, Bill Denbrough, or “stuttering” Bill,

deals with his speech impediment by repeating, “He thrusts his fist against the post and still insists he sees the ghost,” whenever he feels frightened or confused (King 1040). This “mantra” is an affirmation of belief in the supernatural in defiance of everyday fact. Bill manages to depict the fight against the indifference of It through his constant mantra, yet another example of the character’s unwillingness to remain sedentary when confronted with visual and mental horrors. He uses it to steady his thoughts and keep the clown from confusing him or sending terrifying delusions. The repetition stops fear from rushing into his imagination, while also giving him focus. One final aspect of *IT* that parallels with Lovecraft’s work is the similar idea of religion. With Lovecraft, as mentioned earlier, Cthulhu possibly shares a similar plight with Satan, though the connection remains unsubstantiated in the text. If Cthulhu does somewhat suggest Satan, however, then the members of the Losers Club can be said to resemble Job. Strengell claims, “King’s use of religion amounts to an exploration of morality and the seemingly unjust sufferings of innocent people such as Job” (233). The Club suffers unjustly, but they do manage to outwit the deity Pennywise, with their own brand of faith. Lovecraft’s characters represent the notion of religious submission (also, ironically, like the prophet Job). All of his characters lack the drive to contradict the gods, and they all seem more or less willing to accept their damnation. King, however, focuses on the free will of his characters, allowing them true three-dimensional realization. They hurt, they bleed, they eventually decide to make a stand and fight their predestined status in the universe—even if they are still infinitesimal in comparison to the god.

Offering a third approach to man’s relationship with chaotic deities, Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* changes the idea of man’s place in the universe, as well as

revising his relationship with the concept of divinity. Unlike the common interpretation, that man is subservient or beneath the gods, Gaiman paints a picture closer to equality or mutual need. He proposes that the gods depend on man's belief in them to survive, and man, due to his belief, earns their protection. Most of his characters are gods, but in human form, exhibiting human emotions, expressions, and needs. Gaiman's main idea translates to this: new gods—of the Internet, Television, and various other media outlets—compete with old gods, Odin, Loki, and other mythical divinities for humanity's reverence. Without man's faith, they cannot exist in the modern world, and thus disappear or die. The main protagonist says, "People believe—It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjugations."¹² Man creates new things to believe in, but ultimately abandons those beliefs in favor of something better, leaving the former for the shinier or more useful.

In *American Gods*, the gods rely on the worship of humanity, a departure from King and Lovecraft's views, where the gods are generally indifferent and, with the latter, send delusions to those who approach them. In contrast, Gaiman depicts a world where both good and chaotic gods are dependent on man's recognition, which forms the basis of the novel's plot. Wednesday is a manifestation of Odin, whereas Mr. World, the antagonist god, is Loki. The two of them stage a battle where old and new gods fight for man's acknowledgement, but it is a trick. By having the gods fight, their deaths empower Odin, and the battle itself, or its chaos, feeds Loki. Addressing this, Shadow, speaking to Odin, continues, "You wanted a massacre. You needed a blood sacrifice. A sacrifice of gods" (Gaiman 533). In the end, Shadow, or Balder, the mythological son of Odin (and

his son in the novel) stops the war. He reveals the truth, but it is too late: Wednesday and Mr. World has what they need. Interestingly, and a departure from King and Lovecraft, the two characters take the form of man, making it easier for them to interact with the world.

However, everything comes back to belief. The narrator says, “People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen” (Gaiman 538). This last quote seems more reminiscent of King’s characters. The Losers Club’s collective imagination helps them not only believe in Pennywise, but also helps them “believe” him into a form they can destroy. Like in *American Gods*, King’s characters need the concept of belief to survive. However, as mentioned, Lovecraft’s many protagonists simply do not have this depth of character, and seem unresponsive, or resigned, to their eventual fate. The notion of god’s reliance on man adds a third element to the discussion. If Lovecraft depicts man as nothing and King man’s perseverance, Gaiman illustrates a future where man realizes his importance. While the gods remain indifferent to a degree in *American Gods*, they also need human beliefs to keep them alive, and have created new ways to trick man into serving their will. Gaiman’s work, in essence, is a maturation, or evolution, of the two earlier approaches.

In conjunction with this idea, scholars point out that Gaiman “humanizes the gods” in his stories.¹³ The idea of making the gods appear human adds a certain depth to Gaiman’s work and provides another perspective, on divine exchanges with man. This humanization of the gods closes the gap between man and divinity. In King’s novels and Lovecraft’s short stories, there is a fixed distance between the two, but not in Gaiman’s novel. *American Gods* gives man and god an equal place in the universe, and focuses on

the idea of “belief,” since without it both parties fail to have purpose. All men, according to Gaiman’s novel, have the connection to the gods engrafted within themselves, and thus they rely on each other, in a symbiotic relationship. The significance of Gaiman’s approach lies in the nature of man’s choices. He does not have to acknowledge the gods, but if he does, there is reward in that belief. Harley Sims states, “His vision of a cosmic backstage is where deities and spirits of all cultures and historical periods continue in secret to influence human affairs.”¹⁴ There is reward for belief in *American Gods*, specifically the gods’ protection. However, the only way to achieve that level of belief, according to the novel, is through divine influencing of humanity, even if it is coercive or deceptive.

In the novel, human beings might seem to play an inactive role, since the majority of the characters are gods disguised as human beings. Sims argues, “These masks allow the Gods to live among us undisturbed. There are no boundaries anymore between them and us” (206). Considering Sims’s interpretation, the telling differences among the afore-mentioned authors come into view. Gaiman finalizes the progress of man’s existence in the universe; he shows that unlike Lovecraft and King’s visions, man is not irrelevant, but is important to the well being of the gods. Without man, according to *American Gods*, there would be nothing to worship, since without man’s belief in them they could not exist. Another perspective comes from Gaiman’s creative interpretation of the Cthulhu Mythos, where he portrays Lovecraft’s Elder Gods in a different light. Lynn Gelfand states, “Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones do not live on the margins of human life, evoking fear and dread; instead, they conquered humanity centuries earlier and are now revered by humans as royalty and heads of states.”¹⁵ Gaiman takes a satiric stance on

Lovecraft's gods, mocking their rise in world culture and using their indifferent nature toward man as a metaphor for seeking political offices. However, the ironic aspect of the story is that Gaiman does the exact same thing in *American Gods*. Wednesday and Mr. World hold special offices in the spiritual and physical planes, and invisibly rule over man. In addition, there is much religious language that references the characters' actions in the novel: the other gods crucify Shadow on a tree, Wednesday sacrifices himself for man, and the Egyptian lord of the dead, Anubis, judges Shadow following his death.¹⁶ Again, if Cthulhu symbolizes Satan and members of the Losers Club Job, then Shadow in *American Gods*, aside from his origins in Nordic myth, acts like the character of Jesus in the New Testament. It seems that each work offers not only examples of man's place in the universe, as well as man's relationship with divinity, but also allusions to Christian mythology. In the end, Gaiman's "humanizing" of the gods offers a third approach, that of man's important place among powerful, and chaotic, gods.

One final statement in *American Gods* summarizes Gaiman's attempt at humanizing the gods: "Either you've been forgotten, or you're scared you're going to be rendered obsolete, or maybe you're just getting tired of existing on the whim of people" (Gaiman 538). This depicts a radical shift from Lovecraft's uncaring creatures and King's monster in *IT*. In Gaiman's work, the gods not only need the reverence, and belief, from humanity, but they also need reassurance in their station, an affirmation of their own importance. They are scared, and in their fear, they battle over who will have humanity's worship. Gaiman, when interviewed by Jessica Crispin, adds, "Mythology tends to be what religion decays into."¹⁷ This statement echoes the situation in *American Gods* in that, according to the novel, man has moved on and has found new gods. Man seeks new

relationships with new divinities, but the prospect of that relationship separates Gaiman's work from Lovecraft and King. There is a complete overhaul of man's perceived state in the universe, one of significance, and the old gods, such as Cthulhu and Pennywise, seem replaced with Gaiman's new concept of a mutual need between man and god. There are several gods in the novel, all sharing the same realm. Sims mentions, "The deities born to peoples continents away and historically unacquainted with one another now rub shoulders as surely as they do in modern dictionaries of gods and myths" (94-95). In this sense, the gods, too, share equality in the novel, but man seems to have the upper hand, in a way. For without man's acknowledging of them, believing in them, they would have no power. However, man would not have their protection without believing in them, either.

All three authors offer problems and sometimes solutions that provide a clearer picture of man's place in the universe. Strengell suggests, "We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we crave as human beings" (39). The "order" here is simple: humanity needs good to win—humanity needs man to persevere, as in King's work. However, the idea that divinity might rely on man provides common ground, something that blurs the traditional boundary between man and god. Man needs god's protections. God needs man's belief. However, perhaps the similarities go even deeper. For example, the concept of man having a soul suggests equality with god. If god is a spirit, and man has a spirit, then he shares an important aspect of his nature with god. Either way, Gaiman's contribution shows an evolution of the previously unquestioned position of man in relation to the gods. While Lovecraft provides a bleak existence for man, King offers a glimmer of hope. Only Gaiman, however, goes a step further, suggesting a symbiotic equality between the two. "The Call of Cthulhu," *IT*, and

American Gods each offer insight into man's relationship to chaotic gods. Lovecraft's view of uninterested gods, King's counterargument that man in despite of his smallness has the ability to face these gods, and Gaiman's idea of man sharing equality with divinity verifies the significance of mythology in fiction. The significance of mythology in modern genre fiction also reveals itself through the interaction, and sometimes lack of interaction, of mythical gods with humanity.

Notes

1. Allusion to Satan (Lovecraft), Job (King), and Christ (Gaiman) appear in the order of discussion, included in final remarks.

2. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates, (New York: Ecco, 2007), 52-76. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

3. "African voodoo circles": Lovecraft was a vehement racist, as a majority of his works attest. For example, the cat in "Rats in the Walls," another story he sold to *Weird Tales* in the early '20s, is named "nigger man," a blatant display of racism, and not the only time the author used pejorative terms to define a race. In "Cthulhu," Lovecraft insinuates the practice of voodoo represents the character of barbaric, unlearned, and simple-minded individuals. He associates this practice with Africans, Chinese, and all other non-white groups.

4. S. T Joshi, *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos*, (New York: Hippocampus, 2015), 16. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

5. John Engle, “Cults of Lovecraft: The Impact of H.P. Lovecraft’s Fiction on Contemporary Occult Practices,” *Mythlore* 33.1 (2014), 1-15. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

6. As mentioned in the introduction of Joshi’s *The Rise*, Lovecraft himself was an atheist. One can glean much from Lovecraft’s position on religion from “Cthulhu.” Most of his comments appear apprehensive: he feared the idea of god, something that appears often in his work. Mostly notable, Lovecraft feared the unknown, as also evidenced in his short stories. He’s known for stating, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is *fear*, and the oldest and strongest kind of *fear* is *fear of the unknown*” (*Supernatural Horror in Literature* Nov 25, 1927). The idea that a god may or may not exist certainly played into his fear of the unknown, and it may have contributed to his declaration—and lengthy works—associated with atheism.

7. “Worship his powers, his abilities”: In Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower*, there are several references to a “multiverse,” a place where the gods exist. Pennywise the Clown comes from one of these places, and is said to exist alongside other deities. This idea is reminiscent of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu and the Elder Gods. For more on this topic, consider Stephen King’s *Dark Tower* series, in addition to *The Tommyknockers*, another book referencing Pennywise.

8. Stephen King, *IT*, (New York.: Viking, 1986), 1093. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

9. Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*, (Madison: U of Wisconsin, 2005), 105. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

10. Margaret Carter, “The Turtle Can’t Help Us: The Lovecraft Legacy in

Stephen King's *IT*," *Strange Horizons* 5.80 (Dec. 2005), Web. Accessed Feb. 2016.

Hereafter cited parenthetically.

11. C. W. Sullivan, "Folklore and Fantastic Literature," *Western Folklore* 60.4 (2001): 8. Print.

12. Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: A Novel* (New York: W. Morrow, 2001), 533-538. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

13. Anthony S. Burdge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen, eds. *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman* (Crawfordsville, FL: Kitsune, 2012), 290. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

14. Harley Sims, "Consorting with the Gods: Exploring Gaiman's Pan-pantheon," *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman*, (Crawfordsville, FL: Kitsune, 2012), 94. Print. Hereafter will refer to this edition parenthetically.

15. Lynn Gelfand, "The End of the World as We Know It: Gaiman and the Future of Mythology," *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman* (Crawfordsville, FL: Kitsune, 2012) 223. Print.

16. *Only the Gods are Real*, home page, (01 Oct. 2005) Accessed 14 Jan. 2016. Web.www.frowl.org/gods/index/html. Need when accessed.

17. Jessica Crispin, "An Interview with Neil Gaiman," *Bookslut* (Oct. 2006). Web Accessed. Feb. 2016.

Circle of Shadows

DAY ONE

“How much longer?”

Stan Vickers squeezed the steering wheel and shook his head, dull pain forming behind his right eye. “A couple more minutes, okay?”

“Are you alright? You look a little pale,” Courtney asked, frowning, placing her hand over Stan’s.

He sighed and forced a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just a little hungover.”

“Are you sure that’s it?” she asked, glancing behind her at Cole in the backseat, who stared out the window.

“Well, maybe the questions are getting to me a little, but you can’t blame the boy, you know? He’s at that age.”

“Have you told him why we’re going out here?”

“You mean about the house?” Stan steered the vehicle into the left lane, eyes scanning the fields, unconsciously counting the number of barns, cows, and traffic lights.

“Yeah, what else?”

“He hasn’t asked why yet.”

She looked over her shoulder again, and now, Cole met her gaze before returning to the window, a smile following his movement.

“But what are you going to say when he does?”

That was something he hadn’t thought about, but the question was on the way. And he needed to think of an answer, even if it *was* a lie. But what if the questions kept

coming? He couldn't explain everything, and if he could, in one way or another, Cole was smart, and he'd eventually put the pieces together himself.

“Are you going to answer me?”

Stan took a deep breath. “I'll just tell him that his uncle didn't want it anymore and gave it to us. That sound good to you?”

“But what about when he—”

Before she could finish, Stan slammed his hand on the steering wheel and pulled to the side of the road. “Did you see a sign that said Davis Circle back there?”

“I don't think so,” she replied, startled.

While Stan reached into his pocket, fishing for his phone, Cole moved up between the seats, his light green eyes disappearing behind tiny slits as his smile widened.

“We passed it a couple minutes ago.”

“Where?”

“On the left, back that way.”

Stan swung into a U-turn, his face growing hot, sweat forming on his thick unibrow and beading down his narrow cheeks. If it weren't for Courtney's repeated questions, he wouldn't have missed the turn. Part of him, the side that had lost his temper and slammed the wheel, wished that she, his wonderful wife for nine years, simply would have stayed home. At least there, absorbed in her cell phone games and television sitcoms, she couldn't harass him over what was or wasn't proper for Cole, and of course, his innocent, fragile ears.

“Thanks, honeybun. Your father and I wouldn't know what to do without you.”

He hated it when she called him that. If there was anything he had learned from his father, it was that boys need toughening up, not softened with words like “honeybun.” His brother Levi had always been a momma’s boy, and perhaps their mother’s *babying* him explained why the adult Levi had been so effeminate. Sure, there were other factors, like his hippie wife, Cassandra, but it all goes back to their parents, the sowers of the bad seed. There was no way in hell he would let Courtney do that to Cole. No way.

Stan bit his lower lip, the pain behind his eye spreading to his temples.

“You never answered my question,” Courtney said, nudging his shoulder.

“That’s because I don’t have one.”

“Well you need to think of one quick, cause we’re almost there. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?” She glanced back at Cole, smiling.

Instead of replying, Stan bit into his lip harder and shook his head. He needed to sit down with Courtney and have a talk, but that wouldn’t happen for at least six or seven days, after sorting out the business with the house. And by then, hopefully, he’d have the right words. As for Cole, if the question came about why his aunt and uncle *weren’t* there, he’d do his best to answer, maybe even tell him the truth, but that was for later, much later. For now, all Stan wanted to do was drive, get to the house, and get *out* of it. Make things as painless as possible. He would actually have to *find* the place first, and that, other than the questions, Courtney, and his aching head, seemed the hardest. At least Cole wasn’t—

“Are we almost there?”

Finding the house on Davis Circle hadn't been that difficult, but the pain in his head made the journey from the car to the house's front door somewhat of a challenge. Bitter November winds, especially in upstate New York's empty, bucolic landscape, were strong enough to knock a man over and numb any exposed flesh. Stan fumbled with the keys while trying to open the door. All he could think about, other than how much he hated New York, was that Levi, though dead, somehow had managed to make his life unbearable. And Stan still had to see him at least one more time before it was all over.

“What's taking you so long? Don't you know how cold it is out here?”

Stan looked over at Courtney, his face reddened. “Want to try yourself?”

She grabbed the ring of keys and unlocked the door, pushing it open on the second try. Cole released her hand and ran inside, his feet creating tiny echoes on the hardwood floors. Stan didn't say anything, but he could feel Courtney's smile widen, and instead of waiting for her next remark, he followed Cole inside the house.

“You smell that?” Courtney asked, with her hand over her mouth.

“I told you it might reek in here.”

“No, this isn't like that. It smells like someone shit in every corner of the house and mixed it with, I dunno, old milk.”

Shrugging, Stan frowned. “I don't smell it, babe. But I'll tell you what: I've gotta turn this heat down. I can barely—”

Before he could finish, Cole came running down the hallway, shouting, his face twisted into an expression of elation and shock. “Come here! Look at this! Outside.”

“What is it?” Courtney asked.

“You just have to see it, okay?”

Stan looked over at Courtney, his face pale and severe. Every time Cole shouted, it was like driving a railroad spike into his head, making his eyes scream and heart pound inside his heavy chest. He needed something, an aspirin, perhaps, but he didn't even want to open his mouth. If Cole's voice made things worse, his own deep tone reverberating inside his head might send him to the floor. And the heat. The heat had to go.

"Alright, honey, we'll be there in a minute."

Cole nodded and raced away. Turning back to Stan, Courtney placed a hand on his forehead, her brows furrowed. "Are you alright? You look terrible."

"I just need an aspirin," he whispered back, wiping the sweat from his face.

"Hold on."

Reaching into her purse, she removed a bottle of Children's Tylenol, unscrewed the top, and dropped three pink pills into her palm.

"This is all I've got, but three should help you. Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor? I've seen you hung-over before but this—"

"I'm fine," he interrupted, taking the pills and chewing them.

"Okay, but if you get worse, you've got to see someone. I don't care if we drive around all day searching. You look bad, Stan, like *really* bad."

It was simply maternal instinct that made Courtney this way. Stan smiled and nodded, telling her that he was fine, things would get better soon, and, if there were anything he could do about it, they'd stay just long enough to clean out the house and go to the funeral. That's all. But Stan knew better, and the prospect of spending more than a few weeks in the frigid north, this far away from Alabama (and its two seasons, hot and chilly) made him not only resentful of Levi, but Courtney too. Sure, Stan loved his

family, but part of the reason he and Courtney got along so well together was that they didn't see each other every day, her flaws (leaving clothes on the floor, piling dishes in the sink) never becoming a problem. But here, Stan couldn't go to the office or lock himself away and think. He would have to deal with it, every moment for the immediate future. There was no choice. And the thought made his head throb.

"I'll be fine. Let's go check on Cole," Stan said, still chewing the Tylenol.

She grabbed his hand and started down the hallway, into the back of the house, where Cole was staring out a massive window next to a set of double glass doors next to a long wooden staircase.

"Can I go outside?"

"It's freezing out there. I don't think—"

"But mom, you haven't seen it yet."

Courtney walked up to the glass and stopped, her eyes widening, but Stan didn't follow. The window itself held his attention. In his mind, he could see what Officer Toms had described over the phone, Cassandra's body, a hatchet jutting from the back of her head, covered in glass shards, half of her inside, the other half, reeking of piss and excrement, laying on the concrete. The more he stared, the more he could actually *smell* her, possibly even *hear* Levi's last breaths as he bled out into the backyard. Maybe Courtney had been right: the smell hadn't completely aired, but he didn't know. He couldn't think straight.

"Are you going to look at this?" Courtney asked.

He walked over to the window, gritting his teeth. At first, all he could see was the enormous field surrounding the house, but when he moved to the left, there was a structure on the far right side of the yard, near a long, barbed wire fence.

“So, can I go outside?” Cole asked again, unconsciously zipping up his Dallas Cowboys coat and stepping forward, his hand on one of the glass door handles.

Courtney looked at Stan, the question reflecting from her green eyes to his blues.

“If you do, I want you to stay away from that well out there, you understand? We’re miles away from a hospital, and you cracking your head is the last thing I need today.”

“But Dad, I swear I won’t get hurt. I just want to—”

“I *know* you won’t get hurt, Cole, because you aren’t going near that damn thing. There might be snakes out there. I want you to stay close to the porch, got me?” Stan’s voice grinded in his head, but the pain seemed less. The Tylenol was doing its job.

“Yes, sir.”

Once through the door, Courtney watched Cole run out into the yard, look back, and pick up a stick. He waved it in the air, presumably, she knew, so he could enjoy the WOOSH sound of it cutting through wind, like swords do in the movies. She then turned to Stan, her face pulled into a scowl.

“You didn’t have to be so rude with him. You do know that?”

“He’s only like that because you baby him, Court. The boy needs toughening up.”

“He’s six.” Her coarse tone told him what her face concealed.

“I know how old he is, and that’s why I’m rough on him now. My father—”

“Your father was a hardass, and if he knew what he was doing, then . . .” She stopped, biting her lower lip.

“Go ahead and say it. Go ahead and say that Levi was my father’s fault. I would love you to spit it out.”

“Look, I . . .” she placed her hands on Stan’s shoulders, “didn’t mean to insinuate anything. I just don’t like the way you talk to Cole sometimes, that’s all.”

“Let’s start cleaning this place out, okay? My head’s pounding, and there’s a lot of work to get done. I saw a room on the way in where we can put stuff. You start upstairs, and I’ll start down here. Is that okay with you? I have to go downtown tonight, and I’d like this place looking somewhat decent.”

Courtney took a step forward, her brows raised. “Why do you have to go downtown?”

“I told you earlier.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Stan threw his hands into the air and slammed one hand down, hard, on the wooden stairwell. “Jesus, Court! I told you this a thousand times. I still have to see the coroner this evening to identify them, I guess. And someone’s got to sign the paperwork. What part of that don’t you get?”

“What about Cassandra’s family?”

“She only had my brother. See why I have to go? Or do you still not remember?”

“No, I remember now, but . . .” she replied, looking around the room, her eyes stopping at the top of the stairs, then moving back to Stan.

“What?”

“Well,” she stopped and rubbed at her forehead, “I was just wondering why Levi decided to settle all the way up here, in the middle of nowhere. I mean, the place is amazing, Stan. It really is, but here? Why didn’t he move somewhere, you know, warmer?”

Stan shrugged and walked over to the hallway, his gaze drawn above to a picture of Levi and Cassandra’s wedding. “You’d have to understand my brother. He didn’t like people. It’s a wonder he ever met Cassandra in the first place. I remember him telling me about this house, and how excited he was. I remember getting angry.”

“Why?” She moved closer to him, her steps soft.

“Because my parents left him their house, that’s why. All I ever wanted was that house, and he didn’t want it. It was a slap in the face, but you know how Levi was. He didn’t care. I swear, even now, I don’t think I ever really knew him. One day he would lock himself away, and you’d never hear from him for months, and then, presto, I’d be talking to him on the phone. I just really don’t know, Court, and when he told me about Cassandra, hell, I couldn’t believe it. But now, now I wish he’d never met that nutcase.” Stan paused and shook his head. “Damn, I can’t believe all of this happened.”

Courtney put her arms around his waist, resting her head on his shoulder; she realized he was crying, stomach spasms coming in quick, tense intervals. She pulled on his shoulder, turning him around, where Stan, wiping his eyes, forced a smile, his lower lip quivering.

“Just tell me everything’s going to be fine, Court.”

She ran her hands through his thick brown hair.

“I will do the best I can to make sure you—”

The words were on the tip of her tongue when she heard the first scream. By the time the second came, both Stan and Courtney, a veil of red covering their vision, rushed toward the back door. Looking through the same window Cole had earlier, they saw that something was missing. The backyard was empty. Cole was gone.

Once outside, he didn't shout back. Stan knew exactly where the screams were coming from, and he fought the urge to sprint in the direction. Behind him, her dirty blonde hair tossing in the frigid wind, Courtney shouted, but her voice didn't carry, the words instead escaping and then dying, crushed under the weight of the gunmetal sky. How much longer would he make Cole wait? Stan didn't know, but he figured at least a few more moments. The boy had to understand something, that when his father said *don't*, it meant just that. Sure, it probably wasn't the most kind-hearted thing to do, but Cole needed toughening up, needed instruction, and, most importantly, the *damn* boy needed *discipline*. And if Courtney didn't understand that—

“Then that’s too bad.” Stan’s voice was loud enough to gain Courtney’s attention.

“What’s too bad?”

Coughing into his palm, Stan turned, his weather-beaten face taking the brunt of the wind, and pursed his lips, then took her hand. “Nothing, I was just thinking about something.”

“Are you serious right now? We’ve got to find—”

“Relax, he’s over there, in the well.”

Immediately, she pulled her hand away, her following expression mixed with shock and repulsion.

“How long did you know that?”

“I just assumed he—”

“You mean you thought your son, our baby, was in that well and you didn’t say anything? What kind of man *are* you?” She backed away.

“He’s *not* a baby, Court, and I told him—”

“Stop, do you hear that? He’s probably hurt,” she said, turning and running in the direction of the well, the frozen grass sounding like eggshells.

Cutting through the cold, Stan felt his face grow warm, and though his gut told him follow, his father’s voice, nestled in his head, said wait, that everything was fine. In the past, that voice had been right, but this time Stan found himself fighting it, opting instead for the comfortable medium. He started moving in the direction of the well, not running. No. He walked. Running would be giving in, something his son might see as weakness, and if the boy saw that, he might not learn anything. He might continue down the same road, thinking that tears were punishment enough.

“He’s down here. Come help me! Hurry!” Courtney waved frantically in the air.

Stan continued walking, his head tilted, avoiding the wind. The closer he ventured, the bigger the well seemed, its image more crisp, until he stood a few feet away, Courtney’s voice shrill, bringing back the ache behind his eyes. For a moment, he just stood there, his tongue lax inside his slack jaw. The well’s walls looked at least six feet high, much higher than Cole, and made of jagged, dirt-tarnished stone, with a face crudely chiseled in the well’s center. The thing looked lifted from the pages of a Gothic novel. But how did Cole manage the climb? Before he found an answer, Courtney grabbed the sleeve of his flannel jacket.

“Jesus, are you going to help me? I can’t reach his little arms.”

Courtney's voice shook, on the verge of breaking into a whimper. The anger and his father's voice suddenly disappeared, and he moved forward, pushing Courtney out of the way. He then reached over the lip of the well, feeling for Cole's hands, but couldn't make any contact. Leaning on the well's edge, right arm still dangling, Stan looked inside.

"Cole, can you hear me?"

At first, there was nothing, and Stan felt Courtney's eyes burning a softball-sized hole in the back of his head. But he repeated his query, and a small and icy hand grasped his own, making him recoil. Stan looked inside, and he noticed that it was shallower, five or six feet deep, invalidating the previous mental image. *Why didn't I see him when I looked the first time?*

"I'm . . . okay, Dad, but my leg hurts."

Stan squeezed tighter, this time pulling up on the boy's arm, so that he could get his other around his wrist. "You're going to be fine, just—"

"Momma's here, Hun. I'm sorry we didn't hear you, but every thing's okay now, hear me?" Courtney said, stepping over and blocking Stan from seeing inside the well.

He thought about saying something, and then changed his mind. She would blame him for the entire scenario later, he realized, and that made his face burn again, giving him new strength. Two tugs later and Cole's belly rested on top of the stone. On the third, lifting him up by the belt, Stan set him on the grass. Courtney dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around his shivering frame. Before the boy could even breathe, the water works started, leaving Stan's head pounding from the sudden rush of blood and fire racing through his numbing fingers.

“Where are you hurt, show me,” she said, her hands frantically searching the boy’s body, like a fisherman obsessed with finding a tiny hole in his boat.

“It’s my leg. I think I scratched it pretty bad, but I don’t know how.” Cole gestured to his knee. A small patch of red surrounded the open fabric of his jeans. “I didn’t see anything sharp down there.”

Taking a small, apprehensive step forward, Stan rubbed his hands together and breathed on them, his eyes tearing up from a sudden gust of cold air rushing into his face. He could sense his father’s voice returning, but he ignored it. The scene in front of him needed his full attention. Courtney wasn’t going to baby Cole out of this, not this time.

“Cole,” Stan said, his voice loud, startling both his son and Courtney.

“Yes, sir.”

There were tears in Cole’s eyes when he turned around, but Stan pretended not to notice. He knelt and motioned Cole toward him. “What did I tell you?”

“Stan—” Courtney said, but his hand was already in the air, the universal gesture that meant, or at least meant to her, *quiet*.

“*What* did I tell you?”

Cole lowered his head, fighting tears. “Not to go near the well, but—”

Stan squeezed his shoulders. His gaze held firm. “There is no but, Cole. What part of what I said didn’t you understand?”

Courtney stood and called his name, this time nearing a shout. But Stan paid no attention. He wanted answers, real answers, and she wasn’t stepping in his way until he was satisfied. This moment had been coming, and freezing or not, Stan was going to have his say. “Answer me, Cole.”

“I understood, but,” he stopped, his eyes widening, “but there’s so much stuff in there. Watches, rings, and other stuff. You’ve gotta see—”

“So you’re telling me that you knew and still didn’t listen? Is that what you’re saying?” Stan interrupted, his grip tightening. His voice growing louder. Courtney stood with her arms crossed, the wrinkles around her eyes forming crow’s feet. It was only a matter of time before she scooped the boy into her arms again.

“But just look, Dad,” Cole said, holding his hand out and uncurling his fingers.

In the center of his right palm, dirt covering its metallic surface, was a coin, but not one Stan had ever seen before. It looked old, possibly late eighteen hundreds, and there was no date, nothing signifying when or where it had come from. Stan was positive of one thing: it was only a coin, a beat-up, heavy piece of metal. However, he knew what it meant to Cole, and in that realization, though the boy’s treasured collection might suffer, Stan knew the punishment.

“Toss it back in.” Stan’s voice was monotone.

“But didn’t you see it? And there’s a ton of more stuff down there, Dad. You just gotta get past the sand and dig, but you’ve—”

Stan shook his head, his hands leaving the boy’s shoulders and falling to his sides.

“What did I say?”

Closing his hand over the coin and backing away, Cole’s attention drifted from his father to his mother, tears filling his eyes. Courtney knelt in the frosted grass.

“Don’t you think what happened is punishment enough, Stan? Just look at his leg. What if he gets tetanus?” Courtney placed her arms around Cole.

Stan stood and clenched his teeth, the sound making an audible click in both ears. How had she managed to get between him and Cole? He had only released the boy for a moment, and just as he had imagined, Courtney pounced on the opportunity. Stan felt his hands make their way into fists and, escaping from somewhere inside his head, came the voice of his father, dislodged from whatever recess had kept it prisoner.

You're the head of the house, son. It's time you made that clear.

If it wasn't for him suffering in a cubicle the size of a small broom closet, there would be nothing, food, shelter, no clothes to keep them warm. Absolutely nothing. Were his father's words correct? Yes, they were. And this babying thing . . .

Courtney needed to wake up. It was time he put his foot down, showed them that things were changing, that what he said was what *would* happen. No more asking momma if daddy says no. That was over. It would stop here and now.

"Cole, I'm going to give you ten seconds to toss that back in the well, and if it's not in there on, *before* ten, then you and I are going to have a problem."

Courtney released the boy and stood, her usually pallid face a bright red. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone. A placid expression replaced it. "Can't you see that he's been through enough?"

"Stay out of it, Courtney."

"*Excuse me?*" she replied, stepping forward.

"You heard me. If it wasn't for the way you hold his hand every time he farts, then the boy might listen more often. Have you considered that? That because of the way you always undermine me, like right now, he's not worried about consequences. And I'm sick of it." Stan ignored her gaze and shifted to Cole, who, for reasons he didn't

immediately recognize (it was the word fart) returned his head toward the grass, hiding an increasing grin.

Courtney again knelt and placed her arms around Cole. She then picked him up, holding him waist high with both arms, and took a step toward the well.

“Don’t you have something else to do, Stan? We’ll talk about this when you get back, me and you, okay?” Courtney said, leaning her head down and whispering something in Cole’s ear.

“Are you kidding me?”

“This needs to wait until later. It’s freezing out here, and Cole’s leg is bleeding. He might need stitches.”

“It’s just a scratch, and you know that, I—”

Her face completely void of expression, Courtney looked over at Stan, and for a moment, perhaps shorter, he saw two things: exhaustion and hurt.

“Look, I didn’t mean . . . I just wanted to. Dammit, Courtney,” Stan said, his anger fading, leaving him icy.

“We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Alright, I’m going to go into town and take care of that stuff we talked about earlier. But you make sure he puts that coin back in the well, understand? I might have overreacted, but I meant what I said about listening. You understand, Cole?”

He didn’t speak, only nodded, burying his face in Courtney’s shoulder. Stan hated it when Cole didn’t look at him when he spoke, another thing he would later address. There was also the embarrassment of being shut down, his momentum halted like a bus speeding into a concrete wall. But what could he do? That answer was simple, nothing.

“I’ll make sure he does. I’ll call you later,” Courtney said, turning her back away from him and toward the glass double doors, the same one that Cassandra had fallen through, a hatchet jutting from her head. That image remained in Stan’s mind as he went inside the house, took a couple more children’s Tylenol, and then left, the voice of his father, clear and distinct, laughing him down the driveway.

“Are you ready?”

Taking a deep breath, Stan looked over at the man wearing the white lab coat, and then his eyes lowered, stopping on two cold steel slabs, each covered in a sheet, both motionless. He had seen moments like this on almost every television crime drama, but on television, there were tears, people screaming. In fact, the only aspect that resembled television was the indifferent expression on the coroner’s face. And Stan was sure that, if he looked in a mirror, he’d see the exact same thing.

“As I’m ever going to be,” he replied, taking a step backward. The man pulled back the top half of the sheets.

The man in the white lab coat tilted his head, beady eyes peering over silver-rimmed spectacles, and arched his brows.

“That’s them.” Stan focused his attention wholly on the right, on Levi’s almost ghoulish, slack features.

“Okay, I just need you to sign a few forms.” He stopped and put two clipboards on an empty slab next to Cassandra’s body, “and then we’re done.”

“That’s it?” Stan replied, the relief in his tone evident.

“Well, there’s one more thing, but I figured I’d give you a few moments alone before I started talking possessions, you know. Most people like to have some time alone with their relatives before, well . . .” His voice dropped off, and only then did Stan notice the man fidgeting with his ring finger.

“Are you okay, doctor?”

“Garland Sears. And I’m not a doctor, wish I were, trust me. Doctors have the happy endings, Mr. Vickers. My job’s to handle the unhappy ones, much like what happened with your brother and sister-in-law here. But . . . umm.”

“But what?”

Garland walked past him and to the area beside the door, picked up two square, metal boxes, and returned, placing them on the steel slab next to the clipboard. A strange image came to him as Garland stood over the boxes, between the slabs, that of the two bodies suddenly sitting bolt upright, silently accusing each other. Their eyes milky white, their rickety fingers pointing in every direction except toward themselves. Trying to dispel the thought, he walked toward Garland, between Cassandra and Levi.

“Mr. Vickers, I need you to look at something for me, and please, don’t spare my feelings, okay? If I’m being absurd, you have every right to set me straight, but I suspect this will be as much of a surprise to you as it was me.”

Garland took a large plastic bag out of the metal box on the right, opened it, and eased the contents onto an empty slab. Cassandra’s wedding ring made a loud clink and rolled around a moment before falling flat on its side.

“Have you seen this before?” Garland asked, untangling a silver chain from around a hemp bracelet. The end of the chain had a small disk attached, an image of hands clasped together in prayer on its front.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Haven’t seen Cassandra or my brother in two years. Why do you ask?”

Garland turned the necklace over in his hands. Sweat formed tiny beads on his pale forehead and dripped down his large nose. Finally, his eyes rested on Stan, a quizzical look on his face.

“I only ask because of the name on the back. Here, have a look.” He held it out, the movement, to Stan, seemed strained.

On the back of the necklace, written in tiny cursive, was this: *To my everlasting love, Blair*. Again, Stan shrugged, and passed it back to Garland, confused.

“Okay, what do you want me to say?”

“So you haven’t seen it before?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Alright. I just wanted to make sure that none of this sounds familiar to you, and now that I see it doesn’t, I’ll tell you what I’m thinking. See, Blair’s the name of one of the women that used to live in that house, out there on Davis Circle. Her name was Blair Carver, Mr. Vickers. Ring any bells?”

“Should it?”

“Not unless you were from Watertown. Anyway, I’m pretty sure this necklace belonged to her, say eighty-one, eighty-two years ago, give or take.”

“Okay, so what? Why don’t you just give it to whatever family the woman—?”

“I can’t, Mr. Vickers. Blair Carver’s dead.”

“When?”

“Oh, say eighty-one, eighty-two years ago, give or take.”

Stan scratched the side of his head. “Okay, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Just listen, Mr. Vickers. Blair Carver, in that same house, killed her son and husband, butchered them in ways that makes even me shiver. She was the first, and five years later, around 1936, there was another murder, this time a young couple. The husband drugged his wife, hung her from the top of the stairwell, and then hung himself—and on, and on, and on. There have been at least twenty deaths in that house, Mr. Vickers, and your brother and his wife here, well, that puts things at twenty-two, or more. I’ve seen five or six myself, and trust me, the two now lying on these slabs are the best-looking corpses, or least the most intact, that have come my way.”

“Are you really insinuating that all of these deaths are because of that house?”

Garland placed his hands on the left and right slab and bit his lower lip. “I’m not insinuating anything, Mr. Vickers. I’m *telling* you there’s something wrong with that house. I have no earthly idea what it is, but I wouldn’t stay there more than a few days, if it were me. Most of the deaths occurred eight months to a year after moving in, and I’d bet my bottom dollar that things started getting strange well before that.”

“You do know that you sound crazy, right?”

“That may be true, but if you don’t believe me, check it out at the library, on microfilm—I’m sure they have some of the old papers on file there still—and see for yourself.”

“I’ll just check it out on Google, doctor. I’ve got a lot of ground to cover to make up for the time I wasted here, listening to *this* garbage.”

Garland abruptly rushed forward and placed a hand on Stan’s shoulder, the glare in his eyes fearful, but he wasn’t focusing on Stan’s face. He was looking at his mouth. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Are you okay?”

“What are you talking about? If you’re trying to scare me, then—”

“Come over here,” Garland replied, pulling Stan toward the mirror above the sink. Once he released him, Stan started to turn, but he stopped as he caught his reflection. Blood oozed from his mouth, and when he touched his lip, a sudden jolt went through his spine. Both of his top front teeth were bleeding.

When Stan reached the house, he shifted the car into park, the warmth surrounding him inside the vehicle easing some of the tension on both his head and mind. Garland had given him gauze to put between his lip and teeth, urging him to call the local dentist, Dr. Berry. Stan had simply nodded, excusing himself without another word on the topic of the house. Back home in Alabama, there were plenty of crackpots, some working right next to his cubicle, but Garland, he realized, was the worst. In other words, Alabama crazy had nothing on him.

The thought made him smile, but something else took it away, what was actually inside the house. Stan knew that Courtney was waiting for him, possibly sitting right beside the door, and the prospect of another confrontation made him want aim for the interstate, put as much space between him and them as possible. However, he knew he couldn’t do that, even if that thought had surfaced and resurfaced many times since he

said “I do.” If anything, Cole needed him, and the idea of leaving the boy alone with Courtney brought a sharp, uncomfortable pain to his stomach. No, he would go inside the house and take whatever came, and in the process, he’d get that place ready. He’d handle things.

Cause that’s what men do.

“Thanks, Dad, but I think I can handle this.” Stan cut the ignition and stepped out of the car, the force of the wind pushing him, as if he were a mere cloth on a clothesline.

Courtney stood at the door, but there was a smile on her face. The closer Stan came, the more he realized she was *holding* the door open for him, her voice barely audible over the rustling of trees and grinding of rocks under foot.

“Hurry! It’s *freezing*.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“How’d everything go?”

“Let me get inside, and we’ll talk about it.” Stan removed his coat, the dull scent of burning insulation coming from the heater stinging his nostrils.

He walked into the kitchen and rested his hands on the white counter, staring over the bar toward the glass back doors. Courtney stopped on the other side, her green eyes dull in the hue cast from the overhead kitchen light. Sighing, she propped both elbows on the bar’s wooden surface and smiled.

“So . . . how’d it go?”

“Where’s Cole?” Stan’s voice sounded muffled and came out with a slight lisp.

“He’s upstairs. I found some blankets and made him a cot. I think the trip took a lot out of him,” Courtney replied, her tone sweet, all of the former indifference “Don’t

you have something else to do, Stan?” completely gone. Inside, he wondered what had happened to her, if this was some kind of trick, but he watched her smile crease at the corners, relaxed and natural, and felt his own lips part.

“Oh my God, Stan, what happened to your mouth? Did someone hit you?” Her eyes widened and brows furrowed, as if chasing the deep lines set in her forehead

Stan shook his head and smiled, a thick mixture of blood and spittle coloring his teeth a bright red. “I’m okay. I don’t know what happened, really. Probably just brushed too hard this morning, that’s all. Anyway, are there any more blankets upstairs?”

“There’s some, why?” she asked, her attention still on Stan’s mouth.

“Because, it looks like we might be here at least until Friday. I’ve got so much to do, and that damn coroner held me up too long. By the time I finally got out of there, the funeral home was already closed, and it looks like, judging from the answering machine, I won’t be able to schedule anything until Wednesday.”

“You said the funeral home is closed? Doesn’t a coroner work at a—”

“Yeah, I thought that too. But morticians handle the regular deaths. Levi and Cassandra were, as you know, different. I think he works for the police.”

Courtney leaned against the counter and tilted her head to the right, her smile coming back. “Well, having to stay here isn’t too bad. After all, this place is nice, you know. It could be a small vacation, like we talked about back home.”

“I like my vacations with a little less death. And cleaning up after hippies has never been my thing, you know?” He released a silent laugh, the air escaping through his nose in one heavy, snot-muffled breath.

“You’re terrible,” she laughed, rolled her eyes, and returned to the other side of the bar. “Anyway, I managed to get most of the back room packed away—there wasn’t much stuff, believe it or not—but what I did find was strange.”

“Strange?” Stan replied, pouring a glass of orange juice and taking a massive gulp, chilling his teeth but making his gums burn.

Courtney shrugged. “I guess that’s the right word. Maybe.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know Cassandra, and I’m not judging her.”

“It’s okay. Trust me, I knew her, and it wasn’t exactly easy *not* judging her, you know. She *did* kill my brother, if you haven’t forgotten?”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Distance yourself from what happened? I’ve only seen you upset once, earlier, and the way you’re talking now, if I wasn’t your wife, I don’t think I’d even know that Levi was your brother.”

“*Is* my brother, Court,” Stan said, hearing the sharpness in his voice, and then, seeing Courtney’s eyes drop down to the counter, continued, his tone lighter. “He’s still my brother, babe and, well, I don’t know, you know? I guess it still hasn’t fully sunk in yet. Just kinda get moments of it, that’s all.”

“Even after seeing them at the coroner’s office?”

“I know it’s odd, but yeah. Anyway, you said something about the back room.”

Propping her right elbow on the bar counter, Courtney frowned. “I found some weird things in there. Like I said, I’m not judging, but Cassandra was into some pretty dark stuff, and it doesn’t surprise me what happened.”

“What was in there? I know she had tons of crystals and stuff like that. The woman was crazy about putting them under her pillow, even tried convincing me that I should, too. Said it might keep nightmares away or something like that.”

“It wasn’t just crystals. I could deal with all of that. It was her closet that creeped me out. She had some kind of altar in there, with all these strange books stacked beside it. I found one on the very bottom, and you’re not going to believe what was in it.”

“Do I wanna know?” Stan asked, cracking a smile, trying to influence Courtney’s expression, but it didn’t help.

“It was a book on wishing wells. I set it over—”

Before she could turn and retrieve the book, Stan pushed himself up from the sink. “Wait. I don’t wanna see it.”

“But you might think it’s—”

“That’s okay. I’ve had enough of that stuff for one lifetime. Forget giving it away. Cassandra’s junk is heading to the garbage—including all of these damn beads in the doorways. I’m not even going to donate it. So if you see any more of her things, just cram them in that room, and when the bank takes the house back, they can decide what to do with it. But I’m recommending the city dump.”

“And Levi’s things?” she asked, looking over her shoulder.

“They’re going to Goodwill, if this town has something like that.”

She didn't move for a moment, simply stared ahead, out the double glass doors leading to the back yard. The idea to ask what she was thinking surfaced and quickly faded. It was obvious what was on her mind, what had happened, just inches from her feet. Though someone had replaced the glass window and scoured the tile, leaving sections of it a faded white, the memory still resided there, like how a camera flash burns the afterimage into the retina. Courtney had never seen any of the photos taken by the police, but Stan had described them to her, and perhaps that was enough for imagination. He was positive the scent of death still lingered in the air, cutting through the choking warmth from the heater. Maybe that was what drew her over to the window, forced her arms across her chest, and kept her from venturing any further.

Seeing his wife stand there, her body miniature in the enormity of the back room, brought a sudden sense of conviction to his heart. He wanted, *desired*, her warmth, her gaze. What had been wrong with him earlier? All of that anger, that need to feel in *charge*, and for what? He could blame his father's advice, but that only went so far, and what had Courtney done in response? Nothing. She had greeted him at the door with a smile, her natural warmth guiding him inside and away from the cold. He just continued watching, hoping she would turn around and smile.

"When's the bank going to take the house?" she asked. Her back remained to him.

"I don't know. When we're done here I imagine. Why?"

She turned around, her eyes dull and face void of expression. "It's just so nice. It could be a great vacation home, you know?"

“You’re kidding, right? This place is out in the middle of *nowhere*, and that’s not even the half of it. According to that loon downtown, this place is a bad investment.”

Stan walked over to Courtney and wrapped his arms around her.

Relaxing, she leaned back against him. “What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. And you’re right: it is a nice place.”

“A lot nicer than our apartment.”

“Anything’s better than a shoebox,” Stan whispered.

Courtney squeezed his hands and turned around, remaining inside his embrace.

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It’s not your fault. I was being a jackass.”

Son, now’s your chance to set her straight.

“It’s just, you know, Stan. Cole’s still really young, and I think you’re being too rough on him, that’s all. I know how your father used to run things, but *he’s* not the man I fell in love with. You are,” she said, leaning her head down on Stan’s chest, listening to his heart quicken.

But that’s who you are, boy. Just like me, in every way. Through and through.

“I know, but you have got to help me out. When I tell him something, I need you to back me up, you understand? If you don’t, he’ll never listen to me.” Stan kissed the top of her head and squeezed her waist.

“I understand. What do you say we head upstairs and check on him, like we used to do when he was little?” Courtney lifted her head.

Stan, I’m talking to you, boy! Are you listening to me?

“Sounds good to me,” he replied, dipping his head and kissing her. He realized that his headache was completely gone, along with the voice. Allowing the warmth of her body to depart, he followed her up the stairs.

They walked slowly to minimize the creaking beneath their feet. Courtney reached the beaded doorway, placed a finger over her mouth, and then she slipped a hand through, parting the way for both her and Stan. At first, they assumed Cole was simply lying on his side, asleep, and facing the wall, but when Courtney motioned for them to leave, the blue wool sheet around Cole’s body started moving. Holding his breath, Stan turned around and started toward the doorway, his heart skipping inside his chest.

“Dad?” His tone seemed muffled, as if he had cotton balls shoved into his nose.

Releasing his breath, Stan stepped forward and leaned down, toward Cole. When he did, he saw damp smudges on the boy’s cheeks and fresh tears forming around his eyes. “I’m here, Cole. What’s wrong?”

Courtney rushed forward, but she gave Stan his space. Something about the way Cole sounded made her break out in chills, as though his very tone produced tiny icy fingers that made their way up the back of her shirt, into her spine, and traveled to her nape. “Momma’s here, baby. Are you okay?”

Cole shifted to his back, his eyes closing for a moment. And then, suddenly, they shot open, staring forward, toward the ceiling. “Make it go away, please. I don’t want to see it anymore, momma.”

“Make what go away, Cole? Did you have a bad dream?” Stan felt gooseflesh rise on his arms, neck, and finally his scalp.

“I saw what happened.”

“What are you talking about, honey?” Courtney asked, moving closer. Stan sat closer to the boy’s head, his jaw almost locked, a coppery taste in his mouth.

Closing his eyes again, Cole rubbed his lids and breathed in deeply.

“I saw what happened to Aunt Cassandra and Uncle Levi. I saw it all, and now it won’t go away. Please make it go away, *please*.”

For a moment, Stan and Courtney stared at each other, their faces expressionless, but their eyes communicated what their mouths failed to do. *Did you say something?* The accusation lingered on Stan’s mind the most, considering, after all, Courtney *had* been alone with the boy, *had* been whispering something to him, and, of course, she *had* been the most interested in what they should tell Cole about what had happened. It wouldn’t be any surprise, at least not to Stan, if, while he had been gone, Courtney told him, their little ‘honey bun,’ everything and, at the same time, giving him nightmares for life. Nope, no surprise at all.

See, what did I tell you, son? If you let them have a yard, they take a mile.

“Cole,” Stan asked, his eyes fixed on Courtney’s, “who told you about it.”

There was no response, only silence.

“Cole?” Stan asked, his voice losing its former composure.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, and after that I’m—”

“It was Aunt Cassandra, Dad. She told me, but she’s gone now. Please don’t get mad at me. When I woke up, she was gone, and I don’t know where she went.” Cole turned over and met his father’s eyes, then scanned his face. Then his gaze drifted, slowly, to his mother.

Once again, there was silence, but it didn't last very long. Stan's gaze found Courtney's and he opened his mouth, the question sharp and thick.

"What did you *tell* him?"

"I didn't *tell* him anything. He must have found out himself somehow," Courtney replied, an indignant curl on the left side of her lip.

"You had to have said *something*. There's no other way he—"

As the words reached Stan's tongue, Cole shot bolt upright and glared at him, the boy's cheeks quivering, a small twitch developing at the creases of his eyes. It took everything for Stan not to shriek; and Courtney, seeing through what felt like the wrong end of binoculars, fell backward, mouth dropping slack.

Cole raised his right hand, the index finger extended in Stan's direction, and he started shaking it, a mixture of deep, garbled noises working their way up his throat. Unable to hold them any longer, his lips parted, releasing a flood into the former silence.

"LEVI, IF YOU DON'T GET THE FUCK BACK HERE, YOU'RE GOING TO EAT THIS HATCHET, AND I SWEAR TO GOD ALMIGHTY YOU'LL SHIT STEEL SHARDS BEFORE I'M FINSHED! LEVI, DO UNDERSTAND? DO. YOU. FUCKING UNDERSTAND?"

The last image Stan had seen that night before sleep took him was that of Cole's face, the boy's eyes burning, his teeth grinding together, moments after screaming about the hatchet and seconds before collapsing to the floor. That mental picture had followed Stan around the rest of the day, festering at the back of his mind. When Courtney had asked if he was ready for bed, in her light, monotone way, Stan had almost rushed to the

small cot she had made in the guest bedroom downstairs. Unconsciousness seemed the best way out. But sleep didn't come immediately. Stan had tossed and turned, a cold sweat covering his chest and face, the mechanical beat of his watch clicking away in the darkness, off rhythm with his pounding heart.

What bothered him was how Courtney had passed out moments after her head touched the pillow, leaving him alone. In fact, if Stan remembered correctly Courtney, after Cole had fallen back asleep, simply stood, went downstairs, and drank a glass of water, bits of fluid spilling down her chin. She didn't mention what had happened the rest of the day, and neither did he, but something remained, an itch located somewhere deep, unable to breathe. How did Cole know about the hatchet or, for that matter, where had he heard *those* words? Stan had been careful, limiting his choice vocabulary to empty rooms or Courtney's presence. He was positive that *Spiderman*, one of the only cartoons Cole still watched, didn't speak that way. That only left either Courtney or kids from the apartments, but what kids? There were no kids in their area around, which left only her.

He must have heard them from Courtney. And wasn't it possible that she had told Cole about Cassandra and Levi? These thoughts followed Stan into semi-sleep, leaving them unanswered until, he assumed, daylight. But his rest didn't last long. Moments later his body convulsed, jarring him awake.

The same cold, dark room, smelling of mold and sweat, greeted his blurry eyes.

"Jesus, I was almost there." Stan took a deep breath and rubbed his face. He rolled over on his left side, expecting Courtney's bony knees in his gut, but they weren't there.

Neither was Courtney.

"Court?" Stan asked, patting the blanket next to him.

Like the cot was made of hot coals, Stan pushed the covers back and jumped up. Courtney wasn't in bed, nor was she in the room. She must have got up to use the bathroom or get a drink. The idea slowed his heart, but his head, now aching on both sides, continued pounding. He needed to make sure, but why? He didn't know.

Something pulled at his gut. Turning, Stan moved toward the door, and his hand rested on the cold copper handle. He twisted and opened it.

The first thing he heard was muffled applause, coming from the darkness beyond the door, which started dying down when Stan flipped the light switch. His eyes drank deeply. To the left, suspended by nooses, were two decaying bodies hanging from the top of the stairwell, both in white nightgowns, both heads swollen to a bright purple. Below their feet, propped against the wall, was a tall man smoking a cigarette. It wasn't until he stepped into the light that Stan saw that he didn't have a lower jaw, the smoke going in through his nose and coming out of his gaping throat, thick with pus. The applause continued, forcing Stan's attention to the right. On the floor lay four bodies, their chests crudely carved open, and the light from the chandelier above showing beating hearts. Their heads were gone, and a trail of something thick and black spread across the white tile toward the stairs.

Air trapped in his lungs, Stan grabbed the frame of the door. He couldn't formulate words or feel his legs. Dizzied by the strong odor of rotting meat and earth, he rubbed his eyes. The room seemed filled with the grotesque, walls covered in viscous fluid, and the more Stan focused, the more the house rapidly decayed around him. He started to close his eyes, but a voice called to him from the right.

“Hey, Stan, it’s been a while. Say, why don’t you call more often? You know Levi worries about you all the time.”

Stan looked to the right, his hands trembling as they retreated from his face, and squinted. “Cassandra? Is that you?”

Her body half in, half out, and a hatchet buried in the back of her skull, Cassandra smiled, the whites of her eyes seemingly fixed on him. “Who else would it be, Stan? You haven’t forgotten about us, have you?”

“No, I haven’t,” he paused, took a step forward, and continued. “Where’s Levi?”

“He’s outside, but you knew that already, didn’t you?” Blood trickled down the front of her forehead, smearing on the side of her left cheek.

Stan took another step forward, and through the glass, standing in the rain, was his brother. “I see him.”

“Of course you do, Stan. Now, *go* see him, and ask him to help me up. My fucking legs are cramped like you wouldn’t believe.” She then slumped, lifeless.

Stan ducked lower, looking through the broken glass and out into the yard, where Levi stood. But something was different. He was waving, a smile plastered on his ghastly face, with dark fluid running from his sides. The image of his brother made him tremble, and forced his steps backward. When he moved, Stan caught his own reflection in the shattered glass. Only then did he realize there was blood coming from his open mouth. And after *seeing* it, he started *tasting* it.

“What’s happening to me? What the *fuck* is happening to me?” Stan said, his voice becoming a shout, hands then going to his mouth, finding blood, and then wiping it

on his white t-shirt. From the top of the stairs, Stan heard a single set of hands clapping, gaining his full attention.

“Come and see what your negligence has rewarded you,” a man with his short-cropped brown hair and handlebar mustache said, a reddish hue cast over his face. He turned and walked forward, the sound of his heavy feet on the wooden floorboards echoing. Stan took an apprehensive step toward the stairwell. His eyes drifted downward, resting on the empty floor. Everything had disappeared, the hanging bodies, the smoking man, the stains on the walls, and behind him, the glass wasn’t broken. No Cassandra. But on the other side, Levi still stood in the rain, his hand and face trapped in the same gestures, their movement mechanical. The sight kept his heart pounding.

He took the steps one at a time, both legs feeling like gelatin. Once he reached the middle, he looked over his shoulder, hoping that he wouldn’t turn into stone. He continued until he reached the top, the darkness making his steps light on the creaking boards. It didn’t take long, three or four steps, until he saw the man with the mustache disappear, his shadow becoming transparent, then nothing in an instant.

Standing in front of the hallway door where Cole slept, Courtney stood in her green bathrobe, hair covering her face. What was she doing *here*? Stan didn’t know, but something wasn’t right. She was too still.

“Court?” Stan took an apprehensive step forward.

There was no answer.

“What are you doing up here?” Stan almost asked her about the man with the mustache. *Did you see him? Who was he?* But he refrained.

“Listen, Court, what happened? Are you alright?” he said, moving closer, until he stood a foot away from her. He could smell her perfume, the stuff he had bought her last year for their anniversary, its pungent scent of sunflower making his eyes water. She continued her stiff, mannequin-like posture, not a breath escaping her lips. Stan thought he smelled something over the perfume, something sour, but he wasn’t sure. His nostrils were on overload. The only reason he even noticed the fragrance was due to its strong contrast to the smell of death.

“I’m here, Stan. Doesn’t he look so peaceful?” Her tone was deep and hollow.

“Why didn’t you say something the first time I asked? You have no idea—”

“Doesn’t he though, Stan?”

Stan had enough. He lurched forward, grabbing Courtney’s right arm, but he instantly withdrew. It felt like a piece of mushy plywood covered in cloth, gummy, almost falling apart. The discovery made his stomach twist, the knots pushing anything inside toward his throat.

“Courtney . . . ?” he asked in an almost inaudible whimper, but she didn’t reply. Instead, she turned and faced him, showing the oozing bone-splintered hole where her face had once been. Stan started screaming. The acid in his gut rose into his throat, meeting his teeth, seconds later spewing onto the floor. He fell to his knees, using his hands for support, and he heard her familiar tone above, words clear and distinct.

“Wake up, Stan! Wake up Stan! Wake up, Stan! Wake up, Stan! Wake up, Stan!”

The violent sound of Stan choking had woken her. But it wasn’t until she’d felt the warm, soup-like puddle forming nearby and caught the scent of vomit did she rush to the light switch. Standing beside the wall, she’d seen him, hands in the air, palms pressed

up against gravity, pale yellow fluid spilling from his mouth like a clogged toilet. Courtney, feeling her own gut twist, had sprinted over to him, shouting his name, and rolled him on one side. He let out one more gurgling heave followed by a series of deep coughs before falling back on the cot. Somewhere in her scrambled mind, Courtney had thought she was dreaming, but the other part, the one now shaking her husband, shouting for him to wake, knew otherwise. This was real, clarity pooling around her knees and soaking into her nightgown.

But Stan didn't wake up. His entire body stiffened, mechanical clicks coming from grinding teeth. His fists turned purple. She first thought that Stan was having a heart attack. The sweating and tensing she understood, but the vomiting? Something else was happening, a stroke, maybe? Once again, Courtney didn't know, but—

Stan's eyes shot open.

“Christ, Stan, are you okay?”

Stan pushed her backward into a puddle of vomit. She saw him bolt forward, eyes bloodshot, glassy mirrors. Before she could get out of the way, his hands found her face. It was as if he were inspecting fruit for bruising: fingers pressing on her cheeks, moving to her forehead, and then, finally, gripping her jaw, squeezing lightly and dropping away.

“Courtney, *where's* Cole?” His voice was no more than a whisper.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out, only short breaths. She knew the answer, somewhere inside her head.

“*Listen*, Court, where's Cole?”

“In the same place we *left* him.”

Stan released her shoulders and rushed to the bedroom door. Seconds later, she heard his feet, quick and heavy, slam down on the wooden steps. Her own instinct brought her out into the back room, following him. Or was it fear? Stan had never hurt Cole, ever, but the look in his eyes, that wild, bestial glare she had seen moments ago, put lightness in her step that she had only experienced as a child when walking down a darkened hallway, an uncertainty in her gut.

“Stan,” she shouted, reaching the top, “wait. I don’t think you—”

Courtney stopped three feet from the room, her eyes wide, her hands trembling. Stan stood in the doorway, Cole wrapped in his arms. At the bottom of the sheet, toward the boy’s legs, was a dark, crimson stain, wet and shimmering in the hallway light.

“Grab my keys, Court. We’ve gotta hurry.”

DAY TWO

Checking his watch, Stan sighed and leaned back in the car seat, his attention drawn to the Watertown Community Library, next to the antique shop that Garland had mentioned. Stan couldn’t believe he was actually here, sitting in his car, in fact *had been* for thirty-minutes, waiting to spend even more time in some microfilm booth researching suicides and murders. Something in his gut assured him that waiting *was* worth it, after the grotesque dream and finding Cole in that condition.

What had started out as a small scratch had turned into a deep foot-long laceration. At the hospital, a thick, wheezy man with a terrible comb-over and bright eyes had given Cole a shot of penicillin and bandaged his leg, saying the wound was infected,

that in his sleep Cole had scratched it enough that it grew wider. Otherwise, Cole would be fine, provided, of course, he left it alone. Courtney had tried to get the doctor to check Stan, too, but he opted against it, telling her that the vomiting must have been due to something he had eaten. He didn't tell her about the dream. Why would he? She wouldn't believe him. After all, Courtney actually *trusted* what the doctor had said, but somewhere inside, Stan felt differently. It didn't take a genius to figure out that minor cuts didn't get *that* bad from only scratching, not after a single day.

Something else must have caused Cole's infection, but Stan didn't know what. Every time he tried making sense of it, he could hear the man from his dream, the one with the handlebar mustache. *Come and see what your negligence has rewarded you.* What could that mean? And right after that, the voice of his father screamed into his head. *You're just like your mother, son. Bat shit. Just like your mother.* Stan rubbed his eyes, bits of sleep stinging the corners, took a deep breath and exhaled, fogging up the car window.

"Maybe I am, but I don't neglect my son."

Then explain to me why he doesn't listen to you?

"I—"

As Stan opened his mouth, someone knocked, hard, on the windshield, almost making him bite his tongue. He quickly shifted in his seat, an electric feeling shooting through his spine, and noticed a small woman standing to the left of the car, her face hid from the morning chill behind the hood of her corduroy coat.

He leaned forward and rolled down the window, forcing a smile.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

“I was just about to ask you the same thing. Are you waiting for us to open?” the woman replied, her tone inviting and warm.

Stan nodded and rolled the window up a little over halfway.

“Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Well . . . follow me. I can’t take this cold another minute, and I’ve lived here my whole life.” She laughed, her breath coming out in one long, transparent cloud. The woman then took off toward the library doors, sprinting full speed, like a child running down a long hallway. Stan followed behind, ducking his head, wishing that he were in Alabama.

“How long have you been waiting?” The woman reached into her pocket and removed a set of keys.

“Not long, really. Just glad you’re here now.”

“There we go.”

The door’s lock clicked, and the sound of its rusty bolts creaked against the woman’s shoulder as she pushed it open. Then there was heat, an almost heavy, crushing heat that made it hard to breathe. Stan watched the woman walk quickly over to the right, punch a few buttons into the security system and remove her hood.

“Sorry about the wait, but my kid had me up most of the night. Don’t suppose you know what I’m talking about though, huh?”

For a moment, Stan was speechless. He had expected that, judging by the woman’s tattered jacket and posture, she was older, but she seemed about Courtney’s age, give or take a few years, with short black hair and brown eyes, a small scar above

her right eye. It at least explained the quickness he had seen moments earlier, when she had sprinted toward the library doors.

“Oh, no, I understand completely, and like I said, I haven’t waited long,” he replied, unzipping his jacket and stuffing his wool cap into his jacket pocket.

She smiled and flipped a set of switches, the lights coming on in one quick, flickering instant. “What can I help you with?”

“I was hoping to use your microfilm, if I can. A friend of mine told me about something, and I wanted to look it up. Want to see if he’s full of it or not.”

The woman frowned, the very sight making Stan’s gut feel as though it had dropped to his knees. “I’m so sorry. But our microfilm guy . . . well, the guy that was working on it died a couple days ago, and I have no idea when someone will fix it.”

“What was the guy’s name?”

Please don’t say Levi . . . I couldn’t handle it.

“I think his name was Terry. Mrs. Arnold would know. Want me to call—”

“No, no that’s okay. Thanks for your help.”

He turned and immediately felt a light touch on his shoulder, the suddenness of it making him jerk.

“Sir?”

Stan looked over his shoulder, scared that Courtney would be right there, her face hollowed out, her dead tongue flapping around in detached meat and bone shards.

“Yes.”

“I thought I’d tell you . . . that the library has duplicates of what’s on the microfilm, if you were interested. It’s just that most people don’t like digging through all of that stuff, but if you want, I can show you where we keep the archives.”

Stan smiled, this time a real one. “What’s your name?”

“Belinda.”

“Well, Belinda, I’d love to see them. You lead the way.”

After a short flight of stairs and a long, musty hallway, Belinda stopped at a wooden door, her thin fingers trembling as she inserted a key and twisted. The door creaked open, revealing a room the size of a large closet, each wall home to a massive black filling cabinet. Above each, fuzzy with a dusty glaze, was framed art.

“See what I mean?” The curvature of Belinda’s thin lips mouthed what her eyes alluded. *I’m sorry, but this is where the road stops.*

Stan shrugged, still smiling. “It’s not that bad. Thanks.”

Resting one of his hands on a cabinet, Stan immediately recoiled. He quickly brushed the dust off on the leg of his pants, where it left a thick gray streak. The smell of the room, like the hallway, felt like one big, rank armpit, but he could deal with it, if the door remained open.

“There is another thing,” Belinda said, her voice low and distant.

“What’s that?”

She took a step into the room and pulled out the top drawer of the cabinet Stan had just wiped his hand across, dust wafting into her face, but she seemed undisturbed by it. “It’s the way things are set up. See,” she stopped, leaving the drawer open, and

continued. “The prior handler or I guess you’d call him our archivist, managed these files, and as you can see, he had his own system.”

“I don’t understand? Isn’t everything set up by—?”

“Year?”

“Yes, isn’t that right?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be, yes, but Mr. Wellington had his own system. See this here, where it says January?”

Stan looked down, his eyes scanning the rows upon rows of newspapers, some of them muddy brown, others a jaundiced yellow. Each row divided with a thin piece of sheet metal after every fifty-third or fifty-fifth edition.

“I see it, but it looks normal to me.”

“You don’t see February anywhere though, do you? And you wouldn’t. *This* is only January. Wellington was odd, no doubt. The cabinet underneath: February, and so on, and so on. And to make it worse, these go all the way back to the early *eighteen hundreds*, making it nearly impossible to find something unless you know the precise date, year, and month. Plus, even if you do find *something*, the chances that it doesn’t fall apart in your hands is like this room getting cleaned, which I’m sure you’ve noticed,” Belinda said, pushing the drawer in and stepping back toward the doorway.

As if he didn’t hear her, Stan, now standing at the back of the small room, motioned downward, his eyes remaining below as he spoke. “What about this one?”

“Which one?” she replied.

“The tan filling cabinet back here.”

He lowered to his knees, reading the small black letters written across a piece of tape the same color as the cabinet. At first, Stan didn't believe what he was reading. But then he read it again, trying both not to laugh, and also, strangely, allow the bumps crawling up his nape and scalp purchase. The words on the tape were this:

X-FILES

“What's in here?”

“Oh, I forgot about that one. Mr. Wellington, if you haven't already guessed, was an awfully weird man. He kept most of the, well—”

“What happened to him?”

Belinda suddenly pushed away from the cabinet, the lines in her face, around the eyes, cheeks, and forehead, mushed together, making her look twenty-years older and somewhat distorted.

“Wait a minute. Why do you want to know about him? Are you from the newspaper?”

“No, listen—”

She took a step forward, an indignant flash in her eyes. “No, *you* listen. Mr. Wellington was a good man, and we don't need any more of you people and your slanderous garbage. I can't believe I didn't notice it before, when you showed interest in the archives. I could lose my job for this. I bet you didn't know that, and I bet—”

Before he could hold back the words, they blurted from between his tightened lips. “Davis Circle!”

“What?” a queer look formed at the creases of her lips.

“I think you heard me the first time.” Stan leaned against the back wall, between the tan filling cabinet and the largest black one. The harshness in his tone, though warranted, seemed like it had come from someone else. The exact words, in fact the entire phrase, was one he had heard many, many times.

Like father like son, huh?

“Yes, I heard you.” She rubbed her face. The scar above her right brow, Stan realized, stretched to her hairline.

“It happened four years ago, when I had first started working here. I was young, didn’t really know anything about books. The only things I ever read were the occasional ones on UFOs, you know. Weird, but that’s me. And that’s how I met George,” Belinda stopped, faked a smile, and rolled her eyes.

“You were seeing each other?”

Belinda shook her head, both hands waving in front of her chest. “Oh, no way. It wasn’t like that. George was old enough to be my dad, and besides, I don’t think I was his type. I didn’t have the right parts.”

Stan relaxed, a smile creasing his cheeks.

“Anyway, he helped me learn the ropes—how to use the computer to find books and which floor contained what—but something about him always felt off, like, I dunno, he just gave me this weird vibe. And I started noticing that he spent most of his time, if not all, in this room. So I followed him in here one day, during my lunch.”

“What was he doing?”

“What do you think? He was pulling files out of that tan cabinet back there and stacking them on the floor, making a mess.” Belinda turned and looked out the door.

When she had finished, she faced Stan, took a step forward, and leaned against the wall between the cabinets.

“That doesn’t make him weird, maybe antisocial, but not—”

“No, you don’t understand,” she interrupted. “You should have seen the look he gave me. Even thinking about it, that tobacco-stained grin, his odd glossy eyes, makes my gut wrench. Then, and I’ll never forget it, he asked me if I believed in the devil. It was so strange, but I couldn’t move, could only listen to his voice, the echo of his voice in my head. I had nightmares about it.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Huh?” She again rubbed her face, this time the effort seeming contained within the region around her scar.

Stan pushed away from the wall and repeated.

“I remember nodding, that’s all, and George’s attention went back to the cabinet, but he kept talking. He said that he had seen the devil, but, then again, he had also said many things, like Watertown was full of monsters, werewolves and other things I can’t seem to remember. But he was bat shit, you know?”

You’re just like your mother, son. Bat shit. Just like your mother.

Stan squinted, a crushing pain shooting through his head. “Hold on just a minute.”

“Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

He smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Anyway, what does this—?”

“Have to do with Davis Circle?”

“Yes. You seemed startled when I mentioned it.”

She lowered her head, that same look of contempt returning from when he had asked about Mr. Wellington. When their eyes met, there were tears spilling down the sides of Belinda's cheeks, her lower jaw trembling.

"I wasn't startled. It's just . . . just," she stopped and wiped her face.

"Look, I know *something* happened, and it's alright if you don't want to tell me, but I've got a feeling, especially after what you just told me, that what I need to know is inside this cabinet. You don't have to say anything else, but please let me look. And I swear I'll be out of your hair." Stan stepped forward, reluctant to say another word.

After wiping her face, Belinda moved closer to Stan, past him, and removed a key from her pocket and unlocked the cabinet.

"I'll let you look at the files. But I want to know what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, about the house. And if you're straight with me, I'll tell you what happened to George."

Stan extended both arms and rested them on the cool metal surface of the black cabinet next to him. "There really isn't that much to tell. My brother and his wife died in that house last week."

"I know. I remember." Her voice trailed off into a whisper.

"You *remember*?"

"Of course I do. It was all over the news. How could I forget? And I remember your brother, too. He used to come in here and scroll through the microfilm, before the machine stopped working."

“Do you have any idea what he was looking for? I mean, did he ever say anything about it?”

“Never. I didn’t know it was him until I saw his face on the news, then I remembered where I had seen him, but—”

“But what?”

“Well, I have a pretty good idea what he was looking for, but I don’t think he ever found it. You see, Mr. Wellington didn’t scan his personal records into the microfilm, and that would explain why your brother kept coming back.”

“Wait. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that your brother must have been looking for articles about the house, but he couldn’t find anything because Mr. Wellington didn’t put the stuff in the tan cabinet on film. And it wasn’t until I saw his face on the news, along with the house, that I realized what he must have been looking for.”

“How do you know this? He could have been looking—”

“I know this because *you’re* here now, and that’s exactly what *you’re* looking for, isn’t it?” She paused and took a step forward. “Listen, you’ve got to get out of that house. If I’d known about your brother, I would have told him the same thing, but I can’t; so I’m telling you. Please, just *go*. Don’t look back.”

Stan shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

Belinda looked up toward the ceiling and took a step backward. “You asked about Mr. Wellington, right? Maybe this will change your mind. George lived in that house before your brother.”

“I gathered that much.”

“He also died in that house, like your brother and his wife.”

“So what are you telling me? That the *house* had something to do with this?”

“I think you know it does. When I first met George, he didn’t live in that house. Sure, he was weird, but after he moved in there, well, he started—I don’t know, changing. The first thing I noticed was that he kept missing work. When he did show up, he had these dark circles under his eyes.”

“A lot of people have that.”

She nodded. “I know, but none like George. Trust me when I say that. It was as if his eyes were sinking into his head or something. He just didn’t look well. I tried talking to him the best I could, but he wouldn’t do anything but smile and keep walking.”

“I don’t mean to cut you off, but what about the house?”

“No, you’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just,” she stopped, her hand tracing the scar above her brow, and smiled, “it’s just that I remember it all so clearly, you know? After George didn’t show up for a week, Pam, the director here, asked if I wouldn’t mind going over to his house, see if he’s alright. I didn’t want to, but what choice did I have?”

“You could have told her you couldn’t.”

“You don’t know Pam. It was either that or turn in my keys.”

“If she’s so bad, why didn’t she fire Mr. Wellington?”

“Probably because he’s the only one who had been here longer than her, and he knew the place. She might have even had a thing for him. I don’t know. What does it matter? Back to what I was saying. So I go over there and knock on the door, but he doesn’t answer. And like an idiot, I check the door. It was unlocked. I made it halfway

down the hallway when George hit me with something. I still have no idea what it was, but it left a pretty bad scar.”

Belinda suddenly stopped and looked toward the floor and shivered, as if she had stepped into a puddle of ice water. When her eyes returned to Stan, her jaw once again trembled.

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry I keep crying, feel like such a baby.”

“No, it’s alright.”

“While I was on the floor, half in and half out, I watched George walk across the backroom of the house smoking a cigarette. I remember seeing something in his other hand, but I couldn’t make it out. After all, the room was dark, and my eyes weren’t exactly focused. Then he stopped, out of nowhere, just stopped. He wasn’t that far away from me when he said it, and I. I—”

Stan placed his hands on Belinda’s shoulders and bent at the knees, his eyes meeting hers. “What did he say?”

“He said that he didn’t mean to do anything wrong, and that he was sorry, but I knew he wasn’t talking to me. He was talking to the house—don’t ask how I know. I just do—and then, whatever he had in his other hand went up in the air. I watched him. Watched him stab himself in the face, over and over again. I have no idea how he did it or why, but he just kept on, until his screams turned into these, these gurgling noises. Then I passed out and woke up in the hospital, but I *know* George was talking to that house. Strange. But I know it.” Belinda wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands.

All Stan could do was listen to the heavy thump of his heart. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He watched Belinda, her own lips parting, words forming but falling away. Stan remembered the dream, but more aptly, he remembered the man underneath the stairs with his jaw missing and the stale scent of cigarettes wafting through the darkened backroom.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m okay.”

“Want me to get you some water?”

“I’m fine, really.”

“Okay.” Belinda opened the door and stood in the hallway.

“You believe me, don’t you?”

His hand on the drawer handle, Stan turned. “Yes, I believe you. And I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Don’t apologize. I shouldn’t have gone inside, but do me one favor, will you?”

“What’s that?” Stan opened the drawer. It unleashed a strong, invisible cloud of ancient cigarette smoke that stung his eyes.

“*Leave* that house, before you can’t.”

Of the four drawers marked X-FILES, Stan pulled out the bottom one first. Mr. Wellington had split them into four rows, separated with four metal dividers. In the back, attached to a single divider, was a taped white piece of paper, the dates 1931-2011 written in thick black marker. Reaching forward, Stan sifted through the newspapers, skipping over the ones covered in transparent plastic and moving more toward the middle, in his head counting back until he reached *eighty-one, eighty-two, and . . .*

“Eighty-three,” he said, removing a newspaper marked November 23, 1948.

After looking through the first couple of pages and finding nothing, Stan flipped the paper over. There it was, circled in yellow highlighter. But it wasn't the exact article he had been expecting. The title read:

Milford Home in Ruins

Late last night, the bodies of Jonathon and Martha Milford were found in the couples' upstairs bedroom, where they had apparently died from undisclosed injuries. Little is known, but it is estimated that, based on Mr. Milford's employer, Tommy Dalton, who runs the Ironworks downtown, Mr. Milford hadn't been to work in several days.

Stan flipped the newspaper over without finishing, and placed it back, careful not to wrinkle or crush any of the surrounding pages. He then removed another, and another, pulling out the next one in front of the last. Just like the others, each had that same yellow circle, but the headlines—

He stopped.

When he had pulled out the one closest to the front of the drawer, a half-mangled piece of paper fell from between its pages. Stan bent down and retrieved the crinkled piece. The paper was so thin between his shaky fingers that he feared it might rip. In his right pocket, Stan felt his phone vibrating, but he didn't answer. He had told Courtney he was going to pick up extra bandages from the local pharmacy and that he wouldn't take too long.

He gently unfolded the paper, its cloth-like surface reeking of dead man's smoke, and placed it on top of the cabinet. On the outside edges, Stan could see where the yellow

highlighter had been, before Mr. Wellington had cut it from the larger newspaper. The next two things he noticed simultaneously, the enormous black and white picture and the equally enormous words in bold: **Murder Suicide at New Carver Residence**. According to the report, dated 1930, “Blair Carver, a local high school teacher at Watertown High, brutally murdered her husband and six-year-old son this past Saturday evening, only to take her own life moments later. Her husband, Thomas Carver, a veteran, worked as—”

Stan’s eyes broke from the text, the remaining sentences drifting off into a blur, and shifted attention toward the black and white picture. Time stopped, his ears filling with an almost deafening pressure, like being under water and moments away from oxygen deprivation. Standing next to a woman with short blonde hair was the man with the handlebar mustache, his massive smile looking ghoulish. It wasn’t until Stan looked in the background, to the left of the house, did he find the boy, but something was odd.

The boy, a miniature figure frozen in the distance, stood beside the well from the backyard, its outline unmistakable, even from far away. He had his arms in the air, back slightly arched. He looked frightened.

But there was something else, too.

Stan could barely make it out, and he had to flatten the paper so that the wrinkles wouldn’t warp the image. On the opposite side of the boy, standing to the back left of the well, was a shadow, one that looked seven-feet-tall and, through somewhat undefined, roughly shaped like a man. *How could somebody not have noticed this*, Stan thought, but immediately retracted the idea. Wellington had noticed, obviously. But if Wellington had known about the house, then why had he moved out there, into it, and ignored the message hidden on the newspaper, the very message Wellington himself read and reread

until the paper itself started falling apart? It didn't make any sense, and in that same thought, another, more terrifying reality bombarded him, the room upstairs, the one Cole slept in throughout the night. If everything in the tan cabinet was true, then the room upstairs . . .

How many people had died in there? Murdered there?

He felt the vibration in his pocket again, and he found himself mentally cursing Courtney for pestering him. But what if it was about Cole? For some reason, that possibility had never occurred to him, that something was wrong, or even worse, something *had* happened.

C'mon, son, you have work to do . . . And that bitch can wait. Don't beat yourself—

"Get fucked," Stan said, reaching into his pocket.

"Excuse me, sir?"

His heart had almost stopped when he heard the annoyed, high-pitched voice behind him. The phone continued vibrating inside his pocket, a dull, almost distant feeling, like a muscle spasm.

"Do you mind explaining to me what you're doing in here?" The woman's wiry arms rested on her gaunt, protruding hips, and her painted on eyebrows rose to her large forehead, her shortly cropped grey hair reminding Stan of every substitute teacher he had ever had.

"You must be Pam."

She smiled. "How'd you know?"

“Belinda mentioned you. When she told me the microfilm wasn’t working, I asked if I could see the archives, and I’m just about finished.”

“It’s policy, sir, that one *must* sign in to use the archives, and I don’t recall seeing any names on the sheet, so I will ask that you please stop what you are doing and provide your information, and *then* we can talk about your continued use. Please, follow me to the front desk.” Pam’s smile suddenly disappeared, leaving behind a worn, hollow expression that Stan assumed Belinda had seen many, many times.

When Pam turned around, Stan started to follow, but, almost instinctively, he reached up and removed the mangled newspaper clipping from the top of the tan cabinet. He then placed it inside his left pocket. Stan didn’t know why he’d taken the paper with him, other than a strange intuition that he would need it. If anything, it would help him explain things to Courtney, especially when he told her that they were leaving.

“Just sign here, sir. And I’m going to need two sets of identification.” Pam held out a blank piece of paper and a pen.

This is the sign in sheet? I should have known you were screwing with me.

“Sir?”

Stan backed away from the counter and reached into his pocket, removed the cell phone, and stared at the tiny screen: *nine* missed calls.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m done in there.”

“If you don’t sign in, then—”

Stan pressed the call button and stepped away from her. He thought about telling the woman where she could stick the pen, then decided against it. If he said something

with one of his colorful adjectives on the end, Belinda might pay for it, and she had been through enough already. He didn't want her losing her job.

A low voice, almost a whisper came from the phone. "Stan . . . is that you?"

"Who else would it be, Court? I'm sorry I didn't answer. I have been—"

"It doesn't matter. Just get home, and hurry. I don't know if they can hear me."

"Who?" Stan realized his own voice had also dropped to a whisper.

There was silence for a moment. He was vaguely aware of Pam, wide-eyed and jaw clenched, staring at the side of his head. Quietly, he repeated the question.

"Stan, there's someone here . . . in the house with us."

While Courtney had been whispering into the phone, Stan had already started moving toward the library's doors. Though he had urged her to stay on the line, Courtney had hung up the phone, the line going dead with a piercing beep into Stan's ear. That tiny noise had made his entire head feel like it was pulsating, sharp bolts of web-like lightening gripping his brain all the way back to Davis Circle. Within five minutes, Stan pulled into the gravel driveway and rushed out of the car. Seconds later, he found himself running down the hallway and up the stairs.

"Courtney!" He had completely ignored the fact that somebody might be inside the house, but he didn't really care. Once he entered the bedroom and saw the ruffled blankets on the floor, he calmed down. There was no one there. In fact, it didn't look like there ever was. Stan shouted her name again, and he heard Courtney's voice.

"Stan?"

He watched the copper-colored handle of the closet twist slightly to the right. Not wanting to startle her with his own anxiety, he took a deep breath and waited.

“Stan?”

“It’s me, babe.”

The door suddenly flew open, its knob slamming against the opposite wall, making a hollow thud against the plaster. Holding Cole in her arms, Courtney sprinted out of the closet, almost tripped over an array of blankets, and stopped a foot from Stan. She then lowered Cole to the floor, the boy’s eyes closed, his body stationary.

“Court, what hap—”

“Where *were* you, Stan?” She abruptly stood. There were new tears in her eyes where the old ones had left her face looking soggy and drained of color.

“I was at the library.”

“I called you over and over. Why didn’t you answer? Didn’t you think it might be important?”

“I—”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want any excuses. What if we had been hurt? What if *Cole* had gotten hurt?”

It was clear to Stan that she was upset, but there was another expression there he recognized immediately, terror. She had every right to be angry with him, but the other look in her eyes made him feel awful, and the only way he could manage listening to her voice was if he averted her gaze. He wanted to put his arms around her, but there was an invisible barrier there, something stopping him.

“But you’re not hurt. Neither is Cole. Everything’s going to be fine, as soon as we get away from this house. Just tell me what happened.”

Her eyes widened. “Get away from this *house*?”

“Yes, and—”

“But what about the funeral?” The previous irritation in her tone subsided, replaced now with genuine concern.

“One thing at a time. We’ll get to that. First tell me what happened.”

She looked at the rickety floorboards, then over at Cole’s chest gently rising and falling. “I’m not sure, really. I was downstairs, doing something, when I heard Cole scream. Truthfully, I didn’t want to move, let alone go up the stairs. I know it sounds terrible.”

“No, I understand completely.”

“That doesn’t make it okay, and you know that,” she replied, and then added, “I just couldn’t bring my legs off the floor. I don’t remember ever being that freaked out in my life. You should have heard him. I can still hear it.”

“But you obviously made it up there.”

“Only after I called you a few times, yeah. After you didn’t answer, I didn’t have any choice. I should have ran up those stairs, but I couldn’t.” She lowered her face into her hands and cried, the heat from her own mouth drying her throat.

Stan pulled her close to his chest. “What happened when you got up to the room? Did you see anyone?”

“I didn’t see anybody, but Cole kept screaming, trying to push me away.”

“So how did you know there was someone in the house?”

“Cole told me. After he calmed down, he said that he had woken up and saw someone standing in the doorway, staring at him, but he didn’t recognize them.”

There was another question on his mind, but he wasn't sure that pushing the issue at the moment would be the best decision. However, his mouth opened before his brain could protest, and the words came out in a monotone whisper.

“Did he say if it was a man or women?”

Courtney suddenly released Stan's waist and frowned. “Why does it matter?”

“It doesn't. I just wanted—”

“Are you not telling me something?” This time she took a step backward, toward the closet door.

“Just answer the question.”

“No, you tell me why you want know.”

A frail hand grabbed his right leg, followed by a thin, high-pitched voice. “Dad, where's mom?”

“She's here, Cole.” Stan dropped to his knees and pulled the boy toward him.

“It was a man.”

Courtney rushed from the closet and knelt beside Cole, listening. Stan watched her do this, but didn't notice that Cole avoided eye contact with her, instead keeping his attention focused beyond, possibly on the hallway. Suddenly, Stan pushed up from the floor and rubbed at his eyes. The headache was coming back, a deep, throbbing pain in the back of his skull, and he was positive that he tasted copper in his mouth.

“We're leaving.”

“What? Now? What about the house? I thought you—”

“Will you, for *once*, just fucking listen to me? I'll explain, or I'll try the best I can later. Get you guy's stuff together and meet me downstairs.”

He then started toward the door, positive that Courtney would shout at him. But when he stepped into the hallway, she remained quiet. He imagined he'd pay later for cursing at her, especially in front of Cole, but that didn't matter right now. At the bottom of the stairs, Stan stopped, his attention shifting toward the left, to the double glass doors. The image from the newspaper appeared in his mind's eye, the boy recoiling from something off to the left, partially hidden by the well. Stan removed the mangled clipping from his pocket, intent on smoothing out the paper's surface. He turned, heading toward the bar, but his elbow struck something, sending it to the floor with a thud.

“Jesus.”

Stan knelt and picked up the book that Courtney had mentioned finding in Cassandra's room the day before, the one about wishing wells, titled *Gods, Magic, and Talismans*. There was a small pink notecard in the middle of the book. Almost forgetting about the newspaper clipping, Stan opened the book to the page where the card was, unaware of the pain inside his head moving forward, to the back of his eyes.

The first thing he noticed was the obvious similarities with the well in the picture and the one in the backyard. It, too, had a face in its center, the same crudely fashioned outline of either a man's face or some monster. The text underneath offered some clarity, though very little: Mímir's Well: Often called “The Wisdom Well. Underneath the description, about halfway down the page was a single paragraph. Stan placed the book on the bar, next to the mangled paper, and continued reading.

Originally thought as a gift from the Nordic god Mímir, this well houses certain gods that, when offered something of personal value or meaning, grants profound wisdom and knowledge. Other myths suggest that Mímir himself inhabits the well, and

that great wealth and prosperity wait if the proper sacrifice(s) is offered. The Greeks and Romans believed—”

Stan’s mind struggled to make the needed connection. He skimmed the remainder of the paragraph, waiting for something, anything, but the text offered only various interpretations from one ancient culture to the next. However, one thing remained the same, regardless of era, the well’s name, Mimir’s Well. But what that actually meant or alluded to Stan didn’t know, and he found himself questioning the relevance of Courtney’s intention by mentioning it to him.

Exasperated, he closed the book and rubbed his eyes, then returned to the double glass windows. He could hear the heavy, distant sounds of Courtney and Cole’s feet shuffling on the floorboard above. But they were secondary to the steady thump inside his ears. Stan walked forward, until he stood inches away from the glass, his gaze scouring the backyard, thoughts filled with static. There was something he was missing, but he couldn’t place it.

He opened the back door. The frigid cold knocked him off balance, like an invisible dead hand. Below, Stan could feel his legs moving, carrying him toward the well. But he didn’t know why, at least not until his hands rested on the rough texture of the stone and his eyes fixed on the layer of sand several feet from the well’s lip. *Now it looks less shallow. How is that possible?*

What was it that Cole had said when Stan pulled him over the lip of the well? It was on the tip of his tongue, but memory seemed—

But there’s so much stuff down here. You’ve gotta see.

Stan felt the air rush out of his lungs, a crushing sensation in his solar plexus that traveled up his neck. Littered below were dozens of shimmering items, some household utensils made of gold, others, the less glamorous and expensive, rusted watches and bottle tops. That was it, the answer. Stan sprinted back into the house, not understanding why it hadn't jumped off the page earlier, but that didn't matter. At least not anymore.

Breathing in deep, raspy intervals, Stan picked up the newspaper clipping. Carefully, he then pulled the paper tighter, eyes wandering from the boy to the picture of Blair Carver. There it was. The silver necklace Garland had tried passing along to him was around Blair's neck. Had he noticed that back at the library? And if he did, why hadn't the thought occurred to him then?

"It must have been him."

It had been Thomas Carver that originally took the necklace out of the well. After all, didn't the inscription on the back of the silver disk read *To my everlasting Blair*? Stan was sure that it had, but what did that mean exactly? For one thing, it would explain why, in his dream, Stan didn't see Blair, only Thomas Carver. But that still didn't answer where the necklace came from, nor did it clarify why Cassandra *and* Levi were trapped in the house, if trapped was indeed the correct word. Also, what did the shadow in the newspaper clipping have to do with anything?

There was something bigger, something simpler, that Stan was missing. The current clues offered little explanation. And if Stan was positive, he could hear Courtney's voice getting closer, the footsteps louder. He needed to hurry. Again, Stan opened the book, skimming the text, and then it dawned on him. The text constantly mentioned the benefits of giving in exchange for something, but it said nothing about

taking. There was nothing about what would happen if someone couldn't part with their "personal sacrifice" and wanted it back.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

Thomas Carver, for whatever reason, went inside the well and *found* that necklace, but it never belonged to him.

"It belonged to the gods inside the well," Stan said, surprising himself with the evenness in his tone, the surety of it. Someone must have put the necklace back, possibly Thomas, but that didn't make any sense. If Thomas had put it back, why was he still there, in the house? Stan closed the book and quickly placed the newspaper in his pocket. There was also the man, Mr. Wellington, and the others, the ones from his dream. But even more terrifying, Courtney had been there also, her face crudely hollowed out like a rotten pumpkin in November. The urgency in Stan's mind made his stomach knot. Then, another revelation struck him. What if leaving didn't fix the problem? What if they left, drove all the way home, and things got worse?

In Stan's opinion, there were too many ifs. If one thing was certain, concrete, it was this: he needed to get that necklace back in the well, and destroy the damn thing so it didn't happen to someone else. And maybe he might be able to stay, get the funeral and house taken care of before leaving. But he needed to make a call first, to the only person that could help, the only person who had seen this type of thing at least five or six times in his career, Garland Sears.

Stan zipped up his jacket and headed to the front door, the phone already to his ear, its gurgling tone droning inside his aching skull.

"Hello?" a light, half-dazed tone asked.

Stan started the car and placed it in reverse, his foot dropping down on the accelerator, jerking him backward. “Garland, it’s me, Mr. Vickers.”

“What can I help you with, sir? You know it’s Saturday, and business—”

“I thought about it, and I need that necklace after all. Can you meet me at your office in, say, five minutes?”

There was semi-silence, Garland’s heavy, labored breaths sending static through the line. Then he spoke, his voice stern. “I’ll be there in three. I figured you’d call, but we’ve gotta talk first. Should have talked a long time ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll see you in a few minutes, Mr. Vickers. We’ll talk then.”

Stan lowered the phone, about to hang up, but stopped.

“Garland, do you have a sledgehammer?”

Stan didn’t waste any time. As soon as Garland closed the door and locked it, he stopped in the hallway, rubbing both hands together. “You said something’s wrong with that house, and I’m kicking myself for not listening before. But I am now.”

“In my office, Mr. Vickers.”

Nodding, Stan followed him down a long, nondescript hallway smelling of stale coffee and mint chewing tobacco. The fluorescent lights danced inside their hard plastic covering. “Why didn’t you tell me about that house?”

“I tried, but you were in a hurry, and I didn’t think you’d believe me anyway. Probably just figure I was bat shit.”

You’re just like your mother, son. Bat shit. Just like your mother.

Garland pulled out a metal chair for Stan. He then sat down behind the desk, his considerable weight making his own cushioned chair squeal in protest.

“I didn’t. Are you alright?”

Stan rubbed his temples, squinting. “I’m fine; my head hurts like hell.”

“I’d give you some aspirin, but I don’t have any. Are going to be okay?”

“I said I’m fine. Now, tell me what you know.”

“You tell me why you want the sledgehammer, and then we’ll talk.”

He considered this for a moment, then he pulled out the metal chair, unfolded it, and sat down, its cool surface chilling him through his jeans. “You’ll just think *I’m* crazy.”

“Try me,” Garland said, his silver-rimmed spectacles dipping on his nose.

“I’m going to destroy the necklace.”

It wasn’t completely a lie, Stan guessed. After all, he was going to destroy it, and maybe Garland could understand that, but the business with the well, that might be too much.

“Okay, just wanted to make sure you weren’t thinking about doing something more, well, sinister, if that’s the correct word.”

“You mean like kill my family?”

The room suddenly fell silent. Garland adjusted his glasses and looked down at the desktop, a slight tremble in his right hand. “I guess you took my advice then.”

“If you mean looking at the library archives, then yes; I’ve been there. I need you to tell me about the necklace, Garland. You’ve seen it before.”

“No, not the necklace. The only time I’ve ever seen it was when it showed up here, with your brother and sister-in-law. Other than that, I’ve never laid eyes on it, but I have seen *similar* things pass this way.”

“What do you mean by similar?”

“You know, like various heirlooms and such. I never thought much of it, until I noticed that the majority of them came from the people at that house, the ones who had died there. But that’s not what I wanted to tell you.”

“Garland, what do you do with the stuff?”

“Excuse me?”

Stan was sure that Garland heard him just fine. As Stan waited for the answer, he realized that his left leg was vibrating. Courtney, he assumed, calling again, but like before, he ignored it. He would get to her later, after he got the necklace.

“The heirlooms, Garland. What do you do with them?”

“If nobody claims them, depending on what they are, I sell them to the antique shop.” Garland’s voice was matter-of-fact.

“Are you serious? What if—”

“Just relax, Mr. Vickers. I didn’t sell your necklace, now did I?”

It wasn’t until he saw Garland’s hands shoot into the air did he realize he had stood from the metal chair, leaning on the desktop. If Garland actually sold the dead’s belongings, or kept them for himself, then that would explain why some of the people were trapped inside the house, especially Mr. Wellington. But it still didn’t explain the necklace or, for that matter, Levi being there and not Blair. Perhaps it did. Garland was probably just another thief in a long line of thieves, each taking what they wanted and

discarding the rest, like professional grave robbers. It wasn't unbelievable to assume that, if Garland had done it, stole from the spirits inside the well, someone else might have, too. By that same rationale, perhaps some were guiltier than others were. Levi had more of a part in it than Blair did, but *how* was that?

Levi had been to the library, too . . .

But hadn't Belinda said that Levi never looked in the tan cabinets? Yes, Stan was sure but—

“Have you ever met my brother before, Garland?” At the question, Stan saw something he had seen many times, but mostly from Cole, that look of shame. The *I don't know* look.

Garland coughed into his palm and, meeting Stan's gaze, looked away. But sweat beads poured down his waxy face, though the room matched the outside chill. “That was another thing I wanted to mention, Mr. Vickers, but I wanted to wait for the right time. See, I met—”

Halfway through the sentence, Stan's right hand came across the desk, catching Garland on the right side of the cheek. It sent him heavily to the floor, coughing.

“How many people, Garland?”

He didn't answer, only continued coughing. But when Stan moved forward, standing over him, Garland waved him away.

“It's not like that. I just provide a service, nothing else.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell me about the house? That I could talk to one of your friends if I liked it? That I could get it for cheap? Is that it? No wonder you didn't

mind letting me borrow your fucking sledgehammer.” Stan kicked him in the side, sending him into another coughing fit.

The man slunk away and leaned against the back wall, his chest rising and falling in quick, labored intervals. Once he caught his breath, he looked over at Stan, a menacing frown on his lips. “I wanted you *out* of the house. You and your family were unexpected guests. Hell, I didn’t even know the he had family, thought your brother was like the rest of them, and so what, anyway? It’s not like you can do anything about it. Even if you tried, you’d look crazier than you do right now, beating up on an old man.”

Stan moved to kick him again, but stopped. “Why do you do it?”

“C’mon, you know that.” He stopped and wiped small trickles of blood from his chin. “Cause I’m feeling so peachy, I’ll let you in on the secret. My pal down at Martin’s Reality gives me a cut of the sales if I can push the house, and the heirlooms, well, Martin doesn’t need to know about that part. That’s *my* business, and don’t you go trying to tell him, cause he won’t believe you neither.”

“What about my brother?”

“Mentioned the house to him while he was at the antique shop buying the necklace for his wife, and wouldn’t you know it, he needed a house, so what about it?”

Taking a step forward, Stan bent at the knees, eye level. “And you didn’t tell him anything, did you? About the necklace or the well in the backyard?”

“What are you talking about? I only saw your brother one more time after that, and he looked like hammered shit, was complaining about hearing voices. A week later, well, you know the story.”

“Don’t screw with me, Garland. Did you tell him about the well?”

“I still have no clue what you’re talking about, but if you’d like, I know a pretty good psychologist, if that’s—”

This time, Stan kicked Garland square in the gut. The man convulsed and squeezed at his stomach, strings of saliva mixed with blood spilling from his open mouth. Stan felt the phone in his pocket start ringing. He needed to get home. But there was one last thing he wanted to tell Garland, and he knelt back down, once again eye level.

“I’m going to end this.” He picked up the keys, along with the silver necklace, where they had both fallen when Stan knocked him out of the chair. “I just wanted you to know that.”

Leaving Garland lying on the floor, half-conscious, Stan stood and walked out of the office. A thought suddenly occurred to him, a quick clarity. Perhaps Garland didn’t know about the well. It was Cassandra’s book, after all. But why were things happening to *him*, to *his* family? And why, after everything, even the scene with Garland, did he still feel like he was missing something? Stan didn’t know if he, Courtney, and Cole were somehow paying for Levi and Cassandra’s sins, if indeed they were actual sins. He assumed it was possible.

Stan stopped at Garland’s white Ford pickup and pulled out the sledgehammer. He then hustled to his own vehicle and drove away. He could see Garland standing in the window of the coroner’s office, clutching his side. The thought to wave at him, rub it in his face, proved too strong an impulse to deny. When he did, an image brought a smile to his otherwise exhausted features, that of Garland, on his deathbed, wandering where he was going, expectations of heaven flooding his brain as the last sparks went out and

unveiling the backroom of the house on Davis Circle, his former customers greeting him with a round of applause.

Choking the sledgehammer's handle just under its rusty head, Stan rushed toward the set of double glass doors at the back of the house, the silver necklace clenched into his left fist. The familiar taste of copper came back strong. The headache, the one that should have receded a day ago made his eyes water. But it was almost over, he reassured himself. If anything was certain, he was about to end Garland's little *operation*, in the process releasing Levi. Wouldn't it also allow Thomas Carver rest, too? Stan figured that was possible, but what about the others? Like Willington?

"Not my problem," he said, setting the sledgehammer down and reaching for the doorknob. However, as he twisted, a congested voice spoke his name from behind, sending his already racing heart into a panic.

"You *asshole*."

Stan quickly turned, his wide eyes resting on Courtney's blood-shot, puffy eyes. Tears streamed down her face. He stood still, a statue made of frayed nerves. She sat with her back slumped against the wall, arms crossed over her wiry shins. "Where did you *go*? I've been calling you, but I should have known better, especially after earlier, huh?"

"Court," he said, taking a step forward, "I don't have time to explain this to you, okay. You just have to—"

Courtney abruptly slammed both hands on the white tile, winced, and shot to her feet. "I can't *believe* you left us here, even after I told you I thought someone was in the

house. How *could* you, Stan? Don't you at least care about Cole? I can understand you being upset with me, but Cole? What about *him*?"

"Of course I care about him, and I'm not mad at you. I promise." He took another step forward. "And that's why I have to do this, understand?"

"No! I don't *fucking* understand."

Son, she's losing it. If I were you, I'd teach that bitch—

Stan placed the silver necklace into his back pocket, somewhat conscious to the fact that Courtney shouldn't see it, and then started squeezing his temples. The pressure helped, but not that much.

"Quit being a baby and suck it up. I'm so tired of you bitching about your head. Do you understand *that*?" She moved closer, and Stan was confident that Courtney's tone sounded near laughter, mocking him. He could feel the heat forming around his neck, face, and chest, the sledgehammer a foot away, within grasp.

"I think you should shut it, or—"

"Or what? What are you going to do? Walk out the door again; kick *me* in the gut too? Like you did that fucking coroner. God knows he deserved it."

Stan could feel his hand reaching for the sledgehammer before Courtney had finished speaking, but something she'd said, most aptly the bit about Garland, stopped his movement cold. He felt a strange clarity wash over his eyes, the kind he imagined a person experiencing seconds after a brush with death. The hot anger evaporated, leaving his skin feeling clammy.

It wasn't Courtney speaking. That much he knew.

Whatever it was must be the same *thing* that forced Blair Carver against her family, made George Wellington cut off his own jaw. And now, standing three feet away, slowly removing a long, serrated knife from the back of her jeans, Courtney smiled. The things that Stan now assumed shadows or spirits of the well were at work again. If he didn't act quickly, history would indeed repeat itself, and the house, along with its own prisoners, would have to make room for two.

Stan stopped mid-thought.

"Where's Cole?" He inched closer to the sledgehammer.

"Oh, now you give a shit, huh? Well, don't worry: I haven't *spoken* to him yet. He's probably upstairs, probably finished cleaning by now. Want me to call him down?"

Stan inched closer, the tips of his fingers almost touching the glossy wooden handle. "No, not right now. Right now, it's just you and me, okay? Talk to me, Court. Put the knife down, okay? And we'll figure things out, like—"

Courtney lunged at him, the knife coming down quicker than he had imagined possible, and caught the left side of his face. Immediately, Stan felt his cheek start burning, white fire spreading from his aching skull to the roots of his teeth. He wanted to scream, charge at her, and crush her skull under the weight of the sledgehammer, but he resisted.

"I know what you want, and I'm not interested."

She laughed and put the knife in her other hand. "I don't think you get it, Stan. You *don't* have a choice. This house will be your home, sooner or later."

"There's always a choice." Stan's fingers wrapped around the sledgehammer's handle, just as Courtney lunged again.

It was like a first person, slow motion video on mute. Stan sat front row, watching the head of the sledgehammer strike Courtney's right leg, sending her to the floor. Her mouth opening but no sound came out, obscenities imagined but unvoiced. Then, as the knife fell from her hand, everything sped up, time catching up with the loud clang of steel meeting tile. Stan reached out, twisted the doorknob, and removed the necklace from his back pocket.

"This has to stop."

She fell on her chest and pulled her body toward either the knife or him, but whichever it was, he couldn't decide. "It's not going to stop. Ever! *Ever!*"

"Yes it will, in a few moments." He kicked the knife and watched it skid across the tile and stop at the carpet leading into the hallway. With the sledgehammer in his right and the necklace in his left, Stan Vickers stepped through the double glass doors, leaving Courtney screaming his name. He then looked toward the well and started in its direction, warm blood trickling down his cheek.

Stan stood at the front of the well and looked back at the double glass doors. He visualized Levi, as he'd seen in him in his vision, covered in blood, waving with that odd, eternal grin. The image was enough to make him face the well. He took a deep breath and held out the necklace, staring at the engraving on its back. Would simply letting it drop, giving the spirits or, what the book called them, gods, back their stolen offering release Levi? And if so, where would he go? What about him, Courtney, and Cole?

Placing the necklace on the lip of the well, the very area where he had pulled Cole out, Stan rested both hands on the cool stone and dipped his head.

"This is all your fault."

Don't blame me, son. You boys were nothing alike.

"That has nothing to do with it, and you know that."

Well, why don't you just cry about it, Stan? You could have called him too.

Clayton Vickers was right. Stan could have called, written or possibly connected with Levi through the internet. Weren't soldiers in Iraq, thousands of miles away, able to speak to their relatives through the computer? Yes, they were, but Stan had never had the desire to talk to his brother, let alone *see* him. And now he would never see him again, unless he marched back inside and killed himself, but that wouldn't return the hours of conversations he had missed.

Well, son, that's the thing. If you kill yourself, you and Levi could talk as long as you wanted . . . forever, if that suits ya? You'll have all the time you need to catch up.

"You know something, pop? It's a pity you can't die twice."

Stan held the necklace over the well, then let go. But if he was expecting fireworks and whistles, he'd been mistaken. The necklace fell, making little sound other than a subdued, metallic clang against something hollow, like a coffee can or aluminum pipe. Stan peered over the well's lip and looked downward. The previous semi-shallow inside now appeared bottomless, as if someone had removed the five or six feet of sand and replaced it with thick, transparent ink. *There's nothing sharp in here . . . nothing that could have scratched Cole's leg.* He took a step backward and glanced at the house.

His headache remained, and the taste of copper, especially around his front teeth, seemed to increase, becoming thicker.

"C'mon, you bastard! C'mon, c'mon, c—"

"Stan!" Courtney shouted from behind, startling him.

Hands automatically reaching for the sledgehammer, Stan stopped. His eyes rested on Courtney, but she wasn't alone. Cole stood beside her, helping her keep balance as they both treaded the heavy outside winds. "Is that you, or—"

"Of course it's me! Hurry, Stan, we have to leave, now!"

Stan looked back at the sledgehammer. "Not yet."

"What? Look, I'm sorry about before."

"It's ok. It wasn't you, Court. But we can't leave yet."

Stan took the sledgehammer in both hands and rested it on his right shoulder. Raising it, he started to bring it down, but a loud, energetic banging to the left caught his full attention. "Jesus, Stan, what's making that noise?"

"Are you telling me you don't see that?"

"I don't see anything but," she stopped, covered Cole's ears, and shouted over the din, "but I think it's coming from inside the house."

Standing at the glass doors were several darkened figures. Wellington, the hanging bodies from the banister, all were slamming their dead fists into the glass, heads repeatedly shaking from left to right. However, and to Stan's excitement, he didn't see Levi or Thomas (or Cassandra, sadly), which meant—

"It worked." Stan then turned to Courtney. "Get to the car. Fast."

"What about the suitcases? I'm not going back in that house."

"I'll get them, just get Cole to the car, okay? I left the keys in the ignition."

She didn't respond, but instead grabbed Cole's hand and hobbled around to the gravel driveway. Stan, however, turned back to the well and lifted the sledgehammer over his head.

“For you, Levi.”

He brought it down with as much force as he could muster. The precision of the blow caved in the right side of the well, making the monster’s face on its front suddenly uneven. Large pieces of stone and wood from the overhang fell inside the open space. Kicking the loose, tarnished stones around the left side of the well’s lip, Stan again raised the sledgehammer, aiming for the face itself. This time, his eyes caught a glint of movement from below, forcing his arms still.

“What the hell?”

Shadows, iridescent and opaque, circulated inside the well, as if a vortex made of electricity and molasses. But it was the voices emanating from the darkness that made Stan quicken his pace. They were empty but familiar, real but unreal. And they were rising to the surface, coming to stop him.

“I don’t think so.” When he connected with the sledgehammer, striking the well directly on the monster’s face, the entire structure collapsed, chunks of stone falling inward and sealing it. The last deep, wraithlike shout escaped, making the frozen ground under Stan’s feet quake.

The double glass doors of the house shuddered and imploded, sending shards out into the backyard and inside tile.

As the echoes receded, leaving behind a deep, audible silence, Stan had a clear thought, one not clouded by the pain of an aching head or the now trivial obligations in New York and Alabama. *It’s over.* Two days had been enough. He was done.

On the twentieth floor of the RSA tower, staring out at the empty streets of downtown Montgomery, Stan Vickers lowered his head. His tongue involuntarily worked at one of the many loose teeth in the front of his mouth. He looked at his watch, wincing at the time. It was 11:41 pm. Soon Courtney would call, but Stan had already decided that answering would only make things worse, one, for his massive headache, and two, for their marriage.

It had been three weeks since Stan dropped the sledgehammer and left the house on Davis Circle. He'd expected change, especially in his and Courtney's relationship, but hope had disappeared moments after passing the state line into Alabama. After that, she hadn't said more than a handful of words to him or Cole, and Stan figured Courtney would eventually serve him with papers hidden inside a manila folder.

The latter didn't bother him.

What *did* were the new symptoms. Once he had destroyed the well, his headache had abated, but it gradually returned, little by little. First it had felt like a dull throb, coming on slowly and then, by the end of the first day, increasing to the point that driving felt too dangerous a task. But there was something else, too, something far worse: the taste of copper in his mouth.

Like the headaches, the taste started out unnoticeable, bleeding gums after brushing and flossing. Stan had found that all of his bottom front teeth were loose, resembling broken pieces of a plastic fork in a mound of pink mashed potatoes. Then it was his molars, followed by the top front row, blood forming around the edges and somehow drying, only to reopen if he bit down on anything harder than lunchmeat. Like any other person, calling the dentist had been his first thought, but according to Dr.

Stevens there was nothing wrong with him, no signs of gingivitis, peritonitis, or any other disease listed in his “extensive knowledge of dentistry” that could explain what was happening.

The only other option was to see a specialist, but one wasn’t available until next month, after Christmas. So he played the waiting game, or waited until nature (or whatever) took its course and removed the teeth for him.

Whatever the outcome, Stan felt the old cliché, “things would get worse before they got better,” was an apt description of the current situation, but why? Hadn’t he destroyed the well, stopped Garland, or hopefully stopped him? After all, how much would it cost to rebuild the thing? Five-hundred? Six-hundred? Stan didn’t know, but he was sure the bastard had probably fixed it by now, or even worse moved someone else in, telling them the same bullshit he had told dozens of others.

I provide a service . . .

“Should have burnt the place to the ground,” Stan said, backing away from the glass windows, “and maybe burned Garland along with—”

Stan’s foot suddenly struck something hollow and sent him off balance, but he didn’t fall. A hand grabbed the back of his white dress shirt. If that hand hadn’t been there, in the few breathless seconds before righting himself, his head would have caught the steel siding of the cubicle to his right, or even worse he might have gained momentum and went through the glass window. The strangest part of it all, though, was that neither option bothered him. For at least, whichever way he fell, he wouldn’t have to think about it too long.

“Aww, Jesus, mister. I’m sorry, wasn’t even paying attention.”

Stan turned. A man in a dirty, faded blue jumpsuit with an eye patch over his right eye stood next to him, holding on to plastic yellow garbage can. “No, no, it’s alright. If it wasn’t for you, I might have. Well, went through that window.”

“In all respect, sir, if it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have tripped.”

“Like I said, don’t worry about it.” Stan stopped and looked at the white nametag on the man’s uniform. “Albert?”

“Yeah, that’s me. The red cursive makes it hard to read, but that’s me. I’m new here, so bear with me.”

“No problem.”

“Say, if you don’t mind my asking, whatcha doin here so late? Seems a young man like yourself should be at home with his family, not sitting in this empty ass room counting street lights.” Albert leaned on the mop handle protruding out of the yellow garbage can.

Stan surveyed the man’s queer expression with genuine wonder, taken off guard with the question. Weeks had passed since someone had asked him anything other than the usual. *Are you on your way home? Have you left yet? Have you filed the Thompson account? How are the numbers coming along, Stan?* And though these questions seemed a little intrusive, Albert’s intentions, Stan could see, were completely benign.

“You first, Albert. Why take a job that keeps you out all night, away from *your* family?”

“Cause I don’t got no family. Never even been married, not once.”

Stan lowered his gaze, swallowed a generous gulp of blood, and shrugged. “I’m sorry, Albert. I didn’t—”

“Oh, no, don’t apologize, mister. I like it that way,” Albert’s smile widened.

“Allows me the time I need, you know? Trust me, I had my chance, but it wasn’t for me.”

“I wish I had taken that course sometimes, but I didn’t.”

“And that’s why you’re here, I take it?”

“That’s part of it. But truthfully, I just don’t want to go home. Too many things there keeping me here, if you get what I’m saying.”

Albert walked over, next to Stan, and looked through the glass, the smile never leaving his face. “Can I tell you something, mister?”

“Just call me Stan, no need for the mister, but sure. Go ahead.”

“Years ago, right before I lost this eye, I fell in love with a beautiful woman, blue eyes, blonde hair. And we were going to get married, but it didn’t work out.”

“What happened?”

“Well, because of my position at the time, I had to go to war. I was a leader, so that was my duty. I asked her to wait for me, until I got back, but time went on; the war went on. After not hearing from me, seeing me, she killed herself.”

Stan’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry, Albert.”

“It’s old news, but you know what? There’s not a second that goes by that I don’t wish I had simply forgotten about it all and left, married her and ran away.”

“I thought you said marriage wasn’t for you?”

“Not after her it wasn’t. In fact, everything changed after that. But do you understand what I’m saying, Stan? You’ve got to spend the time left with the ones you love. If you don’t, things get out of hand and fall away. They disappear and you find

yourself pushing a trash can the color of piss,” Albert said, a rueful look replacing the former smile.

Once again, Stan nodded and stretched his hand out to Albert. The ache in his head, surprisingly, dissipated, as though someone had drilled a hole and released the pressure. “I understand completely, and I’ll try. I don’t know how she’ll react, but I can at least try.”

Albert returned the gesture, and pursed his lips. “Good. Well, I’ll leave you to it. I’ve still got a few more floors before I can take a break. You take it easy.”

“You too,” Stan replied and began walking toward the elevator. But before he even moved around the cubicle, he stopped and turned around.

“Say, Albert, how’d you lose that eye?”

Without facing him, Albert stopped. “I took it out myself.”

“Why would you—”

“That’s another story, but to make it short, I took it out so I could *see* better.”

Other than the air whistling through the trees, the area around the apartments was silent, the amber streetlights reflecting off the hood of Stan’s red Corsica as he cut the ignition. A full moon bore down on the crisp, chilly night. It had only taken five minutes to get home, and Stan felt much better about seeing Courtney, especially after the talk with Albert. He quickly opened the car door and jogged to the wooden door frame of apartment B1, allowing the slight breeze to water his eyes. Then, in three fast, heavy intervals, he knocked.

His intention was to wait for Courtney to answer, wrap both arms around her, and plant his lips on hers before the protesting started. But on Stan's fifth knock, something else happened. First, there was a scream, and second, there was the loudest blast Stan had heard since the windows shattered at Davis Circle. The shock sent him backward, his legs unconsciously reacting before his mind took over. When it did, a deep, wrenching feeling formed in his gut, the headache coming back in full force, nearly blinding him.

"I'm coming." Stan reached in his pocket, looking for his keys, but his hands were too cold to perform basic movements.

He backed away from the door and kicked at the handle. The door swung open and rebounded off the opposite wall, striking it with a loud, muffled thump.

"Courtney! Cole!" Stan continued into the empty living room, but there was only silence in return. He tried again, and this time, from somewhere down the hallway, he thought he heard Cole scream. The adrenaline, mixed with the steady pounding inside his head (*is that my heart . . . the headache?*) sent erratic signals throughout his body, like a drunk, halfwit cross guard.

Again, Stan shouted their names.

There was nothing, no shout, voice, even the rustling of the leaves or wind outside. It was completely quiet, except for the internal explosion going off inside Stan's head, blurring both his vision and causing blood to seep through his lips. Somewhere he could hear a voice calling his wife and son as he ventured down the semi-darkened hallway, toward Cole's room, where a single light illuminated the rectangular frame of the door. Only then, a foot away, did Stan smell the familiar scent, one that took him back fifteen years, when he and his father would go out to the boonies and hunt.

You gotta aim ahead of them, Stan. What the hell are you doing?

Was that voice coming from inside or from the darkened end of the hallway? Stan couldn't make the distinction, but he was positive it came from the former. At least, he was somewhat certain of it.

Do I have to do everything for you, dipshit?

“Courtney, Cole.”

“Dad, is that you?”

Moving to the sound of Cole's voice, Stan darted into the bedroom, where he immediately stopped. His eyes widened to the point that he felt small bits of fire popping at the corners of his vision. Courtney, dressed in her green bathrobe, sat propped against the back left side of the room. Her face was gone, just one enormous, jagged hole in the center where her brilliant eyes, narrow jaw, and soft lips had been. Cole sat a few inches in front of her, Indian style and clutching a smoking Springfield 45. with tears streaming in between sobs.

“What happened?” The question was only a formality, something we train ourselves to ask when we see hurt, or pieces of bone and flesh covering the place our children lay their heads.

“Momma, she tried to hurt me, but I wouldn't let her, not again.”

Stan walked forward on numb legs and knelt next to Cole. He could feel his eyes twitching, wanting to look to the left. He resisted the urge, electing instead for Cole's face.

“What did she do, Cole?”

“She was standing in my doorway again, watching me.”

“What? How long has she been doing that?”

“Since we were on vacation, in New York. I had to do it, or she was going to hurt me again and—” Cole continued sobbing and lowered his head.

Stan picked the boy up into his arms and carried him into the hallway, allowing him to continue holding the pistol. After all, removing it might send him into a panic, and calming him down was something that, in his current state, seemed impossible. He then lowered him to the carpet, both hands resting on the boy’s shoulders, and spoke as evenly as possible.

“What did she do to you? Tell me, okay?”

“She made the cut on my leg worse. I don’t know what she used, but it hurt really bad, but I still wouldn’t give it to her. I never let her *even* see it!”

Stan felt his gut start twisting again, acid rising up his gullet. Then he lowered his head, so that he was eye level again, and swallowed another thick wad of blood and spit.

“You wouldn’t give her what?”

“Promise not to get mad?”

“Son, listen to me. I promise I won’t get mad, I—”

Before Stan finished, Cole had his right hand out, clenched into a fist. As it opened, he heard the voice of the man with the handle bar mustache, Thomas Carver, speaking to him in his rough, nightmarish tone. *Come and see what your negligence has rewarded you.*

Cole opened his hand, and in the center of his palm was a coin, one that looked, once again to Stan, like something from the eighteenth hundreds. Except it was clean, polished. Instantly, Stan shot to his feet, unaware of Cole’s eyes surveying him. He

snatched the coin from the boy's palm and gawked at it, horrified. Reality rushed in and took the breath out of him.

“But you said you wouldn't be angry at me,” Cole pleaded, but it sounded far away, thousands of miles.

With his back to Cole, Stan started walking toward the open front door, semi-aware of the neighbors' heavy feet getting closer. But approaching the frame, he heard another loud blast, this one sending him off his feet and onto his stomach, where his body felt like someone had covered his back with gasoline and set him on fire. Then Cole walked around to his left, bent down, and removed the coin from his palm.

“I'm sorry, but like I told momma: it's mine.”

Stan tried opening his mouth, but nothing came out. He watched as Cole walked out of sight, heard the sound of the couch's springs accepting the boy's weight behind him.

Son, son, I told you, didn't I? Didn't I tell you the whole time?

But Stan wasn't listening . . .

As the light faded in his eyes, Stan looked forward, at the open front door, his thoughts drifting, but not toward memories of Courtney, Cole, or anything remotely sentimental. He thought of the house on Davis Circle, of Garland Sears, and strangely, the scar on Belinda's forehead. But mostly, he thought of the giant shadow in the newspaper clipping.

Wondering if it was still at the house, waiting.