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STEPHEN KING

THE BAZAAR OF BAD DREAMS

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Author’s Note

Some of these stories have been previously published, but that doesn’t mean they were done then, or even that they’re done now. Until a writer either retires or dies, the work is not finished; it can always use another polish and a few more revisions. There’s also a bunch of new ones. Something else I want you to know: how glad I am, Constant Reader, that we’re both still here. Cool, isn’t it?

—SK

I shoot from the hip and keep a stiff upper lip.

—AC/DC

Introduction

I’ve made some things for you, Constant Reader; you see them laid out before you in the moonlight. But before you look at the little handcrafted treasures I have for sale, let’s talk about them for a bit, shall we? It won’t take long. Here, sit down beside me. And do come a little closer. I don’t bite.

Except . . . we’ve known each other for a very long time, and I suspect you know that’s not entirely true.

Is it?

You’d be surprised—at least, I think you would be—at how many people ask me why I still write short stories. The reason is pretty simple: writing them makes me happy, because I was built to entertain. I can’t play the guitar very well, and I can’t tap-dance at all, but I can do this. So I do.

I’m a novelist by nature, I will grant you that, and I have a particular liking for the long ones that create an immersive experience for writer and reader, where the fiction has a chance to become a world that’s almost real. When a long book succeeds, the writer and reader are not just having an affair; they are married. When I get a letter from a reader who says he or she was sorry when The Stand or 11/22/63 came to an end, I feel that book has been a success.
But there’s something to be said for a shorter, more intense experience. It can be invigorating, sometimes even shocking, like a waltz with a stranger you will never see again, or a kiss in the dark, or a beautiful curio for sale laid out on a cheap blanket at a street bazaar. And, yes, when my stories are collected, I always feel like a street vendor, one who sells only at midnight. I spread my assortment out, inviting the reader—that’s you—to come and take your pick. But I always add the proper caveat: be careful, my dear, because some of these items are dangerous. They are the ones with bad dreams hidden inside, the ones you can’t stop thinking about when sleep is slow to come and you wonder why the closet door is open, when you know perfectly well that you shut it.

II

If I said I always enjoyed the strict discipline shorter works of fiction impose, I’d be lying. Short stories require a kind of acrobatic skill that takes a lot of tiresome practice. Easy reading is the product of hard writing, some teachers say, and it’s true. Miscues that can be overlooked in a novel become glaringly obvious in a short story. Strict discipline is necessary. The writer has to rein in his impulse to follow certain entrancing side paths and stick to the main route.

I never feel the limitations of my talent so keenly as I do when writing short fiction. I have struggled with feelings of inadequacy, a soul-deep fear that I will be unable to bridge the gap between a great idea and the realization of that idea’s potential. What that comes down to, in plain English, is that the finished product never seems quite as good as the splendid idea that rose from the subconscious one day, along with the excited thought, Ah man! I gotta write this right away!

Sometimes the result is pretty good, though. And every once in awhile, the result is even better than the original concept. I love it when that happens. The real challenge is getting into the damned thing, and I believe that’s why so many would-be writers with great ideas never actually pick up the pen or start tapping away at the keys. All too often, it’s like trying to start a car on a cold day. At first the motor doesn’t even crank, it only groans. But if you keep at it (and if the battery doesn’t die), the engine starts... runs rough... and then smooths out.

There are stories here that came in a flash of inspiration (“Summer Thunder” was one of those), and had to be written at once, even if it meant interrupting work on a novel. There are others, like “Mile 81,” that have waited their turn patiently for
decades. Yet the strict focus needed to create a good short story is always the same.
Writing novels is a little like playing baseball, where the game goes on for as long as it needs to, even if that means twenty innings. Writing short stories is more like playing basketball or football: you’re competing against the clock as well as the other team.

When it comes to writing fiction, long or short, the learning curve never ends. I may be a Professional Writer to the IRS when I file my tax return, but in creative terms, I’m still an amateur, still learning my craft. We all are. Every day spent writing is a learning experience, and a battle to do something new. Phoning it in is not allowed. One cannot increase one’s talent—that comes with the package—but it is possible to keep talent from shrinking. At least, I like to think so.

And hey! I still love it.

III

So here are the goods, my dear Constant Reader. Tonight I’m selling a bit of everything—a monster that looks like a car (shades of Christine), a man who can kill you by writing your obituary, an e-reader that accesses parallel worlds, and that all-time favorite, the end of the human race. I like to sell this stuff when the rest of the vendors have long since gone home, when the streets are deserted and a cold rind of moon floats over the canyons of the city. That’s when I like to spread my blanket and lay out my goods.

*That’s enough talk. Perhaps you’d like to buy something, now, yes? Everything you see is handcrafted, and while I love each and every item, I’m happy to sell them, because I made them especially for you. Feel free to examine them, but please be careful.*

*The best of them have teeth.*

August 6, 2014

When I was nineteen years old and attending the University of Maine, I’d drive from Orono to the little town of Durham, which is usually represented as Harlow in my books. I made this trip every three weekends or so, to see my girlfriend . . . and, coincidentally, my mother. I drove a ’61 Ford station wagon: six in a row for more go and three on the tree (if you don’t know, ask your dad). The car was a hand-me-down from my brother David.
I-95 was less traveled in those days, and nearly deserted for long stretches once Labor Day passed and the summer people went back to their workaday lives. No cell phones, either, of course. If you broke down, your choices were two: fix it yourself or wait for some good Samaritan to stop and give you a lift to the nearest garage.

During those 150-mile drives, I conceived a special horror of Mile 85, which was in the absolute nowhere between Gardiner and Lewiston. I became convinced that if my old wagon did shit the bed, it would do so there. I could visualize it hunkered in the breakdown lane, lonely and abandoned. Would someone stop to make sure the driver was okay? That he was not, perchance, stretched out on the front seat, dying of a heart attack? Of course they would. Good Samaritans are everywhere, especially in the boondocks. People who live in the boonies take care of their own.

But, I thought, suppose my old station wagon was an imposter? A monstrous trap for the unwary? I thought that would make a good story, and it did. I called it “Mile 85.” It was never rewritten, let alone published, because I lost it. Back then I was dropping acid regularly, and I lost all sorts of stuff. Including, for short periods, my mind.

Fast-forward nearly forty years. Although Maine’s long stretch of I-95 is more heavily traveled in the twenty-first century, traffic is still light after Labor Day and budget cuts have forced the state to close many of the rest areas. The combined gas station and Burger King (where I consumed many Whoppers) near the Lewiston exit was one of those shut down. It stood abandoned, growing sadder and seedier behind the DO NOT ENTER barriers marking its entrance and exit ramps. Hard winters had buckled the parking lot, and weeds had sprouted through the cracks.

One day as I passed it, I recalled my old lost story and decided to write it again. Because the abandoned rest area was a little farther south than the dreaded Mile 85, I had to change the title. Everything else is pretty much the same, I think. That turnpike oasis may be gone—as are the old Ford wagon, my old girlfriend, and many of my old bad habits—but the story remains. It’s one of my favorites.

Mile 81

1. PETE SIMMONS ('07 Huffy)

“You can’t come,” his older brother said.
George spoke in a low voice, even though the rest of his friends—a neighborhood group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who styled themselves the Rip-Ass Raiders—were up at the end of the block, waiting for him. Not very patiently. “It’s too dangerous.”

Pete said, “I’m not afraid.” He spoke stoutly enough, although he was afraid, a little. George and his friends were headed up to the sandpit behind the bowling alley. There they’d play a game Normie Therriault had invented. Normie was the leader of the Rip-Ass Raiders, and the game was called Paratroops from Hell. There was a rutted track leading up to the edge of the gravel pit, and the game was to ride your bike along it at full speed, yelling “Raiders rule!” at the top of your lungs and bailing from the seat of your bike as you went over. The usual drop was ten feet or so, and the approved landing area was soft, but sooner or later someone would land on gravel instead of sand and probably break an arm or an ankle. Even Pete knew that (although he sort of understood why it added to the attraction). Then the parents would find out and that would be the end of Paratroops from Hell. For now, however, the game—played without helmets, of course—continued.

George knew better than to allow his brother to play, however; he was supposed to be taking care of Pete while their parents were at work. If Pete wrecked his Huffy at the gravel pit, George would likely be grounded for a week. If his little brother broke an arm, it would be for a month. And if—God forbid!—it was his neck, George guessed he might be whiling away the hours in his bedroom until he went to college.

Besides, he loved the little cock-knocker.

“Just hang out here,” George said. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Hang out with who?” Pete asked. It was spring vacation, and all of his friends, the ones his mother would have called “age appropriate,” seemed to be somewhere else. A couple of them had gone to Disney World in Orlando, and when Pete thought of this, his heart filled with envy and jealousy—a vile brew, but strangely tasty.

“Just hang out,” George said. “Go to the store, or something.” He scrounged in his pocket and came out with a pair of crumpled Washingtons. “Here’s some dough.”

Pete looked at them. “Jeez, I’ll buy a Corvette. Maybe two.”

“Hurry up, Simmons, or we’ll go withoutcha!” Normie yelled.
“Coming!” George shouted back. Then, low, to Pete: “Take the money and don’t be a boogersnot.”

Pete took the money. “I even brought my magnifying glass,” he said. “I was gonna show em—”

“They’ve all seen that baby trick a thousand times,” George said, but when he saw the corners of Pete’s mouth tuck down, he tried to soften the blow. “Besides, look at the sky, numbo. You can’t start fires with a magnifying glass on a cloudy day. Hang out. We’ll play computer Battleship or something when I come back.”

“Okay, chickenshit!” Normie yelled. “Seeya later, masturbator!”

“I gotta go,” George said. “Do me a favor and don’t get in trouble. Stay in the neighborhood.”

“You’ll probably break your spine and be fuckin paralyzed for life,” Pete said . . . then hastily spat between his forked fingers to take the curse off. “Good luck!” he shouted after his brother. “Jump the farthest!”

George waved one hand in acknowledgment, but didn’t look back. He stood on the pedals of his own bike, a big old Schwinn that Pete admired but couldn’t ride (he’d tried once and wiped out halfway down the driveway). Pete watched him put on speed as he raced up this block of suburban houses in Auburn, catching up with his homies.

Then Pete was alone.

• • •

He took his magnifying glass out of his saddlebag and held it over his forearm, but there was no spot of light and no heat. He looked glumly up at the low-hanging clouds and put the glass back. It was a good one, a Richforth. He’d gotten it last Christmas, to help with his ant farm science project.

“It’ll wind up in the garage, gathering dust,” his father had said, but although the ant farm project had concluded in February (Pete and his partner, Tammy Witham, had gotten an A), Pete hadn’t tired of the magnifying glass yet. He particularly enjoyed charring holes in pieces of paper in the backyard.

But not today. Today, the afternoon stretched ahead like a desert. He could go home and watch TV, but his father had put a block on all the interesting channels
when he discovered George had been DVR-ing *Boardwalk Empire*, which was full of old-time gangstas and bare titties. There was a similar block on Pete’s computer, and he hadn’t figured a workaround yet, although he would; it was only a matter of time.

So?

“So what,” he said in a low voice, and began to pedal slowly toward the end of Murphy Street. “So . . . fuckin . . . what.”

Too little to play *Paratroops from Hell*, because it was too dangerous. How sucky. He wished he could think of something that would show George and Normie and all of the Raiders that even little kids could face dan—

The idea came to him then, just like that. He could explore the abandoned rest area. Pete didn’t think the big kids knew about it, because it was a kid Pete’s own age, Craig Gagnon, who’d told him about it. He said he’d been up there with a couple of other kids, ten-year-olds, last fall. Of course the whole thing might have been a lie, but Pete didn’t think so. Craig had given too many details, and he wasn’t the kind of kid who was good at making things up. Sort of a dimbulb, actually.

With a destination in mind, Pete began to pedal faster. At the end of Murphy Street he banked left onto Hyacinth. There was no one on the sidewalk, and no cars. He heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner from the Rossignols’, but otherwise everyone might have been sleeping or dead. Pete supposed they were actually at work, like his own parents.

He swept right onto Rosewood Terrace, passing the yellow sign reading DEAD END. There were only a dozen or so houses on Rosewood. At the end of the street was a chainlink fence. Beyond it was a thick tangle of shrubbery and scraggly second-growth trees. As Pete drew closer to the chainlink (and the totally unnecessary sign mounted on it reading NOT A THROUGH STREET), he stopped pedaling and coasted.

He understood—vaguely—that although he thought of George and his Raider pals as Big Kids (and certainly that was how the Raiders thought of themselves), they weren’t *really* Big Kids. The true Big Kids were badass teenagers who had driver’s licenses and girlfriends. True Big Kids went to high school. They liked to drink, smoke pot, listen to heavy metal or hip-hop, and suck major face with their girlfriends.

Hence, the abandoned rest area.
Pete got off his Huffy and looked around to see if he was being observed. There was nobody. Even the annoying Crosskill twins, who liked to jump rope (in tandem) all over the neighborhood when there was no school, were not in evidence. A miracle, in Pete’s opinion.

Not too far away, Pete could hear the steady whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of cars on I-95, headed south to Portland or north to Augusta.

Even if Craig was telling the truth, they probably fixed the fence, Pete thought. That’s the way today’s going.

But when he bent close, he could see that although the fence looked whole, it really wasn’t. Someone (probably a Big Kid who had long since joined the boring ranks of Young Adults) had clipped the links in a straight line from top to bottom. Pete took another look around, then laced his hands in the metal diamonds and pushed. He expected resistance, but there was none. The cut piece of chainlink swung open like a farmyard gate. The Really Big Kids had been using it, all right. Booya.

It stood to reason, when you thought about it. Maybe they had drivers’ licenses, but the entrance and exit to the Mile 81 rest area were now blocked off by those big orange barrels the highway crews used. Grass was growing up through the crumbling pavement in the deserted parking lot. Pete had seen this for himself thousands of times, because the schoolbus used I-95 to go the three exits from Laurelwood, where he got picked up, to Sabattus Street, home to Auburn Elementary School No. 3, also known as Alcatraz.

He could remember when the rest area had still been open. There had been a gas station, a Burger King, a TCBY, and a Sbarro’s. Then it got closed down. Pete’s dad said there were too many of those rest areas on the turnpike, and the state couldn’t afford to keep them all open.

Pete rolled his bike through the gap in the chainlink, then carefully pushed the makeshift gate back until the diamond shapes matched up and the fence looked whole again. He walked toward the wall of bushes, being careful not to run the Huffy’s tires over any broken glass (there was a lot on this side of the fence). He began looking for what he knew must be here; the cut fence said it had to be.

And there it was, marked by stamped cigarette butts and a few discarded beer and soda bottles: a path leading deeper into the undergrowth. Still pushing his bike, Pete
followed it. The high bushes swallowed him up. Behind him, Rosewood Terrace dreamed through another overcast spring day.

It was as if Pete Simmons had never been there at all.

• • •

The path between the chainlink fence and the Mile 81 rest area was, by Pete’s estimation, about half a mile long, and there were Big Kid signposts all along the way: half a dozen small brown bottles (two with snot-caked coke spoons still attached), empty snack bags, a pair of lace-trimmed panties hanging from a thornbush (it looked to Pete like they’d been there for awhile, like maybe fifty years), and—jackpot!—a half-full bottle of Popov vodka with the screw cap still on. After some interior debate, Pete put this into his saddlebag along with his magnifying glass, the latest issue of *Locke & Key*, and a few Double Stuf Oreos in a Baggie.

He pushed his bike across a sluggish little stream, and bingo-boingo, here he was at the back of the rest area. There was another chainlink fence, but this one was also cut, and Pete slipped right through. The path continued through high grass to the back parking lot. Where, he supposed, the delivery trucks used to pull up. Close to the building he could see darker rectangles on the pavement where the Dumpsters had been. Pete lowered the kickstand of his Huffy and parked it on one of these.

His heart was thumping as he thought about what came next. *Breaking and entering, sugarbear. You could go to jail for that.* But was it breaking and entering if he found an open door, or a loose board over one of the windows? He supposed it would still be entering, but was entering all by itself a crime?

In his heart he knew it was, but he guessed that without the breaking part, it wouldn’t mean jail time. And after all, hadn’t he come here to take a risk? Something he could brag about later to Normie and George and the other Rip-Ass Raiders?

And okay, he was scared, but at least he wasn’t bored anymore.

He tried the door with the fading EMPLOYEES ONLY sign on it, and found it not only locked but *seriously* locked—no give at all. There were two windows beside it, but he could tell just by looking that they were boarded down tight. Then he remembered the chainlink fence that looked whole but wasn’t, and tested the boards anyway. No good. In a way, it was a relief. He could be off the hook if he wanted to be.
Only . . . the Really Big Kids *did* go in there. He was sure of it. So how did they do it? From the front? In full view of the turnpike? Maybe so, if they came at night, but Pete had no intention of checking it out in broad daylight. Not when any passing motorist with a cell phone could dial 911 and say, “Just thought you might like to know that there’s a little kid playing Freddy Fuckaround at the Mile 81 rest area. You know, where the Burger King used to be?”

*I’d rather break my arm playing Paratroops from Hell than have to call my folks from the Gray State police barracks. In fact, I’d rather break both arms and get my dick caught in the zipper of my jeans.*

Well, maybe not that.

He wandered toward the loading dock, and there, once again: jackpot. There were dozens of stamped-out cigarette butts at the foot of the concrete island, plus a few more of those tiny brown bottles surrounding their king: a dark green NyQuil bottle. The surface of the dock, where the big semis backed up to unload, was eye-high to Pete, but the cement was crumbling and there were plenty of footholds for an agile kid in Chuck Taylor High Tops. Pete raised his arms over his head, snagged fingerholds in the dock’s pitted surface . . . and the rest, as they say, is history.

On the dock, in faded red, someone had sprayed EDWARD LITTLE ROCKS, RED EDDIES RULE. *Not true,* Pete thought. *Rip-Ass Raiders rule.* Then he looked around from his current high perch, grinned, and said, “Actually, *I* rule.” And standing up here above the empty back lot of the rest area, he felt that he did. For the time being, anyway.

He climbed back down—just to make sure it was no problem—and then remembered the stuff in his saddlebag. Supplies, in case he decided to spend the afternoon here, exploring and shit. He debated what to bring, then decided to unstrap the saddlebag and take everything. Even the magnifying glass might come in handy. A vague fantasy began to form in his brain: boy detective discovers a murder victim in a deserted rest area, and solves the crime before the police even know a crime has been committed. He could see himself explaining to the drop-jawed Raiders that it had actually been pretty easy. Elementary, my dear fucksticks.

*Bullshit, of course, but it would be fun to pretend.*
He lifted his bag onto the loading dock (being especially careful on account of the half-full vodka bottle), then climbed back up. The corrugated metal door leading inside was at least twelve feet high and secured at the bottom with not one but two humungous padlocks, but there was a human-sized door set into it. Pete tried the knob. It wouldn’t turn, nor would the human-sized door open when he pushed and pulled, but there was some give. Quite a lot, actually. He looked down and saw that a wooden wedge had been pushed under the bottom of the door; a totally dope precaution if he’d ever seen one. On the other hand, what more could you expect from kids who were stoned on coke and cough syrup?

Pete pulled the wedge, and this time when he tried the inset door, it creaked open.

• • •

The big front windows of what had been the Burger King were covered with chickenwire instead of boards, so Pete had no trouble seeing what there was to see. All the eating tables and booths were gone from the restaurant part, and the kitchen part was just a dim hole with some wires sticking out of the walls and some of the ceiling tiles hanging down, but the place was not exactly unfurnished.

In the center, surrounded by folding chairs, two old card tables had been pushed together. On this double-wide surface were half a dozen filthy tin ashtrays, several decks of greasy Bicycle cards, and a caddy of poker chips. The walls were decorated with twenty or thirty magazine gatefolds. Pete inspected these with great interest. He knew about pussies, had glimpsed more than a few on HBO and CinemaSpank (before his folks got wise and blocked the premium cable channels), but these were shaved pussies. Pete wasn’t sure what the big deal was—to him they looked sort of oogy—but he supposed he might get with the program when he was older. Besides, the bare titties made up for it. Bare titties were fuckin awesome.

In the corner three filthy mattresses had been pushed together like the card tables, but Pete was old enough to know it wasn’t poker that was played here.

“Let me see your pussy!” he commanded one of the Hustler girls on the wall, and giggled. Then he said, “Let me see your shaved pussy!” and giggled harder. He sort of wished Craig Gagnon was here, even though Craig was a dweeb. They could have laughed about the shaved pussies together.
He began to wander around, still snorting small carbonated bubbles of laughter. It was dank in the rest area, but not actually cold. The smell was the worst part, a combination of cigarette smoke, pot smoke, old booze, and creeping rot in the walls. Pete thought he could also smell rotting meat. Probably from sandwiches purchased at Rosselli’s or Subway.

Mounted on the wall beside the counter where people once ordered Whoppers and Whalers, Pete discovered another poster. This one was of Justin Bieber when the Beeb had been maybe sixteen. The Beeb’s teeth had been blacked out, and someone had added a Notzi swat-sticker tattoo to one cheek. Red-ink devil horns sprouted from the Beeb’s moptop. There were darts sticking out of his face. Magic Markered on the wall above the poster was MOUTH 15 PTS, NOSE 25 PTS, EYES 30 PTS ITCH.

Pete pulled out the darts and backed across the big empty room until he came to a black mark on the floor. Printed here was BEEBER LINE. Pete stood behind it and shot the six darts ten or twelve times. On his last try, he got a hundred and twenty-five points. He thought that was pretty good. He imagined George and Normie Therriault applauding.

He went over to one of the mesh-covered windows, staring out at the empty concrete islands where the gas pumps used to be, and at the traffic beyond. Light traffic. He supposed that when summer came it would once more be bumper-to-bumper with tourists and summer people, unless his dad was right and the price of gas went to seven bucks a gallon and everybody stayed home.

Now what? He’d played darts, he’d looked at enough shaved pussies to last him . . . well, maybe not a lifetime but at least a few months, there were no murders to solve, so now what?

Vodka, he decided. That was what came next. He’d try a few sips just to prove he could, and so future brags would have that vital ring of truth. Then, he supposed, he would pack up his shit and go back to Murphy Street. He would do his best to make his adventure sound interesting—thrilling, even—but in truth, this place wasn’t such of a much. Just a place where the Really Big Kids could come to play cards and make out with girls and not get wet when it rained.

But booze . . . that was something.

He took his saddlebag over to the mattresses and sat down (being careful to avoid the stains, of which there were many). He took out the vodka bottle and studied it
with a certain grim fascination. At ten-going-on-eleven, he had no particular longing to sample adult pleasures. The year before he had hawked one of his grandfather’s cigarettes and smoked it behind the 7-Eleven. Smoked half of it, anyway. Then he had leaned over and spewed his lunch between his sneakers. He had obtained an interesting but not very valuable piece of information that day: beans and franks didn’t look great when they went into your mouth, but at least they tasted good. When they came back out, they looked fucking horrible and tasted worse.

His body’s instant and emphatic rejection of that American Spirit suggested to him that booze would be no better, and probably worse. But if he didn’t drink at least some, any brag would be a lie. And his brother George had lie-radar, at least when it came to Pete.

*I’ll probably puke again,* he thought, then said: “Good news is I won’t be the first in this dump.”

That made him laugh again. He was still smiling when he unscrewed the cap and held the mouth of the bottle to his nose. Some smell, but not much. Maybe it was water instead of vodka, and the smell was just a leftover. He raised the mouth of the bottle to his mouth, sort of hoping that was true and sort of hoping it wasn’t. He didn’t expect much, and he certainly didn’t want to get drunk and maybe break his neck trying to climb back down from the loading dock, but he was curious. His parents *loved* this stuff.

“Dares go first,” he said for no reason at all, and took a small sip.

It wasn’t water, that was for sure. It tasted like hot, light oil. He swallowed mostly in surprise. The vodka trailed heat down his throat, then exploded in his stomach.

“Holy Jeezum!” Pete yelled.

Tears sprang into his eyes. He held the bottle out at arm’s length, as if it had bitten him. But the heat in his stomach was already subsiding, and he felt pretty much okay. Not drunk, and not like he was going to puke, either. He tried another little sip, now that he knew what to expect. Heat in the mouth . . . heat in the throat . . . and then, boom in the stomach. Actually kind of cool.

Now he felt a tingling in his arms and hands. Maybe his neck, too. Not the pins-and-needles sensation you got when a limb went to sleep, but more like something was waking up.
Pete raised the bottle to his lips again, then lowered it. There was more to worry about than falling off the loading dock or crashing his bike on the way home (he wondered briefly if you could get arrested for drunk biking and guessed you could). Having a few swigs of vodka so you could brag on it was one thing, but if he drank enough to get loaded, his mother and father would know when they came home. It would only take one look. Trying to act sober wouldn’t help. They drank, their friends drank, and sometimes they drank too much. They would know the signs.

Also, there was the dreaded HANGOVER to consider. Pete and George had seen their mom and dad dragging around the house with red eyes and pale faces on a good many Saturday and Sunday mornings. They took vitamin pills, they told you to turn the TV down, and music was absolutely verboten. The HANGOVER looked like the absolute opposite of fun.

Still, maybe one more sip might not hurt.

Pete took a slightly larger swallow and shouted, “Zoom, we have liftoff!” This made him laugh. He felt a little light-headed, but it was a totally pleasant feeling. Smoking he didn’t get. Drinking, he did.

He got up, staggered a little, caught his balance, and laughed some more. “Jump into that fucking sandpit all you want, sugarbears,” he told the empty restaurant. “I’m fuckin stinko, and fuckin stinko is better.” This was very funny, and he laughed hard.

Am I really stinko? On just three sips?

He didn’t think so, but he was definitely high. No more. Enough was enough. “Drink responsibly,” he told the empty restaurant, and laughed.

He’d hang out here for awhile and wait for it to wear off. An hour should do it, maybe two. Until three o’clock, say. He didn’t have a wristwatch, but he’d be able to tell three o’clock from the chimes of St. Joseph’s, which was only a mile or so away. Then he’d leave, first hiding the vodka (for possible further research) and putting the wedge back under the door. His first stop when he got back to the neighborhood was going to be the 7-Eleven, where he’d buy some of that really strong Teaberry gum to take the smell of the booze off his breath. He’d heard kids say vodka was the thing to steal out of your parents’ liquor cabinet because it had no smell, but Pete was now a wiser child than he’d been an hour ago.
“Besides,” he told the hollowed-out restaurant in a lecturely tone, “I bet my eyes are red, just like Dad’s when he has too many martinis.” He paused. That wasn’t quite right, but what the fuck.

He gathered up the darts, went back to the Beeber Line, and shot them. He missed Justin with all but one, and this struck Pete as the most hilarious thing of all. He wondered if the Beeb could have a hit with a song called “My Baby Shaves Her Pussy,” and this struck him so funny that he laughed until he had to bend over with his hands on his knees.

When the laughter passed, he wiped double snot-hangers from his nose, flicked them onto the floor (there goes your Good Restaurant rating, he thought, sorry, Burger King), and then trudged back to the Beeber Line. He had even worse luck the second time. He wasn’t seeing double or anything, he just couldn’t nail the Beeb.

Also, he felt a little sick, after all. Not much, but he was glad he hadn’t tried a fourth sip. “I would have popped my Popov,” he said. He laughed, then uttered a ringing belch that burned coming up. Blick. He left the darts where they were and went back to the mattresses. He thought of using his magnifying glass to see if anything really small was crawling there, and decided he didn’t want to know. He thought about eating some of his Oreos, but was afraid of what they might do to his stomach. It felt, let’s face it, a little tender.

He lay down and laced his hands behind his head. He had heard that when you got really drunk, everything started spinning around. Nothing like that was happening to him, so he guessed he was only a little high, but he wouldn’t mind a nap.

“But not too long.”

No, not too long. Too long would be bad. If he wasn’t home when his folks came home, and if they couldn’t find him, he would be in trouble. Probably George would be, too, for going off without him. The question was, could he wake himself up when the St. Joseph’s chimes struck?

Pete realized, in those last few seconds of consciousness, that he’d just have to hope so. Because he was going.

He closed his eyes.

And slept in the deserted restaurant.
Outside, in the southbound travel lane of I-95, a station wagon of indeterminate make and vintage appeared. It was traveling well below the posted minimum turnpike speed. A fast-moving semi came up behind it and veered into the passing lane, blatting its air horn.

The station wagon, almost coasting now, veered into the entrance lane of the rest area, ignoring the big sign reading CLOSED NO SERVICES NEXT GAS AND FOOD 27 MI. It struck four of the orange barrels blocking the lane, sent them rolling, and came to a stop about seventy yards from the abandoned restaurant building. The driver’s-side door opened, but nobody got out. There were no hey-stupid-your-door’s-open chimes, either. It just hung silently ajar.

If Pete Simmons had been watching instead of snoozing, he wouldn’t have been able to see the driver. The station wagon was splattered with mud, and the windshield was smeared with it. Which was strange, because there had been no rain in northern New England for over a week, and the turnpike was perfectly dry.

The car sat there a little distance up the entrance ramp, under a cloudy April sky. The barrels it had knocked over came to a stop. The driver’s door hung open.

2. DOUG CLAYTON (’09 Prius)

Doug Clayton was an insurance man from Bangor, bound for Portland, where he had a reservation at the Sheraton Hotel. He expected to be there by two o’clock at the latest. That would leave plenty of time for an afternoon nap (a luxury he could rarely afford) before searching out dinner on Congress Street. Tomorrow he would present himself at the Portland Conference Center bright and early, take a nametag, and join four hundred other agents at a conference called Fire, Storm, and Flood: Insuring for Disaster in the Twenty-First Century. As he passed the Mile 82 marker, Doug was closing in on his own personal disaster, but it was nothing the Portland conference would cover.

His briefcase and suitcase were in the backseat. Lying in the passenger bucket was a Bible (King James version; Doug would have no other). Doug was one of four lay preachers at the Church of the Holy Redeemer, and when it was his turn to preach, he liked to call his Bible “the ultimate insurance manual.”

Doug had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior after ten years of drinking that spanned his late teens and most of his twenties. This decade-long spree ended with a wrecked car and thirty days in the Penobscot County Jail. He had gotten down
on his knees in that smelly, coffin-sized cell on his first night there, and he’d gotten down on them every night since.

“Help me get better,” he had prayed that first time, and every time since. It was a simple prayer that had been answered first twofold, then tenfold, then a hundredfold. He thought that in another few years, he would be up to a thousandfold. And the best thing? Heaven was waiting at the end of it all.

His Bible was well-thumbed, because he read it every day. He loved all the stories in it, but the one he loved the best—the one he meditated on most often—was the parable of the Good Samaritan. He had preached on that passage from the Gospel of Luke several times, and the Redeemer congregation had always been generous with their praise afterward, God bless them.

Doug supposed it was because the story was so personal to him. A priest had passed by the robbed and beaten traveler lying at the side of the road; so had a Levite. Then who comes along? A nasty, Jew-hating Samaritan. But that’s the one who helps, nasty Jew-hater or not. He cleanses the traveler’s cuts and scrapes, then binds them up. He loads the traveler on his donkey, and fronts him a room at the nearest inn.

“So which of these three do you think was a neighbor to him who fell among thieves?” Jesus inquires of the hotshot young lawyer who asked him about the requirements for eternal life. And the hotshot, not stupid, replies: “The one who shewed mercy.”

If Doug Clayton had a horror of anything, it was of being like the Levite in that story. Of refusing to help when help was needed and passing by on the other side. So when he saw the muddy station wagon parked a little way up the entrance ramp of the deserted rest area—the downed orange barrier-barrels in front of it, the driver’s door hanging ajar—he hesitated only a moment before flicking on his turn signal and pulling in.

He parked behind the wagon, put on his four-ways, and started to get out. Then he noticed that there appeared to be no license plate on the back of the station wagon . . . although there was so much damn mud it was hard to tell for sure. Doug took his cell phone out of the Prius’s center console and made sure it was on. Being a good Samaritan was one thing; approaching a plateless mongrel of a car without caution was just plain stupid.
He walked toward the wagon with the phone clasped loosely in his left hand. Nope, no plate, he was right about that. He tried to peer through the back window and could see nothing. Too much mud. He walked toward the driver’s-side door, then paused, looking at the car as a whole, frowning. Was it a Ford or a Chevy? Darned if he could tell, and that was strange, because he had to’ve insured thousands of station wagons in his career.

*Customized?* he asked himself. Well, maybe . . . but who would bother to customize a station wagon into something so anonymous?

“Hi, hello? Everything okay?”

He walked toward the door, squeezing the phone a little tighter without being aware of it. He found himself thinking of some movie that had scared the heck out of him as a kid, some haunted house thing. A bunch of teenagers had approached the old deserted house, and when one of them saw the door standing ajar, he’d whispered “Look, it’s open!” to his buddies. You wanted to tell them not to go in there, but of course they did.

*That’s stupid. If there’s someone in that car, he could be hurt.*

Of course the guy might have gone up to the restaurant, maybe looking for a pay phone, but if he was *really* hurt—

“Hello?”

Doug reached for the door handle, then thought better of it and stooped to peer through the opening. What he saw was dismaying. The bench seat was covered with mud; so was the dashboard and the steering wheel. Dark goo dripped from the old-fashioned knobs of the radio, and on the wheel were prints that didn’t look exactly as if hands had made them. The palm prints were awfully big, for one thing, but the finger marks were as narrow as pencils.

“Is someone in there?” He shifted his cell phone to his right hand and took hold of the driver’s door with his left, meaning to swing it wide so he could look into the backseat. “Is someone hur—”

There was a moment to register an ungodly stink, and then his left hand exploded into pain so great it seemed to leap through his entire body, trailing fire and filling all his hollow spaces with agony. Doug didn’t, couldn’t, scream. His throat locked shut
with the sudden shock of it. He looked down and saw that the door handle appeared to have impaled the pad of his palm.

His fingers were barely there. He could only see the stubs, just below the last knuckles where the back of his hand started. The rest had somehow been swallowed by the door. As Doug watched, the third finger broke. His wedding ring fell off and clinked to the pavement.

He could feel something, oh dear God and dear Jesus, something like teeth. They were chewing. The car was eating his hand.

Doug tried to pull back. Blood flew, some against the muddy door, some splattering his slacks. The drops that hit the door disappeared immediately, with a faint sucking sound: *slorp*. For a moment he almost got away. He could see glistening finger bones from which the flesh had been sucked, and had a brief, nightmarish image of chewing on one of the Colonel’s chicken wings. *Get it all before you put that down*, his mother used to say, *the meat’s sweetest closest to the bone*.

Then he was yanked forward again. The driver’s door opened to welcome him: *Hello, Doug, been waiting for you, come on in*. His head connected with the top of the door, and he felt a line of cold across his brow that turned hot as the station wagon’s roofline sliced through his skin.

He made one more effort to get away, dropping his cell phone and pushing at the rear window. The window yielded instead of supporting, then enveloped his hand. He rolled his eyes and saw what had looked like glass now rippling like a pond in a breeze. And why was it rippling? Because it was chewing. Because it was chowing down.

*This is what I get for being a good Sam*—

Then the top of the driver’s door sawed through his skull and slipped smoothly into the brain behind it. Doug Clayton heard a large bright *SNAP*, like a pine knot exploding in a hot fire. Then darkness descended.

A southbound delivery driver glanced over and saw a little green car with its flashers on parked behind a mud-coated station wagon. A man—presumably he belonged to the little green car—appeared to be leaning in the station wagon’s door, talking to the driver. *Breakdown*, the delivery driver thought, and returned his attention to the road. No good Samaritan he.
Doug Clayton was jerked inside as if hands—ones with big palms and pencil-thin fingers—had seized his shirt and pulled him. The station wagon lost its shape and puckered inward, like a mouth tasting something exceptionally sour . . . or exceptionally sweet. From within came a series of overlapping crunches—the sound of a man stamping through dead branches in heavy boots. The wagon stayed puckered for ten seconds or so, looking more like a lumpy clenched fist than a car. Then, with a pouck sound like a tennis ball being smartly struck by a racquet, it popped back into its station wagon shape.

The sun peeked briefly through the clouds, reflecting off the dropped cell phone and making a brief hot circle of light on Doug’s wedding ring. Then it dived back into the cloud cover.

Behind the wagon, the Prius blinked its four-ways. They made a low clocklike sound: Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

A few cars went past, but not many. The two workweeks surrounding Easter are the slowest time of year on the nation’s turnpikes, and afternoon is the second-slowest time of the day; only the hours between midnight and five a.m. are slower.

Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

In the abandoned restaurant, Pete Simmons slept on.

3. JULIANNE VERNON (’05 Dodge Ram)

Julie Vernon didn’t need King James to teach her how to be a good Samaritan. She had grown up in the small town of Readfield, Maine (population 2,400), where neighboring was a way of life, and strangers were also neighbors. Nobody had told her this in so many words; she had learned from her mother, father, and big brothers. They had little to say about such issues, but teaching by example is always the most powerful teaching of all. If you saw a guy lying by the side of the road, it didn’t matter if he was a Samaritan or a Martian. You stopped to help.

Nor had she ever worried much about being robbed, raped, or murdered by someone who was only pretending to need help. When asked for her weight by the school nurse when she was in the fifth grade, Julie had replied proudly, “My dad says I’d dress out around one seventy. Little less if skinned.” Now, at thirty-five, she would have dressed out closer to two eighty, and had no interest in making any man a good wife. She was as gay as old Dad’s hatband, and proud of it. On the back of her
Ram truck were two bumper stickers. One read SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY. The other, a bright pink, opined that GAY IS A HAPPY WORD!

End of this sample Kindle book.
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