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DEAN
KOONTZ



Odd
Interlude

ODD INTERLUDE

#1

An Odd Thomas Story

Dean Koontz

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PART ONE
SOUTH OF MOONLIGHT BAY

Oh! They're too beautiful to live,
much too beautiful.

—Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

ONE

They say that every road leads home if you care to go there. I long for home, for the town of Pico Mundo and the desert in which it blooms, but the roads that I take seem to lead me to one hell after another.

In the front passenger seat of the Mercedes, through the side window, I watch the stars, which appear to be fixed but in fact are ever moving and perpetually receding. They seem eternal, but they are only suns that will burn out one day.

When she was just a child, Stormy Llewellyn lost her mother, Cassiopeia. I lost Stormy when she and I were twenty. One of the northern constellations is called Cassiopeia. No group of distant suns is named for Stormy.

I can see Cassiopeia's namesake high in the night, but I can see Stormy only in my memory, where she remains as vivid as any living person I might meet.

The stars and everything else in the universe began with the big bang, which was when time also began. Some place existed before the universe, exists outside of it now, and will exist when the universe collapses back upon itself. In that mysterious place, outside of time, Stormy waits for me. Only through time can time be conquered, and the way forward is the only way back to my girl.

Yet again, because of recent events, I have been called a hero, and again I don't feel like one.

Annamaria insists that mere hours earlier, I saved entire cities, sparing many hundreds of thousands from nuclear terrorism. Even if that is most likely true, I feel as though, in the process, I have forfeited a piece of my soul.

To foil the conspiracy, I killed four men and one young woman. They would have killed me if given a chance, but the honest claim of self-defense doesn't make the killing lie less heavily upon my heart.

I wasn't born to kill. Like all of us, I was born for joy. This broken world, however, breaks most of us, grinding relentlessly on its metaled tracks.

Leaving Magic Beach, fearing pursuit, I had driven the Mercedes that my friend Hutch Hutchison lent me. After several miles, when the memories of recent violence overwhelmed me, I stopped along the side of the road and changed places with Annamaria.

Now, behind the wheel, by way of consolation, she says, "Life is hard, young man, but it was not always so."

I have known her less than twenty-four hours. And the longer I know her, the more she mystifies me. She is perhaps eighteen, almost four years younger than me, but she seems much older. The things she says are often cryptic, though I feel that the meaning would be clear to me if I were wiser than I am.

Plain but not unattractive, petite, with flawless pale skin and great dark eyes, she seems to be about seven months pregnant. Any girl her age, in her condition, alone in the world as she is, ought to be anxious, but she is calm and confident, as if she believes that she lives a charmed life—which often seems to be the case.

We are not linked romantically. After Stormy, there can be none of that for me. Although we do not speak of it, between us there is a kind of love, platonic but deep, strangely deep considering that we

have known each other such a short while. I have no sister, although perhaps this is how I would feel if I were Annamaria's brother.

Magic Beach to Santa Barbara, our destination, is a four-hour drive, a straight shot down the coast. We have been on the road less than two hours when, two miles past the picturesque town of Moonlight Bay and Fort Wyvern—an army base that has been closed since the end of the Cold War—she says, “Do you feel it pulling at you, odd one?”

My name is Odd Thomas, which I explained in previous volumes of this memoir, which I will no doubt explain again in future volumes, but which I will not explain here, in this detour from the main arc of my journey. Until Annamaria, only Stormy called me “odd one.”

I am a short-order cook, though I haven't worked in a diner since I left Pico Mundo eighteen months earlier. I miss the griddle, the deep fryer. A job like that is centering. Griddle work is Zen.

“Do you feel it pulling?” she repeats. “Like the gravity of the moon pulling tides through the sea.”

Curled on the backseat, the golden retriever, Raphael, growls as if in answer to Annamaria's question. Our other dog, the white German shepherd named Boo, of course makes no sound.

Slumped in my seat, head resting against the cool glass of the window in the passenger door, half hypnotized by the patterns in the stars, I feel nothing unusual until Annamaria asks her question. But then I sense unmistakably that something in the night summons me, not to Santa Barbara but elsewhere.

I have a sixth sense with several facets, the first of which is that I can see the spirits of the lingering dead, who are reluctant to move on to the Other Side. They often want me to bring justice to their murderers or to help them find the courage to cross from this world to the next. Once in a while, I have a prophetic dream. And since leaving Pico Mundo after Stormy's violent death, I seem to be magnetized and drawn toward places of trouble, to which some Power wishes me to travel.

My life has mysterious purpose that I don't understand, and day by day, conflict by conflict, I learn by going where I have to go.

Now, to the west, the sea is black and forbidding except for a distorted reflection of the icy moon, which on those waters melts into a long silvery smear.

In the headlights, the broken white line on the blacktop flashes toward the south.

“Do you feel it pulling?” she asks again.

The inland hills are dark, but ahead on the right, pools of warm light welcome travelers at a cluster of enterprises that are not associated with a town.

“There,” I say. “Those lights.”

As soon as I speak, I know we will find death in this place. But there is no turning back. I am compelled to act in these cases. Besides, this woman seems to have become my backup conscience, gently reminding me what is the right thing to do when I falter.

A hundred yards past a sign that promises FOOD FUEL LODGING, an exit from the highway looms. She takes it fast, but with confidence and skill.

As we reach the foot of the ramp and halt at a stop sign, I say, “You feel it, too?”

“I'm not gifted as you are, odd one. I don't feel such things. But I know.”

“What do you know?”

“What I need to know.”

“Which is?”

“Which is what is.”

“And what is this what-is that you know?”

She smiles. “I know what matters, how it all works, and why.”

The smile suggests she enjoys tweaking me by being enigmatic—although there is no meanness in her teasing.

I don’t believe there is any deception in her, either. I am convinced she always speaks the truth. And she does not, as it might seem, talk in code. She speaks the truth profoundly but perhaps as poets speak it: obliquely, employing paradox, symbols, metaphors.

I met her on a public pier in Magic Beach. I know nothing of substance about her past. I don’t even know her last name; she claims that she doesn’t have one. When I first saw Annamaria, I sensed that she harbored extraordinary secrets and that she needed a friend. She has accepted my friendship and has given hers to me. But she holds tightly to her secrets.

The stop sign is at an intersection with a two-lane county road that parallels the state highway. She turns left and drives toward a service station that is open even in these lonely hours before dawn, offering a discount brand of gasoline and a mechanic on call.

Instead of a double score of gasoline pumps that a truck stop might offer, this station provides just four pumps on two islands. At the moment, none is in use.

Dating from the 1930s, the flat-roofed white-stucco building features Art Deco details, including a cast-plaster frieze revealed by lights in the overhanging cornice. The frieze depicts stylized cars and borzoi hounds racing perpetually, painted in yellows, grays, and royal blue.

The place is quaint, a little architectural gem from an age when even humble structures were often artfully designed and embellished. It is impeccably maintained, and the warm light in the panes of the French windows no doubt looks welcoming to an average traveler, although nothing here charms *me*.

Intuition sometimes whispers to me but is seldom loud. Now it is equivalent to a shout, warning me that although this place might be pleasing to the eye, under the attractive surface lies something terrible.

In the backseat, Raphael growls low again.

I say, “I don’t like this place.”

Annamaria is unperturbed. “If you liked it, young man, there’d be no reason for us to be here.”

A tow truck stands beside the station. One of the two bay doors is raised, and even at this hour, a mechanic works on a Jaguar.

A nattily dressed man with a mane of silver hair—perhaps the owner of the Jaguar, recently rescued from the side of the highway—stands watching the mechanic and sipping coffee from a paper cup. Neither of them looks up as we cruise past.

Three eighteen-wheelers—a Mack, a Cascadia, and a Peterbilt—are parked on the farther side of the station. These well-polished rigs appear to belong to owner-operators, because they have custom paint jobs, numerous chrome add-ons, double-hump fenders, and the like.

Beyond the trucks, a long low building appears to be a diner, in a style matching the service station. The eatery announces itself with rooftop red-and-blue neon: HARMONY CORNER / OPEN 24 HOURS. Two pickups and two SUVs are in front of the diner, and when Annamaria parks there, the Mercedes’ headlights brighten a sign informing us that for cottage rentals we should inquire within.

The third and final element of this enterprise, ten cottages, lies past the restaurant. The units are arranged in an arc, sheltered under mature New Zealand Christmas trees and graceful acacias softly but magically lighted. It appears to be a motor court from the early days of automobile travel, a place where Humphrey Bogart might hide out with Lauren Bacall and eventually end up in a gunfight with

Edward G. Robinson.

“They’ll have two cottages available,” Annamaria predicts as she switches off the engine. When I start to open my door, she says, “No. Wait here. We’re not far from Magic Beach. There may be an all-points bulletin out for you.”

After thwarting delivery of the four thermonuclear devices to terrorists, mere hours earlier, I’d called the FBI office in Santa Cruz to report that they could find four bomb triggers among the used clothing in a Salvation Army collection bin in Magic Beach. They know I’m not one of the conspirators, but they are eager to talk with me anyway. As far as the FBI is concerned, this is prom night, and they don’t want me leaving the dance with anyone but them.

“They don’t know my name,” I assure Annamaria. “And they don’t have my picture.”

“They might have a good description. Before you show yourself around here, Oddie, let’s see how big a story it is on the news.”

I extract my wallet from a hip pocket. “I’ve got some cash.”

“So do I.” She waves away the wallet. “Enough for this.”

As I slump in the dark car, she goes into the diner.

She is wearing athletic shoes, gray slacks, and a baggy sweater that doesn’t conceal her pregnancy. The sleeves are too long, hanging past the first knuckles of her fingers. She looks like a waif.

People warm to her on sight, and the trust that she inspires in everyone is uncanny. They aren’t likely to turn her away just because she lacks a credit card and ID.

In Magic Beach, she had been living rent-free in an apartment above a garage. She says that although she never asks for anything, people give her what she needs. I have seen that this is true.

She claims there are people who want to kill her, but she seems to have no fear of them, whoever they might be. I have yet to see proof that she fears *anything*.

Earlier, she asked if I would die for her. Without hesitation, I said that I would—and meant it.

I don’t understand either my reaction to her or the source of her power. She is something other than she appears to be. She tells me that I already know what she is and that I only need to accept the knowledge that I already possess.

Weird. Or maybe not.

Long ago, I learned that, even with my sixth sense, I am not a singularity and that the world is a place of layered wonders beyond counting. Most people unconsciously blind themselves to the true nature of existence, because they fear *knowing* that this world is a place of mystery and meaning. It’s immeasurably easier to live in a world that’s all surfaces, that means nothing and demands nothing of you.

Because I so love this wondrous world, I am by nature optimistic and of good humor. My friend and mentor Ozzie Boone says buoyancy is one of my better qualities. However, as though to warn that excess buoyancy might lead to carelessness, he sometimes reminds me that shit, too, floats.

But on my worst days, which are rare and of which this is one, I can get down so low that the bottom seems to be where I belong. I don’t even want to look for a way up. I suppose surrender to sadness is a sin, though my current sadness is not a black depression but is instead a sorrow like a long moody twilight.

When Annamaria returns and gets behind the wheel, she hands me one of two keys. “It’s a nice place. Sparkling clean. And the food smells good. It’s called Harmony Corner because it’s all owned and operated by the Harmony family, quite a big clan judging by what Holly Harmony told me. She’s

the lone waitress this shift.”

Annamaria starts the Mercedes and drives to the motor court, repeatedly glancing at me, which I pretend not to notice.

After she parks between two cottages and switches off the engine and the headlights, she says, “Melancholy can be seductive when it’s twined with self-pity.”

“I don’t pity myself,” I assure her.

“Then what would you call it? Perhaps self-sympathy?”

I decide not to answer.

“Self-compassion?” she suggests. “Self-commiseration? Self-condolence?”

“I didn’t think it was in your nature to needle a guy.”

“Oh, young man, I’m not needling you.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“Compassionate mockery.”

The landscape lamps in the overhanging trees, filtering through leaves that quiver in a gentle breeze, flutter feathery golden light across the windshield and across Annamaria’s face and surely across my face as well, as if projected upon us is a film involving winged multitudes.

I remind her, “I killed five people tonight.”

“Would it be better if you had failed to resist evil and had killed no one?”

I say nothing.

She persists: “Those would-be mass murderers ... do you suppose they would have surrendered peacefully at your stern request?”

“Of course not.”

“Would they have been willing to debate the righteousness of the crimes they intended to commit?”

“The mockery I get, but I can’t see how it’s compassionate.”

She is unrelenting. “Perhaps they would have been willing to go with you on that TV-courtroom show and let Judge Judy decide whether they did or did not have the moral authority to nuke four cities.”

“No. They’d be too scared of Judge Judy. *I’m* scared of Judge Judy.”

“You did the only thing you could have done, young man.”

“Yeah. All right. But why do I have to go from Magic Beach to Harmony Corner in the same night? So much death. No matter how bad those people were, no matter how bad someone might be here ... I’m not a killing machine.”

She reaches out to me, and I take her hand. Although I can’t explain why, the very contact lifts my spirits.

“Maybe there won’t be any killing here,” she says.

“But it’s all accelerating.”

“What is?”

“My life, these threats, the craziness—coming at me like an avalanche.”

The feathers of soft light flutter not just across her face but also in her eyes as she squeezes my hand. “What do you most want, Oddie? What hope drives you? The hope of a little rest, some leisure time? The hope of an uneventful, quiet life as a fry cook, a shoe salesman?”

“You know it’s none of that.”

“Tell me. I’d like to hear you say it.”

I close my eyes and see in memory the card that came out of a fortune-telling machine in a carnival arcade six years earlier, when with Stormy at my side I had bought a precious promise for a quarter.

“Ma’am, you know what the card said—‘You are destined to be together forever.’”

“And then she died. But you kept the card. You continued to believe in the truth of the card. Do you still believe in it?”

Without hesitation, I reply: “Yes. I’ve got to believe. It’s what I have.”

“Well then, Oddie, if the hope that drives you is the truth of that card, might not the acceleration that frightens you be what you actually want? Might you be quickening toward the fulfillment of that prediction? Could it be that the avalanche coming at you is nothing more than Stormy?”

Opening my eyes, I meet her stare once more. The fluttering wings reflected on her face and in her dark eyes might also be the flicker of golden flames. I am reminded that fire not only consumes; it also purifies. And another word for purification is *redemption*.

Annamaria cocks her head and smiles. “Shall we find a castle with a suitable room where you can do your version of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy to your heart’s content? Or shall we just get on with this?”

I am not out of smiles, after all. “We’d best be getting on with it, ma’am.”

Our only luggage is a hamper of food for us and the golden retriever, which was packed by our friend Blossom Rosedale in Magic Beach. After Raphael finds a patch of grass in which to pee, I follow the dog and Annamaria to Cottage 6, which she has taken for herself, and I leave the hamper with her.

On the stoop, delivery made, as I turn away, she says, “Whatever happens here, trust your heart. It’s as true as any compass.”

The white German shepherd, Boo, has been with me for several months. Now he accompanies me to Cottage 7. Because he is a ghost dog, he has no need to pee, and he walks through the door before I can unlock it.

The accommodations are clean and cozy. Sitting area, bedroom alcove, bath. The unit seems to have been remodeled and upgraded within the past few years.

There’s even an under-the-counter fridge that serves as an honor bar. I take a can of beer and pop the tab.

I am exhausted but not sleepy. Now, two hours before dawn, I’ve been awake twenty-two hours; yet my mind spins like a centrifuge.

After switching on the TV, I sit with the remote in an armchair, while Boo explores every cranny of the cottage, his curiosity as keen in death as in life. Satellite service provides a huge smorgasbord of programming. But nearly everything seems stale or wilted.

As far as I can tell from the cable-news channels, the thwarted nuclear terrorists in Magic Beach have not made the news. I suspect they never will. The government will decide that the public prefers to remain ignorant of such disturbing near disasters, and the political class prefers to *keep* them ignorant rather than arouse in them suspicions of corruption and incompetence in high places.

On NatGeo, in a documentary about big cats, the narrator informs us that panthers are a variety of leopard, black with black spots. A panther with golden eyes stares directly at the camera, bares its fangs, and in a low, rough voice says, “Sleep.”

I realize that I am less than half awake, in that twilight consciousness where dreams and the real world sometimes intersect. Before I drop off and spill the beer, I put the nearly empty can on the table

beside the armchair.

On the screen, a panther seizes an antelope with its claws, pulls the prey off its feet, and tears out its throat. The graphic violence does not shock me awake but instead weighs on me, wearies me. Lifting its head, the triumphant cat stares at me, blood and saliva drizzling from its mouth, and says, “Sleep ... sleep.”

I can feel the words as well as hear them, sound waves issuing from the TV speakers, pulsing through me, a kind of sonic massage that relaxes my tense muscles, soothes the taut fibers of my nerves.

Several hyenas test the panther as it drags the antelope into a tree to feed on it in higher branches where neither these wolfish rivals nor lions—which also do not climb—are able to follow.

A hyena, wild-eyed and loathsome, bares its ragged teeth at the camera and whispers, “Sleep.” The rest of the pack repeats the word, “Sleep,” and the sonic waves quiver through me with a most pleasing narcotic effect, as does the voice of the panther in the tree, while the head of the antelope lolls on its ruined neck, its fixed eyes glazed with the most perfect sleep of all.

I close my eyes, and the panther of the waking dream follows me into slumber. I hear the soft but heavy padding of its paws, feel its sinuous form slinking through my mind. For a moment, I am disquieted, but the intruder purrs, and its purring calms me. Now the big cat is climbing into another tree, and although I am not dead, the creature carries me with it, for I am powerless to resist. I am not afraid, because it tells me that I should have no fear, and as before, not just the meaning of the words but also the sound waves of which they are formed seem to oil the waters of my mind.

This is the tree of night, black branches reaching high into the starless sky, and nothing can be seen but the panther’s lantern eyes, which grow in size and brightness until they are owl-like. In that low, rough voice, it says, *Why can’t I read you?* Perhaps it is neither owl nor panther, because now I feel what seem to be fingers, as if I am a book of countless pages that are being turned, pages that prove to be blank, the fingers sliding across the paper as if seeking the raised dots of a biography in braille.

The mood changes, the would-be reader’s frustration is palpable, and in the darkness, the eyes are suddenly green with elliptical pupils. If this is a dream, it’s also something more than a dream.

Although a dream shapes itself and can’t be consciously scripted by the dreamer, when I wish for light, I have the power to call it forth. Darkness begins to recede from the tangled black limbs of the tree, and the shape of the would-be reader begins to coalesce out of the gloom.

I am *thrust* awake, as if the mysterious figure in the nightmare has thrown me out of it. I scramble to my feet, aware of movement to my right, at the periphery of vision, but when I pivot toward it, I find myself alone.

Behind me, something thrums, as if a pair of practiced hands are strumming arpeggios from a harp with only bass strings. When I turn, no origin of the sound is obvious—and now it arises not from where it had been but from the alcove in which stands the bed.

Seeking the source, I am led into the alcove and then to the bathroom door, which is ajar. Darkness lies beyond.

In my exhaustion and emotional confusion, I have forgotten my pistol. It’s tucked under the front passenger seat of the Mercedes.

The gun once belonged to the wife of a minister in Magic Beach. Her husband, the reverend, had shot her to death before she could shoot him. In their particular denomination of Christianity, the faithful are evidently too impatient to wait for prayer to solve their problems.

I push open the bathroom door and switch on the lights. The thrumming swells louder, but now comes from behind me.

Turning, I discover that Boo has returned, but he is not the primary point of interest. My attention is drawn to what has also transfixed the dog: a quick transparent *something*, visible only by the distortion that it imparts to things as it crosses the alcove, enters the sitting area, seems to spring into the TV screen without shattering it, and is gone.

That presence is so fast and shapeless, I half suspect that I have imagined it, except that the wildlife documentary on the TV ripples with concentric rings, as if the vertical screen is a horizontal body of water into which a stone has been dropped.

Blinking repeatedly, I wonder if what I'm seeing is real or if I have a problem with my vision. The phenomenon diminishes gradually until the images on the screen become clear and stable once more.

This was no ghost. When I see one of the lingering dead, it is the very image of the once-living person, and it doesn't move quicker than the eye can follow.

The dead don't talk, and neither do they make other sounds. No rattling of chains. No ominous footsteps. They have no weight to make the stair treads creak. And they certainly don't strum arpeggios from a bass-string harp.

I look at Boo.

Boo looks at me. His tail doesn't wag.

TWO

I am now wide awake.

The dream of tree and panther lasted less than five minutes. I am still suffering serious sleep deprivation, but I am as alert as might be a man in a foxhole when he knows the enemy will charge at any moment.

Leaving the lights on rather than return to a dark cottage, I step outside, lock the door, and retrieve the pistol from under the passenger seat of the Mercedes.

I am wearing a sweatshirt over a T-shirt, and I tuck the pistol between them, under my belt, in the small of my back. It isn't an ideal way to carry a weapon, but I don't have a holster. And in the past, when I have resorted to this method, I have never accidentally shot off a chunk of my butt.

Although I don't like guns and do not usually carry one, and although killing even the worst of men in self-defense or in defense of the innocent leaves me sickened, I am not so fanatically antigun that I would rather be murdered—or watch a murder be committed—than use one.

Boo materializes at my side.

He is the only spirit of an animal that I have ever seen. An innocent, he surely has no fear of what he might face on the Other Side. Although he is immaterial and cannot bite a bad guy, I believe that he lingers here because there will come a moment when he will be Lassie to my Timmy and will save me from falling into an abandoned well or the equivalent.

Sadly, most kids these days don't know Lassie. The media dog that they know best is Marley, who is less likely to save children from a well or from a burning barn than he is to barf on them and accidentally start the barn fire in the first place.

The oppressive mood infecting me since recent events in Magic Beach seems to have lifted. Curiously, nothing restores my common sense and puts me back on the firm ground of reason like a creepy encounter with something apparently supernatural.

In the lighted branches of the trees, the weak breath of the night makes the leaves quiver as if in anticipation of an approaching evil. On the ground around me, trembling patterns of light and shadow create the illusion that the land is unstable underfoot.

In the arc of cottages, no lamps brighten any windows except those in my unit and Annamaria's, although five other vehicles are parked here. If those guests of the Harmony Corner motor court are sleeping, perhaps a secret reader pages through their memories and seeks ... Seeks what? Merely to know them?

The reader—whoever or whatever it might be—wants something more than to know me. As surely as the antelope in the documentary is a few days' worth of meals to the panther, I am prey, perhaps not to be eaten but in some way to be used.

I look at Boo.

Boo looks at me. Then he looks at Annamaria's lighted windows.

At Cottage 6, as I rap lightly on the door, it swings open as though the latch must not have been engaged. I step inside and find her sitting in a chair at a small table.

She has taken an apple from the hamper, peeled and sectioned it. She is sharing the fruit with

Raphael. Sitting at attention beside her chair, the golden retriever crunches one of the slices and licks his chops.

Raphael looks at Boo and twitches his tail, happy that there's no need to share his portion with a ghost dog. All dogs see lingering spirits; they aren't as self-deluded about the true nature of the world as most people are.

"Has anything unusual happened?" I ask Annamaria.

"Isn't something unusual always happening?"

"You've had no ... no visitor of any kind?"

"Just you. Would you like some apple, Oddie?"

"No, ma'am. I think you're in danger here."

"Of the many people who want to kill me, none is in Harmony Corner."

"How can you be sure?"

She shrugs. "No one here knows who I am."

"I don't even know who you are."

"You see?" She gives another slice of apple to Raphael.

"I won't be next door for a while."

"All right."

"In case you scream for me."

She appears amused. "Whyever would I scream? I never have."

"Never in your whole life?"

"One screams when one is startled or frightened."

"You said people want to kill you."

"But I'm not afraid of them. You do what you need to do. I'll be fine."

"Maybe you should come with me."

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"Here and there."

"I'm already here, and I've *been* there."

I look at Raphael. Raphael looks at Boo. Boo looks at me.

"Ma'am, you asked if I would die for you, and I said yes."

"That was very sweet of you. But you're not going to have to die for me tonight. Don't be in such a hurry."

I once thought Pico Mundo had more than its share of eccentric folks. Having traveled some, I now know eccentricity is the universal trait of humanity.

"Ma'am, it might be dangerous to sleep."

"Then I won't sleep."

"Should I get you some black coffee from the diner?"

"Why?"

"To help you stay awake."

"I suppose you sleep when you need to. But you see, young man, I only sleep when I want to."

"How does that work?"

"Splendidly."

"Don't you want to know why it could be dangerous to sleep?"

"Because I might fall out of bed? Oddie, I trust your admonition isn't frivolous, and I will remain

awake. Now go do whatever you have to do.”

“I’m going to snoop around.”

“Then snoop, snoop,” she says, making a shooing motion.

I retreat from her cottage and close the door behind me.

Already Boo is walking toward the diner. I follow him.

He fades away like fog evaporating.

I don’t know where he goes when he dematerializes. Maybe a ghost dog can travel to and from the Other Side as he pleases. I have never studied theology.

For the last day of January along the central coast, the night is mild. And quiet. The air smells faintly, pleasantly, of the sea. Nevertheless, my sense of impending peril is so great that I won’t be surprised if the ground opens under my feet and swallows me.

Big moths caper around the sign on the roof of the diner. Their natural color must be white, because they become entirely blue or red depending on which neon is closer to them. Bats, dark and changeless, circle ceaselessly, feeding on the bright swarm.

I don’t see signs and portents in everything. The voracious yet silent flying rodents chill me, however, and I decide not to stop first at the diner, as had been my intention.

Past the three eighteen-wheelers, at the service station, the Jaguar is gone. The mechanic is sweeping the floor of the garage.

At the open bay door, I say, “Good morning, sir,” as cheerfully as if a gorgeous pink dawn has already painted the sky and choirs of songbirds are celebrating the gift of life.

When he looks up from his work with the push broom, it’s a *Phantom of the Opera* moment. A grisly scar extends from his left ear, across his upper lip, through his lower lip, to the right side of his chin. Whatever the cause of the wound, it appears as if it might have been sewn up not by a doctor but instead by a fisherman using a hook and a length of leader wire.

With no apparent self-consciousness about his appearance, he says, “Hello there, son,” and favors me with a grin that would make Dracula back off. “You’re up even before Wally and Wanda have thought about goin’ to bed.”

“Wally and Wanda?”

“Oh, sorry. Our possums. Some say them two is just big ugly red-eyed rats. But a marsupial isn’t no rat. And ugly is like they say about beauty—it’s in the eye of the beholder. How you feel about possums?”

“Live and let live.”

“I make sure Wally and Wanda get the throw-away food from the diner each and every night. It makes ’em fat. But their life is hard, what with mountain lions and bobcats and packs of coyotes with a taste for possum. Don’t you think possums they have a hard life?”

“Well, sir, at least Wally has Wanda and she has Wally.”

Abruptly his blue eyes glimmer with unshed tears and his scarred lips tremble, as if he is nearly undone by the thought of possum love.

He appears to be about forty, though his hair is iron gray. In spite of the horrific scar, he has an avuncular quality suggesting that he’s as good with children as he is kind to animals.

“You’ve gone right to the very heart of it. Wally has Wanda, and Donny has Denise, which makes anythin’ tolerable.”

Stitched on the breast pocket of his uniform shirt is the name DONNY.

He blinks back his tears and says, "What can I do for you, son?"

"I've been up awhile, need to stay awake awhile longer. I figure anyplace truckers stop must sell caffeine tablets."

"I've got NoDoz in the gum-and-candy case. Or in the vendin' machine, there's high-octane stuff like Red Bull or Mountain Dew, or that new energy drink called Kick-Ass."

"They really named it Kick-Ass?"

"Aren't no standards anymore, anywhere, in anythin'. If they thought it would sell better, they'd call the stuff Good Shit. Excuse my language."

"No problem, sir. I'll take a package of NoDoz."

Leading me through the garage to the station office, Donny says, "Our seven-year-old, he learned about sex from some Saturday-mornin' cartoon show. Out of nowhere one day, Ricky he says he don't want to be either straight or gay, it's *all* disgustin'. We unplugged our satellite dish. No standards anymore. Now Ricky he watches all them old Disney and Warner Brothers toons on DVD. You never have to worry if maybe Bugs Bunny is goin' to get it on with Daffy Duck."

In addition to the NoDoz, I purchase two candy bars. "Does the vending machine accept dollars or do I need change?"

"It takes bills just fine," Donny says. "Young as you look, you can't have been drivin' a rig long."

"I'm not a trucker, sir. I'm an out-of-work fry cook."

Donny follows me outside, where I get a can of Mountain Dew from the vending machine. "My Denise, she's a fry cook over to the diner. You got yourself your own private language."

"Who does?"

"You fry cooks." The two sections of his scar become misaligned when he grins, as if his face is coming apart like a piece of dropped crockery. "Two cows, make 'em cry, give 'em blankets, and mate 'em with pigs."

"Diner lingo. That's a waitress calling out an order for two hamburgers with onions, cheese, and bacon."

"That stuff tickles me," he says, and indeed he looks tickled. "Where you been a fry cook—when you had work, I mean?"

"Well, sir, I've been bouncing around all over."

"It must be nice seein' new places. Haven't seen no new place in a long time. Sure would like to take Denise somewhere fresh. Just the two of us." His eyes fill with tears again. He must be the most sentimental auto mechanic on the West Coast. "Just the two of us," he repeats, and under the tenderness in his voice, which any mention of his wife seems to evoke, I hear a note of desperation.

"I guess with children it's hard to get away, just you two."

"There's never no gettin' away. No way, no how."

Maybe I'm imagining more in his eyes than is really there, but I suspect that these latest unshed tears are as bitter as they are salty.

When I wash down a pair of NoDoz with the soda, he says, "You jolt your system like this a lot?"

"Not a lot."

"You do too much of this, son, you'll give yourself a for-sure bleedin' ulcer. Too much caffeine eats away the stomach linin'."

I tilt my head back and drain the too-sweet soda in a few long swallows.

When I drop the empty can in a nearby trash barrel, Donny says, "What's your name, boy?"

The voice is the same, but the tone is different. His affability is gone. When I meet his eyes, they're still blue, but they have a steely quality that I have not seen before, a new directness.

Sometimes an unlikely story can seem too unlikely to be a lie, and therefore it allays suspicion. So I decide on: "Potter. Harry Potter."

His stare is as sharp as the stylus on a polygraph. "That sounds as real as if you'd said 'Bond. James Bond.' "

"Well, sir, it's the name I've got. I always liked it until the books and movies. About the thousandth time someone asked me if I was really a wizard, I started wishing my name was just about anything else, like Lex Luthor or something."

Donny's friendliness and folksy manner have for a moment made Harmony Corner seem almost as benign as Pooh Corner. But now the air smells less of the salty sea than of decaying seaweed, the pump-island glare seems as harsh as the lights of an interrogation room in a police station, and when I look up at the sky, I cannot find Cassiopeia or any constellation that I know, as if Earth has turned away from all that is familiar and comforting.

"So if you're not a wizard, Harry, what line of work do you claim to be in?"

Not only is his tone different, but also his diction. And he seems to have developed a problem with his short-term memory.

Perhaps he registers my surprise and correctly surmises the cause of it, because he says, "Yeah, I know what you said, but I suspect that's not the half of it."

"Sorry, but fry cook is the whole of it, sir. I'm not a guy of many talents."

His eyes narrow with suspicion. "Eggs—wreck 'em and stretch 'em. Cardiac shingles."

I translate as before. "Serving three eggs instead of two is stretching them. Wrecking them means scrambling. Cardiac shingles are toast with extra butter."

With his eyes squinted to slits, Donny reminds me of Clint Eastwood, if Clint Eastwood were eight inches shorter, thirty pounds heavier, less good-looking, with male-pattern baldness, and badly scarred.

He makes a simple statement sound like a threat: "Harmony doesn't need another short-order cook."

"I'm not applying for a job, sir."

"What *are* you doing here, Harry Potter?"

"Seeking the meaning of my life."

"Maybe your life doesn't have any meaning."

"I'm pretty sure it does."

"Life is meaningless. Every life."

"Maybe that works for you. It doesn't work for me."

He clears his throat with a noise that makes me wonder if he indulges in unconventional personal grooming habits and has a nasty hairball stuck in his esophagus. When he spits, a disgusting wad of mucus splatters the pavement, two inches from my right shoe, which no doubt was his intended target.

"Life is meaningless except in your case. Is that it, Harry? You're better than the rest of us, huh?"

His face tightens with inexplicable anger. Gentle, sentimental Donny has morphed into Donny the Hun, descendant of Attila, who seems capable of sudden mindless violence.

"Not better, sir. Probably worse than a lot of people. Anyway, it isn't a matter of better or worse. I'm just different. Sort of like a porpoise, which looks like a fish and swims like a fish but isn't a fish

because it's a mammal and because no one wants to eat it with a side of chips. Or maybe like a prairie dog, which everyone calls a dog but isn't really a dog at all. It looks like maybe a chubby squirrel, but it isn't a squirrel, either, because it lives in tunnels, not in trees, and it hibernates in the winter but it isn't a bear. A prairie dog wouldn't say it was better than real dogs or better than squirrels or bears, just different like a porpoise is different, but of course it's nothing like a porpoise, either. So I think I'll go back to my cottage and eat my candy bars and think about porpoises and prairie dogs until I can express this analogy more clearly."

Sometimes, if I pretend to be an airhead and a bit screwy, I can convince a bad guy that I'm no threat to him and that I'm not worth the waste of time and energy he would have to expend to do bad things to me. On other occasions, my pretense infuriates them. Walking away, I half expect to be clubbed to the ground with a tire iron.

THREE

The door to Cottage 6 opens as I approach it, but no one appears on the threshold.

When I step inside, closing the door behind me, I find Annamaria on her knees, brushing the golden retriever's teeth.

She says, "Blossom once had a dog. She put an extra toothbrush in the hamper for Raphael, and a tube of liver-flavored toothpaste."

The golden sits with head lifted, remarkably patient, letting Annamaria lift his flews to expose his teeth, refraining from licking the paste off the brush before it can be put to work. He rolls his eyes at me, as if to say *This is annoying, but she means well.*

"Ma'am, I wish you'd keep your door locked."

"It's locked when it's closed."

"It keeps drifting open."

"Only for you."

"Why does that happen?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I ought to have asked—*how* does that happen?"

"Yes, that would have been the better question."

The liver-flavored toothpaste has precipitated significant doggy drool. Annamaria pauses in the brushing and uses a hand towel to rub dry the soaked fur on Raphael's jaws and chin.

"Before I went snooping, I should have warned you not to watch television. That's why I came back. To warn you."

"I'm aware of what's on TV, young man. I'd as soon set myself on fire as watch most of it."

"Don't even watch the good stuff. Don't switch it on. I think television is a pathway."

As she squeezes more toothpaste onto the brush, she says, "Pathway for what?"

"That's an excellent question. When I have an answer, I'll know why I've been drawn to Harmony Corner. So how does the door open just for me?"

"What door?"

"This door."

"That door is closed."

"Yes, I just closed it."

"You lovely boy, pull your tongue in," she instructs the dog, because he's been letting it loll.

Raphael pulls in his tongue, and she sets to work on his front teeth as just the tip of his tail wags.

The caffeine has not yet begun to kick in, and I have no more energy to pursue the issue of the door. "Up at the service station, there's this mechanic named Donny. He has two personalities, and the second one is likely to use a lug wrench in ways its manufacturer never intended. If he comes knocking at your door, don't let him in."

"I don't intend to let anyone in but you."

"That waitress you spoke to when you rented the cottages—"

"Holly Harmony."

“Was she ... normal?”

“She was lovely, friendly, and efficient.”

“She didn’t do anything strange?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Like ... she didn’t pluck a fly out of the air and eat it or anything?”

“What a curious thing to ask.”

“Did she?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Did she keep almost breaking into tears?”

“Not at all. She had the sweetest smile.”

“Maybe she smiled too much?”

“It isn’t possible to smile too much, odd one.”

“Did you ever see the Joker in *Batman*?”

Finished with Raphael’s dental hygiene, Annamaria puts the toothbrush aside and uses the hand towel to mop his face once more. The retriever grins like the Joker.

As she picks up a grooming comb and begins to work on Raphael’s silky coat, she says, “The little finger on her right hand ended between the second and third knuckles.”

“Who? The waitress? Holly? You said she was normal.”

“There’s nothing abnormal about losing part of a finger in an accident. It’s not in the same category as eating a fly.”

“Did you ask her how it happened?”

“Of course not. That would have been rude. The little finger on her *left* hand ends between the first and second knuckles. It’s just a stump.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Two chopped little fingers is *definitely* abnormal.”

“Both injuries could have happened in the same accident.”

“Yeah, of course, you’re right. She could have been juggling a meat cleaver in each hand when she fell off the unicycle.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, young man.”

I don’t know why her mild disapproval stings, but it does.

As though he understands that I have been gently reprimanded, Raphael stops grinning. He favors me with a stern look, as though he suspects that if I’m capable of being sarcastic with Annamaria, I might be the kind of guy who sneaks biscuits from the dog-treat jar and eats them himself.

I say, “Donny the mechanic has a huge scar across his face.”

“Did you ask *him* how it happened?” Annamaria inquires.

“I would have, but then Sweet Donny became Angry Donny, and I thought if I asked, he might demonstrate on *my* face.”

“Well, I’m pleased that you’re making progress.”

“If this is the rate of progress I can expect, we better rent the cottages by the year.”

As she makes long, easy strokes with the comb, the teeth snare loose hairs from the dog’s glorious coat. “You haven’t already stopped snooping for the night, have you?”

“No, ma’am. I’ve just begun to snoop.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll get to the truth of things shortly.”

Raphael decides to forgive me. He grins at me once more, and in response to the tender grooming

that he's receiving, he lets out a sound of pure bliss—part sigh, part purr, part whimper of delight.

"You sure do have a way with dogs, ma'am."

"If they know you love them, you'll always have their trust and devotion."

Her words remind me of Stormy, the way we were with each other, our love and trust and devotion. I say, "People are like that, too."

"Some people. Generally speaking, however, people are more problematic than dogs."

"The bad ones, of course."

"The bad ones, the ones adrift between good and bad, and some of the good ones. Even being loved profoundly and forever doesn't necessarily inspire devotion in them."

"That's something to think about."

"I'm sure you've thought about it often, Oddie."

"Well, I'm off to snoop some more," I declare, turning toward the door, but then I don't move.

After combing the long, lush fringe of fur on the dog's left foreleg, which retriever aficionados call feathers, Annamaria says, "What is it?"

"The door is closed."

"To keep out the mercurial mechanic, Donny, about whom you have so effectively warned me."

"It only opens itself when I'm approaching it from outside."

"Your point being—what?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying."

I look at Raphael. Raphael looks at Annamaria. Annamaria looks at me. I look at the door. It remains closed.

Finally, I take the knob in hand and open the door.

She says, "I knew you could do it."

Gazing out at the night-shrouded motor court, where the trees discreetly shiver, I dread the bloodshed that I suspect I will be required to commit. "There's no real harmony in Harmony Corner."

She says, "But there's a corner in it. Make sure you're not trapped there, young man."

FOUR

In case I am being watched, I don't immediately continue my snooping, but return to my cottage and lock the door behind me.

Not many years ago, nearly 100 percent of people who thought they were being constantly watched were certifiable paranoids. But recently it was revealed that, in the name of public safety, Homeland Security and more than a hundred other local, state, and federal agencies are operating aerial surveillance drones of the kind previously used only on foreign battlefields—at low altitudes outside the authority of air-traffic control. Soon, the bigger worry will not be that, as you walk your dog, you are secretly being watched but that the rapidly proliferating drones will begin colliding with one another and with passenger aircraft, and that you'll be killed by the plummeting drone that was monitoring you to be sure that you picked up Fido's poop in a federally approved pet-waste bag.

Having returned to my cottage, I consider switching on the TV to a channel running classic movies, to see if Katharine Hepburn or Cary Grant will suggest that I should sleep. But the caffeine will soon pin my eyelids open, and I suspect that I need to be at least on the brink of nodding off before the invader—whoever or whatever it might be—can access me through the television.

I switch off most of the lights, so that from outside it might appear that I'm finished exploring Harmony Corner and am leaving one lamp aglow as a night-light. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I eat a candy bar.

One of the benefits of living in almost constant jeopardy is that I don't need to worry about things like cholesterol and tooth decay. I'm sure to be killed long before my arteries can be closed by plaque. As for dental cavities, I tend instead to lose my teeth in violent confrontations. Not yet twenty-two, I already have seven teeth that are man-made implants.

I eat the second candy bar. Soon, thanks to all the sugar and caffeine, I should be so wired that I'll be able to receive the nearest tower-of-power radio broadcast through the titanium pins that lock those seven artificial teeth into my jawbone. I hope it won't be a greatest-hits station specializing in seventies disco tunes.

I switch off the last lamp, which is on a nightstand.

Beyond the bed, in the back wall of the cottage, one crank-operated casement window offers a view of the night woods. The two panes open inward to provide fresh air, and a screen keeps out moths and other pests. The screen is spring-loaded from the top and easily removed. From outside, I reinstall it with little noise.

The final aspect of my sixth sense is what Stormy called psychic magnetism. If I need to find someone whose whereabouts I do not know, I keep his name at the forefront of my thoughts and his face in my mind's eye. Then I walk or bicycle, or drive, with no route intended, going where whim takes me, although in fact I am being drawn toward the needed person by an uncanny intuition. Usually within half an hour, often faster, I locate the one I seek.

Psychic magnetism also works—although less well—when I'm searching for an inanimate object, and occasionally even when I'm searching for a place that I can name only by its function. For instance, in this case, wandering behind the arc of cottages and through the moonlit woods, I keep in

mind the word *lair*.

A unique Presence is at work in Harmony Corner, someone or something that can travel by television and push a drowsy man into deep sleep, entering his dreams with the expectation that, while he sleeps, his lifetime of memories can be read, his mind searched as easily as a burglar might ransack a house for valuables. That entity, human or otherwise, must have a physical form, for in my experience no spirit possesses such powers. This creature resides somewhere, and considering its seemingly predatory nature, where it resides is best described as a lair rather than a home.

Soon I arrive at the end of the woods, beyond which the grassy land descends in pale, gentle waves toward the shore, perhaps three hundred yards distant. Incoming from the west, dark waves of a more transitory nature ceaselessly disassemble themselves on the sand. The declining moon silvers the knee-high grass, the beach, and the foam into which the breaking waves dissolve.

I am overlooking a cove. On the highlands to the north are the lights of the service station and the diner. A black ribbon, perhaps a lane of pavement, unspools from behind the diner, through the moon-frosted grass, diagonally over the descending series of slopes and along the vales, to a cluster of buildings just above the beach, near the southern end of the cove.

They appear to be seven houses, one larger than the other six, but all of generous size. In two of the structures, a few windows glow with lamplight, but five houses are dark.

If the extended Harmony family, including sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, staff the enterprises just off the coast highway, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, they will live nearby. This must be their private little enclave of homes, a picturesque and privileged place to live, though somewhat remote.

Although this is a mild January, snakes are most likely not as active in these meadows as they will be in warmer seasons, and especially not in the coolness of the night. I particularly dislike snakes. I was once locked overnight in a serpentarium where many specimens had been released from their glass viewing enclosures. If they had offered me apples from the tree of knowledge, I might have hoped to cope with that, but they wanted only to inject me with their venom, denying me the chance to undo the world's disastrous history.

I wade down through the sloping meadows, grass to my knees, until I come, unbitten by lurking serpents and unscathed by plummeting drones, to the blacktop lane, which I follow toward the houses.

They are charming Victorian homes graced with generous porches and decorative millwork—some call it gingerbread—exuberantly applied. In the moonlight, they all appear to be in the Gothic Revival style: asymmetrical, irregular massings with steeply pitched roofs that include dormer windows, other windows surmounted by Gothic arches, and elaborately trimmed gables.

Six houses stand side by side on big lots, and the seventh—which is also the largest—presides over the others from a hilltop, thirty feet above them and a hundred feet behind. Lights are on in a second-floor room of the dominant residence, and also in several rooms on the ground floor in the last of the six front-row dwellings.

At first I feel pulled toward that last house on the lane. As I reach it, however, I find myself continuing past the end of the pavement and down a slope, along a rutted dirt track on which broken seashells crunch and rattle underfoot.

The beach is shallow, bordered by a ten-foot bank overgrown with brush, perhaps wild *Olearia*. About three feet high, the waves crest late, collapsing abruptly with a low rumble, as if slumbering dragons are grumbling in their sleep.

Thirty feet to the north, movement catches my eye. Alert to my arrival, someone drops to a crouch on the sand.

Reaching under my sweatshirt, I draw the pistol from the small of my back.

I raise my voice to outspoke the sea. "Who's there?"

The figure springs up and sprints to the overgrown embankment. It's slight, about four and a half feet tall, a child, most likely a girl. A flag of long pale hair flutters briefly in the moonlight, and then she disappears against the dark backdrop of brush.

Intuition tells me that if she is not the one I have set out to find, she is nevertheless key to discovering the truth of things in Harmony Corner.

I angle toward the embankment as I hurry north. Earlier, the purling waves must have reached within a foot of the brush, because now that high tide has passed, the narrow strip between the surf line and the enshrouded slope is still damp and firmly compacted.

After I have gone perhaps a hundred feet without catching sight of my quarry, I realize that I have passed her by. I turn back and make my way south, studying the dark hillside for some path by which she might have ascended through the vegetation.

Instead of a trail, I discover the dark mouth of a culvert that I hadn't noticed in my rush to pursue the girl. It's immense, perhaps six feet in diameter, set in the embankment and overhung in part by vines.

Backlit as I am by the westering moon, I assume that she can see me. "I don't mean you any harm," I assure her.

When she doesn't answer, I push through the straggled vines and take two steps into the enormous concrete drainpipe. I now must be a somewhat less defined silhouette to her, but she remains invisible to me. She might be within arm's reach or a hundred feet away.

I hold my breath and listen for her breathing, but the rumbling pulse of the sea becomes an encircling susurrant in the pipe, sliding around and around the curved walls. I can't hear anything as subtle as a child's respiration—or her stealthy footsteps if she is approaching me through the blind-black tunnel.

Considering that she is a young girl and that I am a grown man unknown to her, she will surely retreat farther into the pipe as I advance, rather than attempt to bowl me off my feet and escape—unless she is feral or dangerously psychotic, or both.

Years of violent encounters and supernatural experiences have ripened the fruits on the tree of my imagination past the point of wholesomeness. A few steps farther into the pipe, I am halted by a mental image of a blond girl: eyes glittering feverishly, lips peeled in a snarl, perfect matched-pearl teeth, between several of which are stuck shreds of bloody meat, the flesh of something she has eaten raw. She's got a huge two-tined fork in one hand and a wicked carving knife in the other, eager to slice my abdomen as if it were a turkey.

This is not a psychic vision, merely a boogeygirl sparked into existence by the rubbing together of my frayed nerves. As ridiculous as this fear might be, it nevertheless reminds me that I would be foolish, pistol or not, to proceed farther in such absolute darkness.

"I'm sorry if I've frightened you."

She abides in silence.

Reason having dismissed my imagined psychopathic child, I speak to the real one. "I know something is very wrong in Harmony Corner."

The revelation of my knowledge fails to charm the girl into conversation.

“I’ve come to help.”

The claim of noble intent I’ve just made embarrasses me, because it seems boastful, as if I believe that the people of Harmony Corner have been waiting for none but me and, now that I am here, can rest assured that I will set right all wrongs and bring justice to the unjust.

My sixth sense is peculiar but humble. I am no superhero. In fact, I screw up sometimes, and people die when I want desperately to save them. Indeed, my primary strange talent, the ability to see the spirits of the lingering dead, has not come into play here, and I am left with only uncannily sharp intuition, psychic magnetism, a ghost dog that keeps wandering off somewhere, and an appreciation for the role that absurdity plays in our lives. If Superman lost his ability to fly, his strength, his X-ray vision, his imperviousness to blades and bullets, and was left only with his costume and his confidence, he would be of more help to the Harmony family than I am likely to be.

“I’m leaving now,” I inform the darkness, my voice echoing hollowly along the curves of concrete. “I hope you’re not afraid of me. I’m not afraid of you. I only want to be your friend.”

I am beginning to wonder if I might be alone. Perhaps the figure I’d seen had found a way through the brush and up the embankment, in which case the timid girl to whom I now spoke was as imaginary as the homicidal one with the carving knife.

As I have learned before, it is possible to feel as foolish when alone as when one’s lapse in judgment or behavior is witnessed by an astonished crowd.

To avoid feeling even sillier, I decide not to exit the pipe backward, but instead to turn and walk out with no concern about who might be at my back. With the first step, my imagination conjures a knife arcing through the darkness, and by my third step, I expect the point of the weapon to stab past my left shoulder blade and into my heart.

I exit the drainpipe without being wounded, turn left on the beach, and walk away with the increasing conviction that, whatever kind of movie I’m in, it’s not a slasher film. When I reach the rutted track littered with broken shells, I look back, but the girl—if it had been a girl—is nowhere to be seen.

Returning to the blacktop lane and the last of the seven houses, where lamplight brightens a couple of ground-floor rooms, I decide to reconnoiter window-to-window. As I climb the front steps with catlike stealth and mouselike caution, a woman says, “What do you want?”

Pistol still in hand, I hold it down at my side, counting on the gloom to conceal it. At the top of the steps, I see what seem to be four wicker chairs with cushions, all in a row on the porch. The woman sits in the third of them, barely revealed by the glow that emanates from the curtained window behind her. I smell the coffee then, and I can see her just well enough to discern that she holds a mug in both hands.

“I want to help,” I tell her.

“Help what?”

“All of you.”

“What makes you think we need help?”

“Donny’s scarred face. Holly’s amputated fingers.”

She drinks her coffee.

“And a thing that almost happened to me as I drank a beer and watched TV.”

Still she does not reply.

The rhythmic rumble of the surf is hushed from here.

Finally she says, "We've been warned about you."

"Warned by whom?"

Instead of answering, she says, "We've been warned to avoid you ... and we think we know why."

In the west, the moon is as round as the face of a pocket watch, and in this exceptionally clear sky, it seems to have a fob of stars.

The dawn is still more than an hour from the eastern horizon. I don't know why, but I think that getting one of them to speak frankly will be easier in the dark.

She says, "I'll be punished if I tell you anything. Punished severely."

Had she already decided not to speak with me, she would have no need to suggest that she will pay dearly for doing so. She simply would tell me to go away.

She needs a reason to take the risk, and I think that I know what might motivate her. "Is that your daughter I saw on the beach?"

The woman's eyes glisten faintly with ambient light.

I take the first seat, leaving an empty chair between us, and hold the pistol in my lap.

With less dismay than I ought to feel, I seek to manipulate her. "Is your daughter scarred yet? Does she still have all her fingers? Has she been punished severely?"

"You don't need to do that."

"Do what, ma'am?"

"Push me so hard."

"I'm sorry."

"What are you?" she asks. "Who do you work for?"

"I'm an agent, ma'am, but I can't say of what."

That is true enough. I could tell her what I'm *not* an agent of: the FBI, the CIA, the BATF.... The office that I hold comes without a badge or a paycheck, and although it seems to me that my gift makes me the agent of some higher power, I can't prove it and dare not say as much for fear of being thought delusional.

Strangely emotionless considering her words, she says, "Jolie, my daughter, is twelve. She's smart and strong and good. And she's going to be killed."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because she's too beautiful to live."

FIVE

The woman's name is Ardys, the wife of William Harmony, whose parents created Harmony Corner.

A time existed, she says, when life here was as ideal as it can be anywhere. They enjoyed the grace of a close-knit family and the blessing of a sustaining enterprise in which they labored together, without conflict, perhaps much as pioneer families of another era worked a plot of land, producing together what they needed to survive and producing, at the same time, a history of accomplishment and shared experience that bound them together in the best of ways.

From the start of the Corner, the family's children have been homeschooled, and both children and adults have preferred to spend most of their leisure time fishing in this cove, sunning on this beach, walking in these meadowy hills. There were field trips for the school-age kids, of course, and vacations beyond the boundaries of their property—until five years previously. Then Harmony Corner became for them a prison.

She recounts that much in a calm voice so quiet that, at times, I lean sideways in my chair to be sure of hearing every word. She allows herself none of the grief in advance of loss that you might expect if she really believes that young Jolie, as punishment for her beauty, will be killed. Neither does a note of fear enter her voice, and I suspect she must speak without emotion or otherwise entirely lose the self-control that is required to speak to me at all.

Literally a prison, she says. No one any longer vacations off these grounds. No day trips are taken. Long-time friendships with people outside the family have been terminated, often with a rudeness and pretended anger that will ensure that the former friends make no attempt to patch things up. Only one of them at a time may leave the property, and then only to conduct banking or a limited number of other tasks. They no longer go shopping for anything; what they need must be ordered by phone and delivered.

Although her manner and her tone remain matter-of-fact, her voice is haunting, because she is a haunted woman. The revelation toward which she is leading me has bound her spirit but not yet broken it. I sense in her a despondency that is an incapacity for the current exercise of hope, a despondency that arises when resistance to some adversity has long proved futile. But she does not seem to have fallen all the way into the settled hopelessness of despair.

I'm surprised, therefore, when she stops speaking. When I press her to continue, she remains silent, staring solemnly at the dark sea as if it calls to her to drown herself in its cold waters.

Waiting is one of the things that human beings cannot do well, though it is one of the essential things we must do successfully if we are to know happiness. We are impatient for the future and try to craft it with our own powers, but the future will come as it comes and will not be hurried. If we are good at waiting, we discover that what we wanted of the future, in our impatience, is no longer what we want, that waiting has brought wisdom. I have become good at waiting, as I wait to see what action or sacrifice is wanted of me, wait to discover where I must go next, and wait for the day when the fortune-teller's promise will be fulfilled. Hope, love, and faith are in the waiting.

After a few minutes, Ardys says, "For a moment, I thought I felt it opening."

“What?”

“The door. My own private door. How do I tell you more when I’m afraid that mentioning his name or describing him might bring him to me before I can explain our plight?”

When she falls silent again, I recall this: “They say you should never speak the devil’s name because next thing you know, you’ll hear his footsteps on the stairs.”

“At least there are ways of dealing with the devil,” she says, implying that there may be no way to deal with her nameless enemy.

As I wait for her to continue and as she waits to find a route to her truth that will be safe, the darkness beyond the porch railing seems vast, seems to be washing in around us as the black sea washes to the nearby shore. Night itself is the sea of all seas, reaching to the farthest end of the universe, the moon and every planet and every star afloat in it. Here in this waiting moment, I almost feel that this house and the other six houses, the distant diner and service station—the lights of which seem like ship lights—are being lifted and turned in the night, in danger of coming loose of their moorings.

Having found a way to approach her truth indirectly, without mentioning the devil’s name, Ardys says, “You’ve met Donny. You saw his scar. He transgressed, and that was his punishment. He thought that if he was sufficiently deceitful and quick enough, he would win our freedom with a knife. Instead, he turned it upon himself and slashed his own face.”

I thought I must have misunderstood. “He did that to himself?”

She holds up a hand as if to say *Wait*. She sets aside her coffee mug. She lays her arms on the arms of the chair, but there is nothing relaxed about her posture. “If I am too specific ... if I explain why he would do such a thing to himself, then I will say what I must not say, the thing that will be heard and that will summon to us what must not be summoned.”

My mention of the devil seems more apt by the moment, for there is in what she just said something that reminds me of the cadences of Scripture.

“Donny might have died if his death had been wanted, but what was wanted was his suffering. Though he was bleeding profusely and in terrible pain, he remained calm. Though his speech was impeded by his cut lips, he told us to tie him down to a kitchen table and to put a folded cloth in his mouth to stifle the screams that would shortly come and to ensure that he would not bite his tongue.”

She continues speaking in a quiet voice from which all drama and most inflection are edited, and it is this self-control, which takes such a great effort of will, that lends credence to her incredible story. Her hands have closed into tightly clenched fists.

“His wife, Denise, who is screaming and near collapse, seems suddenly to collect herself—just as Donny at last begins to scream. She tells us what she will need to staunch the bleeding, sterilize the wound as best she can, and sew it up. You see, she must share in Donny’s punishment by being the instrument that ensures his permanent disfigurement, which a first-rate surgeon might have minimized. There will be nerve damage and numbness. And every time she looks at him for the rest of their lives, she will in part blame herself for not being able to resist ... to resist being used in this fashion. We know that if we fail to assist her, any one of us might be the next to slash his own face. We assist. She closes the wound.”

Ardys’s fists unclench, and she lowers her head. She has about her an air of exhaustion, as if analyzing her words before speaking them, with an ear for those that might summon the Presence that she fears, has drained both her physical and mental reserves.

Less than an hour of darkness remains, yet the night seems to be rising, submerging the hills, lifting the houses out of anchorage to set them adrift. This perception is nothing more than a reflection of my state of mind; a change in my conception of reality, of what's possible or not, is what has actually for a moment unmoored me.

If I understand Ardys, then the Presence that entered my dream and tried to explore the archives of my memory is more than a reader. It is in their case a *controller* of great power and greater cruelty, a tyrannical puppeteer. Beginning five years earlier, it has made of Harmony Corner not precisely a prison and not in scope an empire, but a pocket universe akin to a primitive island on which a god carved of stone demands absolute obedience, with the difference that *this* false deity is capable of brutally enforcing its commands. It entered rebellious Donny and forced him to mutilate himself, and thereafter it entered Denise and, using her hands, made sure that Donny's face would always testify to the dire consequence of disobedience.

Earlier, when Sweet Donny became Angry Donny, the Presence must have entered him and taken control. I had suddenly been talking not to the mechanic's second and less appealing personality, but instead to another individual entirely, the puppetmaster.

The service station had no television, and Donny was wide awake when he was abruptly possessed. My understanding of how the Presence travels and how it takes up tenancy in another's mind is incomplete. Watching the boob tube might not be an invitation to this particular damnation, after all—though it's still not a wise idea to spend a lot of time watching reality-TV shows about celebrity families living in the wild with gorillas.

I realize, too, that by "my own private door" Ardys means the door to her mind. For a moment, she thought that she felt it opening.

They live in unceasing expectation of being invaded, controlled. How they have held fast to their sanity for five years is beyond my comprehension.

Although I assume Ardys has said as much as she dares to say, she raises her head and continues, speaking softly and in a voice that might seem weary if I didn't know the effort required of her to make it sound so. "My sister-in-law, Laura, is a Harmony, but her married name is Jorgenson. She and Steve, her husband, have three children. The middle one was a boy named Maxwell. We called him Maxy."

I am sobered by her determination to maintain a voice without dramatic emphasis and, presumably, also to repress internally the emotions that these revelations should inflame. Her effort suggests that on some level the Presence is always aware of the general mood of each of the subjects in its little kingdom. Perhaps it's alerted to a possibility of disobedience when one of them becomes a bit too agitated emotionally, in much the way that our nation's security forces employ computers to monitor millions of phone calls, not listening to every exchange but scanning for certain combinations of words that might identify a conversation between two terrorists.

"Maxy was always exceptional-looking. A pretty baby, then a beautiful toddler. More handsome year by year. He was six when things changed. He was eight when we learned there is a degree of beauty that, if exceeded, inspires envy and requires the removal of the one whose appearance causes offense."

Her ability to speak of child murder with such bland words and in such a dispassionate tone indicates that in the three years since the killing of Maxy, she has developed and refined techniques of self-possession that I could never match. She is eerily composed, all excited feeling subdued, for this

is what she must do to survive—and now to save her daughter.

She says, “There’s a short story by Shirley Jackson, ‘The Lottery,’ which concerns a ritual stoning. Everyone in the town must participate so that something outrageous and morally repugnant may seem normal, essential to public order, and a moment of community bonding. Those who participate in that lottery do so voluntarily. When someone too beautiful had to be removed from the Corner, everyone participated, one after the other, including Maxy himself, but none voluntarily.”

The horrific scene she suggests with such restraint chills me as much as anything ever has.

I am inexpressibly grateful that I am invulnerable to the power of this mysterious Presence. But then I pray that I am indeed not vulnerable, because perhaps on second try the puppetmaster will find a way to open my own private door.

Speaking now in a whisper, Ardys says, “Here, mere stones are considered uninspired. More imagination is employed. And unlike in the Jackson story, the sacrifice is not performed efficiently but with an intention to prolong the event as you might want to see a good ball game go into several extra innings to increase the drama and the ultimate satisfaction.”

My palms are damp. I blot them on my jeans before picking up the pistol from my lap.

“In three years, there has not been another whose appearance has caused such offense,” Ardys informs me. “Until recently. Members of our family have begun expressing envy of my daughter’s growing beauty, both to her and to me. Of course I mean this envy has been expressed by another for whom they are forced to speak.”

I have a hundred questions, but before I can pose one, Ardys gets up from the chair and asks that I come with her.

She opens the front door and leads me inside.

For a moment, I look back warily at the shadowed porch and the deeper gloom beyond. When I close the door, I turn the deadbolt, for it seems that the night itself might rise like a rough beast and slouch across the threshold in our wake.

I follow her along the hallway to the immaculate kitchen.

In my experience, everything in Harmony Corner is spotless. Hard work must be essential to relieve their minds from continuous morbid consideration of their desperate situation. Focusing intently on what they *can* control—like the cleanliness of their homes and enterprises—must be one of the few ways they can keep aglow the embers of hope.

In the kitchen light, I discover that Ardys Harmony is lovely. Perhaps in her late thirties, she has a complexion as clear as light, and her eyes are the color of crème de menthe, darker green than I would have thought any eyes could be. Her otherwise perfect skin is marked by crow’s-feet, but those tiny wrinkles seem to me to be evidence not of aging but instead of the courage and the steel willpower with which she faces each day in the Corner, as even now her eyes are squinted and her mouth tightly set with determination.

She draws me to the sink, above which is a window that frames a view of the larger house on the hill behind this one. As earlier, lamplight brightens some of the second-floor windows in that imposing residence.

“My husband’s parents bought this property in a foreclosure sale in 1955. It was dilapidated. They revitalized the businesses, turned failure into success, and built additional houses as their children got married and the family grew. They lived in the hilltop house until they died, both of them nine years ago. Bill and I lived up there four years—until everything changed. Five years now, we’ve lived

down here.”

Without directly telling me that their controller and tormentor can be found in the highest of the seven houses, without mentioning a name or providing a description, without putting her request into words that might draw unwanted attention, she nevertheless conveys to me by her eyes and her expression what she hopes I might achieve. Maybe I, immune to the powers of the Presence, will be able to enter its lair undetected and kill it. I understand what she wants of me as clearly as if I could read minds.

If the Presence is alone and the Harmonys are many, and if it can control only one person at a time—as the story of Donny’s cut and Denise’s sewing up of his wound seems to indicate—then surely sometime in five years, they might have found a way to overwhelm their enemy. I don’t have enough information, however, to understand their long enslavement or to calculate the odds of my succeeding at the task she hopes that I will undertake.

The need to speak somewhat indirectly of these things and in a subdued manner complicates my information gathering. I ask, “Is it a man I’m looking for or something else?”

She turns from the window. “This line of talk is inadvisable.”

I persist: “A man?”

“Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

She shakes her head. She dares not say, for fear the words she would need to describe my quarry might alert him to the fact that we are conspiring against him. This suggests that once he has taken control of someone, even after he departs that person, the two of them remain linked at all times, at least tenuously.

“He’s only one, I assume.”

“Yes.”

She looks at the pistol in my hand.

I ask, “Will this be enough to do the job?”

Her expression is bleak. “I don’t know.”

As I consider how best to word certain other questions without setting off a psychic alarm in the mind of the Presence, I ask if I may have a drink of water.

She plucks a bottle of Niagara from the refrigerator, and as I put down the pistol on the dinette table, I assure her that I don’t need a glass.

For a man closing in on twenty-four hours without sleep, after a long day of exhausting action, too much caffeine is as problematic as too little. Drowsiness and the lack of focus that it promotes could be the death of me, although so could the edginess and the tendency to overreact that come with an overdose of stimulants. But Mountain Dew, candy bars, and a pair of NoDoz have not yet quite cleared the sandman’s dust from my eyes. I swallow one more caffeine tablet.

As I put down the water, Ardys comes to me and takes one of my hands in both of hers. Her eyes seem to express desperation, and her look is beseeching.

Something about her stare, perhaps the intensity of it, makes me uneasy. Because my life is marbled with the supernatural, I’m creeped out frequently enough to be familiar with the feeling that something is crawling on the nape of my neck. This time, however, before I can smooth down those fine hairs with my free hand, I realize that the crawling isn’t on my neck but *inside* my skull.

As I slam my own private door, rejecting what has sought to enter, Ardys says, “Have you figured

out how to express it better, Harry?”

“Express what?”

“The analogy with the porpoise and the prairie dog.”

Alarmed, I twist my hand free of hers.

The form of Jolie’s mother still stands before me, and surely the substance of her—mind and soul—still inhabits the body even if she is no longer in control of it. The Presence and I are face-to-face, as last we were when it challenged me through Donny, and this time its true countenance is concealed by the Ardys mask. Her skin remains clear and radiant, but her expression of utter contempt is one that I doubt is familiar to that lovely visage. Those dark-green eyes are as striking as they were before, like the eyes of a woman in some magic-saturated Celtic myth, but they are no longer haunted or sad, or beseeching; they seem to radiate a palpable, inhuman fury.

I snatch the gun from the table.

She says, “Who are you really, Harry Potter?”

“Lex Luthor,” I admit. “That’s why I had to change my name. The thousandth time someone asked me why I hated Superman, I started wishing my name was just about anything else, even Fidel Castro.”

“You are the first of your kind I’ve ever encountered.”

“What kind is that?” I wonder.

“Inaccessible. I possess everyone who sleeps in the motor court, roam their memories, and embed recurrent nightmares that will destroy their sleep for weeks after I’ve departed them.”

“I’d prefer a free continental breakfast.”

Not stiffly, like a zombie, but with her usual grace, she walks—almost seems to glide—to the counter beside the cooktop and opens a drawer. “Sometimes I seize control of motor-court guests while they’re awake—use a husband to brutalize a wife or use a wife to tell her husband lies about infidelities that I imagine for her in delicious detail.”

Ardys stares into the drawer.

“When they leave,” the Presence says through her, “they’re beyond my control, but what I’ve done will have a lasting effect.”

“Why? What’s the point?”

Ardys looks up from the drawer. “Because I can. Because I want to. Because I will.”

“That’s a tidy little moral vacuum.”

Obedying the beast that rides her, Ardys withdraws a meat cleaver from the drawer. In her voice, the hidden demon says, “Not a vacuum. A black hole. Nothing escapes me.”

I suggest, “Delusions of grandeur.”

Raising the cleaver, Ardys approaches the dinette table, which stands between us. “You’re a fool.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re a narcissist.”

I find it dismaying that we never quite outgrow the schoolyard and the puerile behavior thereof. Even this puppetmaster, with almost godlike power over those it controls, feels the need to belittle me with childish insults, and I feel obliged to respond in kind.

Through Ardys, it says, “You’re dead, shitface.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re probably ugly as hell.”

“Not when I’m in this bitch.”

“I’d rather be dead than as ugly as you.”

“You’re ugly enough, shitface.”

I reply, “Sticks and stones.”

She starts around the table.

I circle in the other direction, taking a two-hand grip on the pistol and aiming it point-blank at her chest.

“You won’t shoot her,” the Presence says.

“I killed a woman earlier tonight.”

“Liar.”

“Freak.”

“Killing the bitch won’t kill me.”

“But you’ll have to find another host. By then I’ll be out of the house, and you won’t know where to look for me.”

She throws the cleaver.

My paranormal ability includes occasional prophetic dreams but not, darn it, glimpses of the future while I’m awake, which would be really, really helpful in moments like this.

I don’t expect her to throw it, I haven’t time to dodge, the blade whooshes past my face close enough to shave me if I had a beard, and chops into the cabinetry behind me, splitting the raised panel on an upper door.

The puppeteer is probably limited to the physical capabilities of whatever host it inhabits. I am maybe fifteen years younger than Ardys, stronger, with longer legs. The Presence is right, I won’t kill Ardys, she’s innocent, a victim, and now as she returns to the knife drawer, there’s nothing I can do but split in the figurative sense before her rider uses her to split me literally.

I race along the hallway, reaching the foyer just as the front door opens and a tall, husky guy halts on the threshold, startled to see me. He must be the husband, William Harmony. I say, “Hi, Bill,” hoping he’ll politely step out of the way, but even as I speak, his expression hardens, and he says, “Shitface,” which either means that the insult is so appropriate that it’s the first thing people think to say when catching sight of me *or* the Presence has flipped out of Ardys and into her spouse.

Although I don’t know Bill as well as I know Ardys, I don’t want to shoot this innocent, either. Call me prissy. If I retreat to the kitchen, the puppeteer will flip out of Bill and into Ardys once more, and she’ll have a carving knife or a butcher knife, or a battery-powered electric knife, or a chain saw if they happen to keep one in the kitchen. Bill is wearing a sailor’s cap, which is appropriate, because his neck is as thick as a wharf post, his hands look as big as anchors, and his chest is as wide as the prow of a ship. There’s no way that I can go through him, which leaves me no choice but to sprint up the nearby staircase to the second floor.

SIX

I am perpetually—sometimes darkly—amused by the workings of my mind, which can often seem less rational than I would like to believe they are. The human brain is by far the most complex object known to exist in the entire universe, containing more neurons than there are billions of stars in the Milky Way. The brain and the mind are very different things, and the latter is as mysterious as the former is complex. The brain is a machine, and the mind is a ghost within it. The origins of self-awareness and how the mind is able to perceive, analyze, and imagine are supposedly explained by numerous schools of psychology, although in fact they study only behavior through the gathering and the analysis of statistics. The *why* of the mind's existence and the *how* of its profound capacity to reason—especially its penchant for moral reasoning—will by their very nature remain as mysterious as whatever lies outside of time.

As I race up the stairs to the second floor, intent upon not falling into the hands of the possessed Bill Harmony, who looks like he has the strength to break me apart as easily as I might break in half a breadstick, I am afraid of dying—and therefore failing to protect Annamaria as I promised—and at the same time I am mildly embarrassed by the impropriety of dashing pell-mell toward the more private portion of their residence, into which I haven't been invited.

I hear myself saying, “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” as I ascend the stairs, which seems absurd, considering that my trespass is a far lesser offense than the puppetmaster's intention to use Mr. Harmony to bash my brains out. On the other hand, I think it speaks well of human beings that we are capable of recognizing when we've committed an impropriety even while we're in a desperate fight for survival. I've read that in the worst Nazi and Soviet slave-labor camps, where never enough food was provided to inmates, the stronger prisoners nearly always shared rations equitably with weaker ones, recognizing that the survival instinct does not entirely excuse us from the need to be charitable. Not all human competition has to be as brutal as that on the Food Network's *Cupcake Wars*.

At the head of the stairs, as I hear Mr. Harmony thundering up the two flights behind me, I discover that the hallway leads right and left. I turn left, trusting my intuition, which unfortunately isn't 100 percent reliable.

Out of a room to my right, a boy of about fifteen, bare-chested and barefoot, wearing pajama bottoms, erupts as if catapulted, slams into me, drives me into the wall, and reveals himself to be possessed when he says, “Shitface.”

Although the impact knocks the wind out of me, although I drop the pistol, although the boy's sour breath reeks of garlic from the previous night's dinner, and although I am beginning to be offended by the unnecessary repetition of that insult to my appearance, I am nevertheless impressed by the puppeteer's ability to switch from host to host in what seems like the blink of an eye. Cool. Terrifying, yes, but definitely cool.

As I drive one knee hard into the boy's crotch, I say, “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” which I mean even more sincerely than the regret I expressed for violating the sanctity of their second floor. He collapses into the fetal position with a wordless groan that would most accurately be pronounced “urrrrlll,” and I assure him that although he feels that he is dying, he will live.

Mr. Harmony is standing at the head of the stairs, looking confused. But then his face hardens into a gargoyle snarl as the Presence invades him.

After scooping up the pistol, I bolt across the hall, into the room out of which the boy attacked me. I slam the door. In the knob is a button that engages the latch, but there's no deadbolt.

Mr. Harmony tries the door, violently rattling the knob, just as I brace it with a straight-backed chair snared from a nearby desk. Even though the animal that Mr. Harmony most reminds me of is a rhinoceros, this trick should hold him off for a couple of minutes.

At the double-hung eight-pane window, I pull open the draperies, see a porch roof beyond, and disengage the latch. I can't raise the inner sash, and I can't lower the outer sash, because the window has been painted shut.

If I were Mr. Daniel Craig, the most recent James Bond, I would quickly kick out the wooden muntins separating the panes in the lower sash, squeeze through the sash without raising it, and be gone. But I am only me, and I've no doubt that a backspray of shattering glass would blind me, while the bristling end of a broken muntin would pierce one calf or the other, gouge open the peroneal artery, and bleed me dry in 2.1 minutes. Another famous film character, Kermit the Frog, sings a song about how "It's not easy being green," and as true as that might be, it's even less easy being a man who isn't James Bond.

Meanwhile, at the door, Mr. Harmony doesn't bellow like some beast from the African veldt, but he slams his shoulder against the door or kicks it with rhinocerosian fury.

Perhaps sixteen years have passed since I last tried to hide under a bed; and even then I was easily found.

Two additional doors offer the only possibilities. The first leads to a closet in which Mr. Harmony could beat me half to death with his humongous fists and then garrote me with a wire clothes hanger.

The second opens into a bathroom. This door *does* have a deadbolt on the inside. The bathroom features a large frosted-glass window directly above the toilet.

The Victorian tilework offers a field of pale green with here and there hand-painted white baskets overflowing with roses, all set off with white-and-yellow-checkered trim. It strikes me as too busy, even garish, but in the interest of staying alive, I enter the bath anyway and lock the door behind me.

I put the pistol on the counter beside the sink, disengage the well-lubricated window latch, and find to my surprise that the window is not painted shut. The lower sash slides up easily and stays there without need of a prop. Beyond lies the same porch roof I had seen from the other room.

As events have unfolded since I first went snooping, this has seemed like a night when I would be well-advised not to buy a lottery ticket or play Russian roulette. Although now my luck seems to have changed, I'm still not in a mood to sing Kermit the Frog's other hit song, "Rainbow Connection."

Whether it is the sight of the loo or the excitement of the chase, I am suddenly aware that this evening I have drunk a beer, a can of Mountain Dew, and a bottle of water. Mr. Harmony has not quite yet broken down the bedroom door, so it seems wise to take the time to pee here rather than hurry onward and soon be hampered in my flight by having to run with my thighs pressed together.

With the personal-hygiene vigilance of a responsible short-order cook, I'm washing my hands as the bedroom door at last crashes open. I blot them on my sweatshirt, snatch up the pistol, stand on the closed lid of the toilet, and hastily exit the window onto the roof of the porch.

This is the front-porch roof, under which I sat with Ardys. That was only minutes earlier, but it seems like an hour has passed since she first began to talk to me.

The blush of dawn has not yet touched the eastern horizon. In the west, the moon discreetly retreats beyond the curve of the earth, and it almost seems that the stars, as well, are receding. Second by second, the dark night grows yet darker.

As the demon-ridden Mr. Harmony begins trying to kick down the bathroom door, I cross the sloped roof toward its lowest edge. I leap off, land on the lawn nine feet below without fracturing my ankles, drop, roll, and spring to my feet.

For an instant, I feel like a prince of derring-do, swashbuckler sans sword. Honest pride can slide quickly into vanity, however, and then into vainglory, and when in the manner of a musketeer you take a bow with a flourish of your feathered hat, you're likely to raise your head into the downswing of a villain's hatchet.

I need to get away from the house, but following the blacktop lane up through the hills and vales will surely lead to encounters with possessed members of the Harmony family. I have learned much less about the Presence than I need to know, but I have learned too much to be allowed to live. Through one surrogate or another, it will pursue me relentlessly.

It doesn't have to possess these people to force them to do what it wants. However many Harmonys there might be—six big houses full of them, surely no fewer than thirty, most likely forty or more—the puppeteer can alert them that they are required to guard against my escape. They will obey out of fear that it will flip from one to another of them, disfiguring or killing at random to punish the slightest thought of rebellion. If they love one another, none will flee and allow an unknown number of others to be killed as revenge for he who escapes. Freedom at that price isn't freedom at all, but instead an endless highway of guilt from which perhaps there is no exit but suicide.

They will hunt me down, and I will have to escape with Annamaria or kill them all. I can't bear to kill so many, or even one of them. The ten-round magazine of my pistol contains only seven cartridges. But the shortage of ammunition isn't what prevents me from shooting my way out of the Corner. My past and my future constrain me. By *past* I mean my losses, and by *future* I mean the hope of regaining what has been lost.

With dawn mere minutes away, I can imagine no certain hiding place once morning light floods down through the hills. I need to hide because I need time to think. Before I know what I'm doing, I find myself running across the dark lawn and to the rutted track littered with broken shells.

In the absence of the moon, the ocean is as black as oil and the foam in the breaking surf is now the fungal gray of soap suds in which dirty hands have been washed and washed again. The beach lies starlit, and although the galactic whorls overhead contain as many suns as any shore has grains of sand, this strand is as dim as badly tarnished silver, for our Earth is remote, rotating far from the stars and farther every night.

As I reach the end of the unpaved track, underfoot the shell fragments slide with a sound like the scattered coins of a pirate treasure, and suddenly she rushes past me, having followed me from the house. Without the moon to honor it, her flag of hair is less bright than before, but she is certainly the blond child whom I glimpsed previously, Jolie, daughter of Ardys. If earlier she followed me to the house and then listened to my conversation with her mother on the porch, that explains why, as she passes, she speaks to me as if I am her confirmed conspirator: "*Follow me! Hurry!*"

SEVEN

Jolie is a shadow but as quick as light, and although she gets well ahead of me, she stops to wait at the mouth of the big culvert.

As I arrive there, I hear a man shout not from the beach behind me but perhaps from the houses that stand ten feet above the sea, and another man answers him. Their words are distorted by distance and by being filtered through the sounds of my drumming heart and my rapid breathing, but the meaning of them is nonetheless clear. Those men are in the hunt.

I hear also the engine of some vehicle, perhaps an SUV or a large pickup. From somewhere above and inland, light flares, fades, swells again, and sweeps across the top of the embankment, over our heads, moving north to south. A searchlight. Mounted on a vehicle.

The puppetmaster can marshal its army with shocking speed, because it needs no telephone. And perhaps it doesn't have to possess its subjects one by one to convey the threat that I pose. Maybe it is able to broadcast an instruction to all of them simultaneously, which they are not compelled to obey—as they are compelled when their oppressor enters intimately into one of them—but which they obey nevertheless because the consequences of disobedience are so dire.

Jolie says, “Hold tight to me. We can't risk a light for a while, and the way is very dark.”

Her hand is small and delicate in mine, but strong.

We push through the overhanging vines. They are cold ropy creepers that conjure in my mind the strange image of dead snakes dangling from the head of a lifeless Medusa.

As before, the drainage tunnel is as dark as any blind man's world, and it is almost as quiet as a deaf man's life. The rubber soles of our shoes extract little sound from the concrete pipe. The floor is not puddled with water through which we might splash, and no debris has washed here that might crackle underfoot. If vermin share this darkness with us, they are as silent as the rats that slink through dreams.

The air is cool and smells clean. In a drain, even one of this size, especially in the rainy season, which is now, I expect at least the faint scents of mold and sporing fungi, the fetor of occasional stagnant pools skinned with slimy algae, a whiff of lime efflorescing from the concrete. The odorless condition of this realm is no less disorienting than the blackness all around.

We stay to the center, the low point of the curving passage, which means the girl can't be feeling her way along the wall. Yet she proceeds with confidence, never hesitating, walking at an ordinary pace, as if she knows that no obstruction lies ahead, as if all she needs to find her way is the cant of the floor under her feet and a draft so faint that only she can feel it.

I have in the past been in lightless places that were less welcoming than this and fraught with dangers, forced to crawl and explore blindly with my hands. Although this great pipe smells clean and seems to harbor no mortal threats, I find it immeasurably more disturbing than any previous dark place I have known.

Step by step, my nerves become more raw, abraded by the silken darkness, pinched by the silence, and what flutters in my stomach also creeps up and down my spine.

Halting, holding fast to the girl's hand, I ask, “Where are we going?”

She whispers, “*Shhhh. Voices carry in the pipe. If they listen at the outlet, maybe they’ll hear. Besides, I’m counting steps, so don’t confuse me.*”

I glance back, but the moonless night is still awaiting dawn. Unable to see the vine-straggled outlet, I can’t judge how far we might have come.

Jolie continues forward, and I follow.

From the moment we entered, the floor has sloped upward. Now the angle of ascent increases. Soon I sense that this tunnel is curving to the left.

Three disturbing things happen in the next few minutes, two of them in that perfect gloom and the third in weak but welcome light.

First my singular intuition, which if it could smell and see would have the nose of a hunting dog and the eyes of a hawk, tells me with steadily increasing insistence that this tunnel is not what it seems to be. I assume that it must have been constructed to channel torrents of rain from the shoulders of the four-lane highway high above or from a network of open gullies, with the intention of preventing erosion of the coastal hills. But this is not a drain, not a piece of common infrastructure with a public purpose.

Being guided by the girl through the blind and odorless quiet, I perceive a pair of truths about this tunnel, the first being that it proceeds to something other than manholes and drainage grates. Ahead will be found peculiar features, and at some far terminus lies an immense facility of mysterious purpose. These perceptions don’t pour into me as a flood of images but as feelings. I am not able to feel them more vividly by concentrating on them, nor can I translate these feelings into clear details. In all its aspects, my psychic gift has always been more powerful than I can comfortably manage but weaker than I wish it were.

The associated truth is that the place to which this passageway ultimately leads is thought to be abandoned but is not entirely so. I have a vague impression of colossal structures, vast rooms that stand empty and others that house exotic machines long unused and corroded. But somewhere in those monumental installations, cocooned by rings of derelict buildings in which nothing moves except fitful drafts and ghosts that are nothing more than bestirred forms of dust, there is a hub of activity. That hub might seem small by comparison to the forsaken architectures that surround it, but my sense is that this secret core is itself large and bunkered, staffed by men and women as busy as the population of any hive.

The second of the three disturbing things that happen in this black passageway, subsequent to the pair of clairvoyantly received truths, is an ominous perception that something pernicious beyond comprehension lies ahead, something unwholesome exceeding all my previous experience of wickedness. A flood tide of apprehension wells and swiftly builds into an almost incapacitating fright, a shrinking, anxious fear that some pure evil looms with all the power of a mile-high tsunami.

I believe—I *know*—that the unknown thing I sense and fear is not here now, but instead waits far ahead, in that fortified hub of which I can *feel* the existence though I cannot see it. This perfect blackness oppresses me, however, and because the girl seems quite at home in it, I am increasingly troubled by the thought that she is so comfortable in the dark because she is *of* the dark, never was the innocent child that I have assumed, but is one with the distant threat toward which she seems to lead me.

She whispers, “*We’re coming to a threshold, don’t trip,*” and squeezes my hand as if to reassure me.

Her apparent solicitude should steady my nerves a little, but it does not. The perception of some unknown but monumental evil waiting ahead does not relent, in fact intensifies. After hearing the story of young Maxwell's murder by his possessed kin, after seeing lovely Ardys Harmony transformed into a homicidal puppet with a cleaver, I have no reason to dread this unknown menace more than I fear the Presence, the puppetmaster, but my intuition continues to insist.

The promised threshold is perhaps two inches high. My left shoulder brushes what might be a heavy sliding door, and my pistol, clutched in that hand, rings loudly off steel. Through the sole of one of my shoes, I feel a metal channel inset in the midpoint of the foot-wide threshold.

"The beach is so far away, we can risk it now," Jolie says, letting go of my hand and switching on a small flashlight the size of a Magic Marker.

The flash is welcome although inadequate, the darkness flowing in again behind the beam as it moves, flowing like the cloak of something cowed and hostile, figures of dim light squirming in the stainless-steel walls, as though they are the tortured denizens of some parallel reality separated from ours by a thin, distorting membrane.

The narrow ray reveals that we have left the pipe behind and have entered a rectangular chamber approximately ten feet wide and twenty long. The floor seems to be white ceramic tiles separated not by grout lines but by thin spines of polished steel. All other surfaces are stainless steel.

With the beam, the girl indicates a crowbar and several wood wedges of different sizes, which lie together in a corner. "I had to pry open the doors, and it wasn't easy, I about thought I'd blow out a carotid artery. They were pneumatic once, I think, but there's no power to them now."

The breached darkness is more disturbing than the blinding gloom that preceded it. Even in cramped quarters, absolute blackness allows the mind to imagine a generous space, but here the ceiling is hardly more than seven feet above the floor, and the sheen of the cold steel is sinister.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Maybe the pipe behind us was just a storm drain a long time ago, before Grandpa even bought the Corner. But someone connected this system to it. Someone weird and up to no good, if you ask me." She plays the light across the walls to the left and right, where the smooth steel is interrupted by double rows of inch-diameter holes. "I've thought about it a lot, and what I figure is this was first of all some kind of escape route. If people used it, they were decontaminated in these rooms—you know, maybe because of bacteria and viruses. Maybe. I don't know. Feels right. But if you weren't people, if you were anything else and you got this far, they trapped you here and instead of pumping in germ-killing mist or whatever, they instead pumped poison gas into the room."

"If you were anything else? What anything?"

Before the girl can respond, a rumbling arises, not unlike the subterranean roar of certain earthquakes. It seems to come from overhead, however, and as it grows louder, I look uneasily at the ceiling.

"Probably an eighteen-wheeler," Jolie says. "We're under the Coast Highway here, beyond the Corner."

She leads the way to the end of the room, where four steps ascend to a second threshold. Here she has pried open another set of steel doors. Beyond lies a chamber identical to the first.

She plays the light over the architrave before stepping into that room. "You had to go through these two air locks to escape to the coast. They weren't taking any chances."

I follow her. "They who?"

“I’ve got some ideas,” she replies, but offers no more as she leads me across the chamber to another four steps that ascend to a third pried-open door.

Another big truck passes overhead, followed by lighter traffic, but the vibrations no longer disturb me. I am troubled now by an even stronger premonition that ahead waits an unequaled abomination, an evil so pure, so perfectly vicious and thoroughly unwholesome that it belongs in a deeper level of Hell than any Dante ever imagined.

Past that third door, Jolie says, “From here on, there’s power,” and she presses a wall switch.

Warm light springs from tubes hidden in coves along both sides of a corridor that is as long as a football field, about twelve feet wide, maybe eight feet high. Every surface is pale yellow, shiny, and seems to be seamlessly plasticized.

The air is warmer here, and it has an astringent chemical smell that isn’t unpleasant.

“When I first pried open that third set of doors,” she says, “it was a lot warmer in here than this, and the smell was a lot stronger. I first thought the air might be bad for me, like toxic or something, but it doesn’t irritate my throat or eyes, and if the stuff is gonna make me grow a second head, it hasn’t happened yet.”

Compared to the rooms preceding it, this space looks welcoming, but my presentiment of evil remains acute, and I’m glad that I have the pistol.

The girl says, “The next doors are powered-up and locked. Can’t be pried open. All these barriers. So maybe there’s a million bars of gold beyond it or the secret recipe for McDonald’s special sauce. This hallway is as far as we can go.”

About halfway to those distant doors, a figure lies on the hallway floor. At first it might be mistaken for a man, but then not.

As we approach the sprawled form, the girl says, “Whatever’s beyond those last doors, if they *are* the last ones, there must not be anyone left over there. If anyone was over there, they wouldn’t just leave the thing here so long. They’d take it away.”

I can’t tell for certain how tall the creature might have been in life or exactly what weight, because it appears to have mummified in the greater heat that she mentioned and in the chemical-laden air. As a guess, I would say it stood over seven feet and weighed short of three hundred pounds. But it is radically dehydrated, skin shrunken over its lanky body, over its long hands, and over the once-fearsome features of its huge head, skin as wrinkled as a gray linen suit worn hard and until threadbare and never once pressed.

What I *can* determine is that it is a primate, legs longer than its arms, more sophisticated than gorillas and other anthropoids, with a spinal curve like that of *Homo sapiens*, capable of standing fully erect. But there the similarity to a man ends, for this thing has long four-knuckled fingers, five per hand, and two three-knuckled thumbs per hand. Its toes are as long as its fingers, six per foot, with one thumblike toe in each half dozen.

“I call him Orc,” the girl says.

“Why?”

“Well, I had to call him something, and *Bob* didn’t seem right.”

I don’t know her yet, but I think I’m going to like her.

“Orc because he makes me think of the orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*.”

Its skull, to which the flesh of the face has been shriveled and shrink-wrapped by the heat, is nearly the size and shape of a watermelon. The eyes have collapsed back into the desiccated brain, but

judging by the sockets, they must have been the size of large lemons, set not horizontally like human eyes, but vertically. The remaining nose cartilage and a mass of shriveled tissue draped over it suggest a proboscis like that of an anteater, though three hooked lengths of hornlike structures, each two inches long, bristle from that portion of the face, unlike anything an anteater can boast. The lips have shrunk from the teeth, which are reminiscent of a wolf's oral weaponry. The mouth cracks uncommonly wide to allow the fullest use of that wickedly sharp and still-gleaming array of cutlery.

The presentiment of evil that has had its claws in me for most of the journey from the beach has not faded, but the reason for it is not this cadaver. Whatever alarms me is behind the closed doors at the end of this corridor, either living specimens related to this corpse or something worse.

One more thing strikes me as important. This carcass appears to be as dry as a mass of parchment, but no stains or time-hardened residue of decomposing tissues mars the floor under it. Where did the bodily fluids go, the dissolving and putrefying fats?

"I've been studying old Orc for a few months," the girl says.

"Studying him?"

"I can learn something from him. Something that'll help us. I'm sure I can."

"But ... studying him here alone?"

No more than six feet from the body are a few folded, quilted blue moving blankets that Jolie has apparently provided for her comfort. She sits on one and folds her legs Indian-style.

"Orc doesn't scare me. Nothing much can scare me after five years of Dr. Hiskott."

"Who?"

The girl spells it for me. "The creep lives in what used to be our house. We're his animals to torment. Slaves, toys."

"The puppetmaster."

"Talking to you on the porch, Mom couldn't speak his name. He knows when it's used. But here I'm beyond the bastard's range. He can't hear me say how much I hate him, how much I want to kill him really hard."

I settle onto another folded moving blanket, facing her.

Jolie dresses to express the rebellion in which she dares not engage: dirty sneakers, jeans, a worn-denim jacket appliquéd with decorative copper rivets to suggest chain mail, and a black T-shirt on which a white skull grins.

In spite of that outfit and the settled anger that hardens her face, her tender beauty is greater than her mother has been able to convey. She is one of those girls who, though a tomboy, would always be chosen to play an angel in the church Christmas pageant and would be cast as the secular saint in any school play. Her beauty has no significant quality of nascent sexuality, but rather she is luminous and projects a goodness and an innocence that is a reflection of that profound grace we sometimes glimpse in nature and from which we take assurance that the world is a place of exquisite purpose.

"Dr. Hiskott. Where did he come from, Jolie?"

"He says Moonlight Bay. That's a couple miles up the coast. But we think he really came from Fort Wyvern."

"The army base?"

"Yeah. Just inland from Moonlight Bay—and from here. Humongous."

"How humongous?"

"Like 134,000 acres. A small city. Civilian workers, military guys, their families—forty thousand

people used to live there. Not counting.”

“Not counting what?”

“Things like Orc.”

The lighting in the cove flutters, dims, goes out, and comes back on before I can bolt to my feet.

“Don’t freak,” the girl says sweetly. “It happens now and then.”

“How many nows and how many thens?”

“It never stays dark more than a couple seconds. Besides, I’ve got a flashlight, you’ve got a gun.”

As I am not one to unnecessarily frighten children and as I wish not to further frighten myself, I refrain from suggesting that what comes for us in the dark might find my pistol as unimpressive as her mini flashlight.

“Anyway,” she says, “they closed Wyvern after the end of the Cold War, before I was born. People say there were secret projects at Wyvern, new weapons, experiments.”

Looking at the mummified creature, I ask, “What experiments?”

“No one knows for sure. Weird stuff. Maybe messing around with genes, crap like that. Some say there’s still something going on there, even though it’s officially closed.”

A bass electronic noise pulses along the hall, a *whummm-whummm-whummm* that seems to stir the marrow in my bones.

“That happens sometimes, too,” the girl says. “I don’t know what it is. Don’t worry about it. Nothing ever happens after it.”

I look toward the sealed doors she has been unable to open. “You think this connects with ... someplace in Wyvern?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a space-warp shortcut to Disney World. Anyway, Dr. Hiskott is sick when he checks into the motor court. He seems exhausted, confused, his hands shaking. My aunt Lois registers him. When he takes his driver’s license from his wallet, he scatters a bunch of cards on the counter. Aunt Lois helps gather them up. She says one was a photo ID for Fort Wyvern. Before she married my uncle Greg, back when Wyvern was still open, she worked there.”

“Why would he still carry a card years after the place closed?”

“Yeah, why?”

I don’t have to be a mentalist to read, in her direct green gaze, that we both know the answer to my question.

“Hiskott stays in his cottage three days, won’t let the maid change the linens or clean. And then he wasn’t just Dr. Hiskott anymore. He was ... something else, and he took control.”

The electronic sound comes again, a longer series of notes than before: *Whummm-whummm-whummm-whummm-whummm...*

Although shriveled, shrunken, mummified, and long dead, the bony fingers of Orc’s left hand tap the floor, making a rattle like dancing dice, and from its gaping mouth comes an eager keening.

The lights flutter and go out.

TO BE CONTINUED in *Odd Interlude #2*, on sale June 18, 2012

BY DEAN KOONTZ

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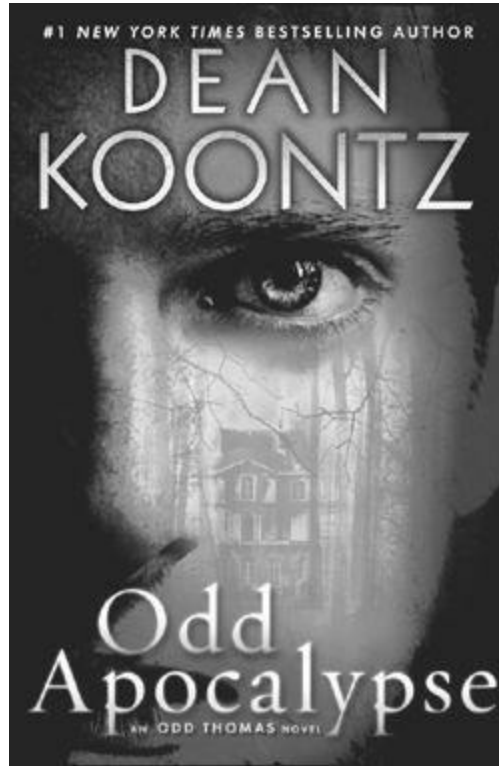
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ONE

Near sunset of my second full day as a guest in Roseland, crossing the immense lawn between the main house and the eucalyptus grove, I halted and pivoted, warned by instinct. Racing toward me, the great black stallion was as mighty a horse as I had ever seen. Earlier, in a book of breeds, I had identified it as a Friesian. The blonde who rode him wore a white nightgown.

As silent as any spirit, the woman urged the horse forward, faster. On hooves that made no sound, the steed ran *through* me with no effect.

I have certain talents. In addition to being a pretty good short-order cook, I have an occasional prophetic dream. And in the waking world, I sometimes see the spirits of the lingering dead who, for various reasons, are reluctant to move on to the Other Side.

This long-dead horse and rider, now only spirits in our world, knew that no one but I could see them. After appearing to me twice the previous day and once this morning, but at a distance, the woman seemed to have decided to get my attention in an aggressive fashion.

Mount and mistress raced around me in a wide arc. I turned to follow them, and they cantered toward me once more but then halted. The stallion reared over me, silently slashing the air with the hooves of its forelegs, nostrils flared, eyes rolling, a creature of such immense power that I stumbled backward even though I knew that it was as immaterial as a dream.

Spirits are solid and warm to my touch, as real to me in that way as is anyone alive. But I am not solid to them, and they can neither ruffle my hair nor strike a death blow at me.

Because my sixth sense complicates my existence, I try otherwise to keep my life simple. I have fewer possessions than a monk. I have no time or peace to build a career as a fry cook or as anything else. I never plan for the future, but wander into it with a smile on my face, hope in my heart, and the hair up on the nape of my neck.

Bareback on the Friesian, the barefoot beauty wore white silk and white lace and wild red ribbons of blood both on her gown and in her long blond hair, though I could see no wound. Her nightgown was rucked up to her thighs, and her knees pressed against the stallion's heaving flanks. In her left hand, she twined a fistful of the horse's mane, as if even in death she must hold fast to her mount to keep their spirits joined.

If spurning a gift weren't ungrateful, I would at once return my supernatural sight. I would be content to spend my days whipping up omelets that make you groan with pleasure and pancakes so fluffy that the slightest breeze might float them off your plate.

Every talent is unearned, however, and with it comes a solemn obligation to use it as fully and as wisely as possible. If I didn't believe in the miraculous nature of talent and in the sacred duty of the recipient, by now I would have gone so insane that I'd qualify for numerous high government positions.

As the stallion danced on its hind legs, the woman reached out with her right arm and pointed down at me, as if to say that she knew I saw her and that she had a message to convey to me. Her lovely face was grim with determination, and those cornflower-blue eyes that were not bright with life were nonetheless bright with anguish.

When she dismounted, she didn't drop to the ground but instead floated off the horse and almost seemed to glide across the grass to me. The blood faded from her hair and nightgown, and she manifested as she had looked in life before her fatal wounds, as if she might be concerned that the gore would repel me. I felt her touch when she put one hand to my face, as though she, a ghost, had more difficulty believing in me than I had believing in her.

Behind the woman, the sun melted into the distant sea, and several distinctively shaped clouds glowed like a fleet of ancient warships with their masts and sails ablaze.

As I saw her anguish relent to a tentative hope, I said, "Yes, I can see you. And if you'll let me, I can help you cross over."

She shook her head violently and took a step backward, as if she feared that with some touch or spoken spell I might release her from this world. But I have no such power.

I thought I understood the reason for her reaction. "You were murdered, and before you go from this world, you want to be sure that justice will be done."

She nodded but then shook her head, as if to say, *Yes, but not only that.*

Being more familiar with the deceased than I might wish to be, I can tell you from considerable personal experience that the spirits of the lingering dead don't talk. I don't know why. Even when they have been brutally murdered and are desperate to see their assailants brought to justice, they are unable to convey essential information to me either by phone or face-to-face. Neither do they send text messages. Maybe that's because, given the opportunity, they would reveal something about death and the world beyond that we the living are not meant to know.

Anyway, the dead can be even more frustrating to deal with than are many of the living, which is astonishing when you consider that it's the living who run the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Shadowless in the last direct light of the drowning sun, the Friesian stood with head high, as proud as any patriot before the sight of a beloved flag. But his only flag was the golden hair of his mistress. He grazed no more in this place but reserved his appetite for Elysian fields.

Approaching me again, the blonde stared at me so intensely that I could feel her desperation. She formed a cradle with her arms and rocked it back and forth.

I said, "A baby?"

Yes.

"Your baby?"

She nodded but then shook her head.

Brow furrowed, biting her lower lip, the woman hesitated before holding out one hand, palm down, perhaps four and a half feet above the ground.

Practiced as I am at spirit charades, I figured that she must be indicating the current height of the baby whom she'd once borne, not an infant now but perhaps nine or ten years old. "Not your baby any longer. Your *child.*"

She nodded vigorously.

"Your child still lives?"

Yes.

"Here in Roseland?"

Yes, yes, yes.

Ablaze in the western sky, those ancient warships built of clouds were burning down from fiery orange to bloody red as the heavens slowly darkened toward purple.

When I asked if her child was a girl or a boy, she indicated the latter. Judging by the height she had indicated, I said that he must be nine or ten, and she confirmed my guess.

Although I knew of no children on this estate, I considered the anguish that carved her face, and I asked the most obvious question: “And your son is ... what? In trouble here?”

Yes, yes, yes.

Far to the east of the main house in Roseland, out of sight beyond a hurst of live oaks, was a riding ring bristling with weeds. A half-collapsed ranch fence encircled it.

The stables, however, looked as if they had been built last week. Curiously, all the stalls were spotless; not one piece of straw or a single cobweb could be found, no dust, as though the place was thoroughly scrubbed on a regular basis. Judging by that tidiness, and by a smell as crisp and pure as that of a winter day after a snowfall, no horses had been kept there in decades; evidently, the woman in white had been dead a long time.

How then could her child be only nine or ten?

Some spirits are exhausted or at least taxed by lengthy contact, and they fade away for hours or days before they renew their power to manifest. This woman seemed to have a strong will that would maintain her apparition. But suddenly, as the air shimmered and a strange sour-yellow light flooded across the land, she and the stallion—which perhaps had been killed in the same event that claimed the life of his mistress—were gone. They didn’t fade or wither from the edges toward the center, as some other displaced souls occasionally did, but vanished in the instant that the light changed.

Precisely when the red dusk became yellow, a wind sprang out of the west, lashing the eucalyptus grove far behind me, rustling through the California live oaks to the south, and blustering my hair into my eyes.

I looked into a sky where the sun had not quite yet gone down, as if some celestial timekeeper had wound the cosmic clock backward a few minutes.

That impossibility was exceeded by another. Yellow from horizon to horizon, without the grace of a single cloud, the heavens were ribboned with what appeared to be high-altitude rivers of smoke or soot. Gray currents streaked through with black. Moving at tremendous velocity. They widened, narrowed, serpented, sometimes merged, but came apart again.

I had no way of knowing what those rivers were, but the sight strummed a dark chord of intuition. I suspected that high above me raced torrents of ashes, soot, and fine debris that had once been cities, metropolises pulverized by explosions unprecedented in power and number, then vomited high into the atmosphere, caught and held in orbit by the jet stream, by the *many* jet streams of a war-transformed troposphere.

My waking visions are even rarer than my prophetic dreams. When one afflicts me, I am aware that it’s an internal event, occurring only in my mind. But this spectacle of wind and baleful light and horrific patterns in the sky was no vision. It was as real as a kick in the groin.

Clenched like a fist, my heart pounded, pounded, as across the yellow vault came a flock of creatures like nothing I had seen in flight before. Their true nature was not easily discerned. They were larger than eagles but seemed more like bats, many hundreds of them, incoming from the northwest, descending as they approached. As my heart pounded harder, it seemed that my reason must be knocking to be let out so that the madness of this scene could fully invade me.

Be assured that I am *not* insane, neither as a serial killer is insane nor in the sense that a man is insane who wears a colander as a hat to prevent the CIA from controlling his mind. I dislike hats of

any kind, though I have nothing against colanders properly used.

I *have* killed more than once, but always in self-defense or to protect the innocent. Such killing cannot be called murder. If you think that it is murder, you've led a sheltered life, and I envy you.

Unarmed and greatly outnumbered by the incoming swarm, not sure if they were intent upon destroying me or oblivious of my existence, I had no illusions that self-defense might be possible. I turned and ran down the long slope toward the eucalyptus grove that sheltered the guesthouse where I was staying.

The impossibility of my predicament didn't inspire the briefest hesitation. Now within two months of my twenty-second birthday, I had been marinated for most of my life in the impossible, and I knew that the true nature of the world was weirder than any bizarre fabric that *anyone's* mind might weave from the warp and weft of imagination's loom.

As I raced eastward, breaking into a sweat as much from fear as from exertion, behind and above me arose the shrill cries of the flock and then the leathery flapping of their wings. Daring to glance back, I saw them rocking through the turbulent wind, their eyes as yellow as the hideous sky. They funneled toward me as though some master to which they answered had promised to work a dark version of the miracle of loaves and fishes, making of me an adequate meal for these multitudes.

When the air shimmered and the yellow light was replaced by red, I stumbled, fell, and rolled onto my back. Raising my hands to ward off the ravenous horde, I found the sky familiar and nothing winging through it except a pair of shore birds in the distance.

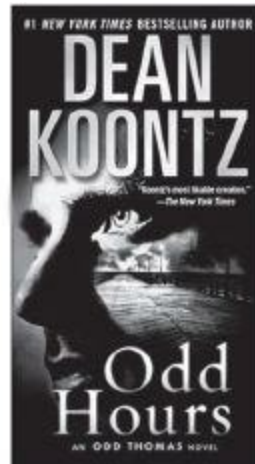
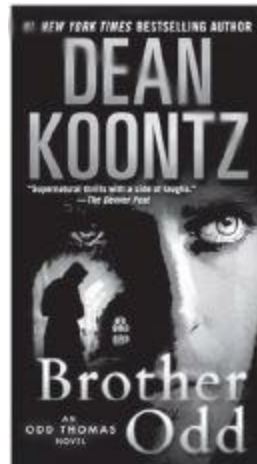
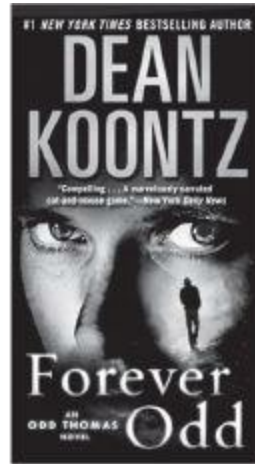
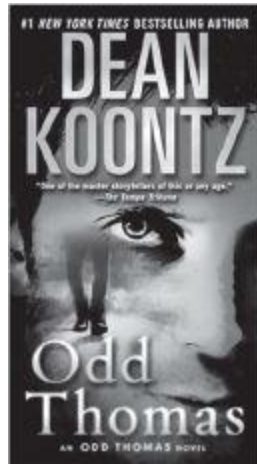
I was back in the Roseland where the sun had set, where the sky was largely purple, and where the once-blazing galleons in the air had burned down to sullen red.

Gasping for breath, I got to my feet and watched for a moment as the celestial sea turned black and the last embers of the cloud ships sank into the rising stars.

Although I was not afraid of the night, prudence argued that I would not be wise to linger in it. I continued toward the eucalyptus grove.

The transformed sky and the winged menace, as well as the spirits of the woman and her horse, had given me something to think about. Considering the unusual nature of my life, I need not worry that, when it comes to food for thought, I will ever experience famine.

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