

Chad Warner entered the smoky interior of “Ned’s Place” with a mixture of fatigue and anxiety. The house band was playing loud Louisiana bioux music at ear splitting volume.

“Twelve dollars,” the barell-chested door man said in a flat, no nonsense monotone. He looked down at Chad with an obvious air of disdain.

“I’m on the guest list,” Chad yelled over the music. “My name’s Chad. I’m a friend of Leon’s.”

Chad pointed over the right shoulder of the bouncer at the short, thin black man sitting at the bar nursing his drink. Leon was wearing his trademark black leather brimmed hat and dark sunglasses. It always made Chad laugh how much Leon looked like a typical jazz character from a movie.

The bouncer never took his eyes off Chad, fixing him with a cold stare.

“You know, we have a dress code.”

Chad expected this. The manager at this club hated him for some reason. The owner and bartender would ignore every drug addict and drunken degenerate that shuffled into the place but for some reason he took a particular dislike to Chad. He claimed Chad looked “shifty” and was always “fucked up on something.”

He looked down at his wardrobe. Few would make the argument that he didn’t look bad. His thin frame was drowning in a ripped t-shirt that was two sizes too big. The knees of his jeans looked like they had been peppered with buckshot and his gaunt face was brown with half a weeks worth of stubble. Chad’s tennis shoes were stained with mud and looked several years out of style.

During Chad’s interaction with the door man, Leon had made his way off his stool and walked slowly over to the front door, cane in hand.

“Man, let the boy in, gawd dammit!” Leon tapped the tip of his cane against the bouncer’s foot. “He’s fuck’n harmless and you know it. Ned don’t like it tell him I can always get shit faced elsewhere.”

Chad followed Leon through the squirming mass of middle aged drunks dancing frantically to the Zydeco music. He took a seat next to Leon. Leon’s hand cautiously reached for his bourbon.

“So how’re you doing, Chad?”

“Ah...usual,” Chad replied, scooting his elbow onto the bar top.

“Hey, Sweetie!” Leon barked over the music “Get my friend here a shot.”

“Naw, Leon,” Chad shook his head and smiled, realizing the futility of both the gesture and the refusal to drink.

“I’ve got things to do tonight.”

“Yeah you need to loosen the fuck up, man. I can feel how tense you are and you’re gonna fuck up and get yourself killed if you don’t loosen up.”

The bartender was a busty blond who lied about her age by a good decade. She passed Chad a shot glass, making sure not to make eye contact with him. At first his overwhelming paranoia suggested it had something to do with the owner. Later he would amend his opinion and decide that she really just doesn’t give a shit.

“So what’s about to make me vomit?”

“Shaddup and just drink it,” Leon snapped back with a wide grin.

Chad washed the whisky down his throat, feeling it leave a trail of fire down to his gut. His face twisted and boiled acid churned in his stomach.

“Gaaawd damn!” Chad was suddenly aware of how much his face itched. The thought of a warm shower and a shave almost made him weep.

As the whiskey began to creep its way into Chad’s brain, several sensations crept in at once. First was the warm, pleasant wash of mild intoxication. Next came the realization that Zydeco music wasn’t all THAT bad. Out of all the musicians, Chad enjoyed the dude playing a corrugated piece of metal the best.

*The mix of people is cool in this place too,* Chad thought. He smiled watching everyone have a good time. There was another sudden jolt of panic at the thought of why HE was so miserable and THEY were so blissfully, ignorantly happy.

Chad turned to Leon and asked “Can I crash at your place tonight?”



“Man, why do you still ask that annoying question?” Leon snapped, placing his ‘sip’n whisky’ back home on the bar with the same caution he had picked it up with.

“Just being polite,” Chad smiled despite the realization that we was - in all likelihood - about to puke. If he didn’t vomit, a violent case of the shits was in store. Leon will just LOVE that. Well, that was assuming things went well tonight.

“Well, STOP being polite for Crissakes!” Leon sipped at his shot glass and put it back down. His mantra when it came to alcohol was to not rush.

“Being polite...” Leon continued “...is why you haven’t gotten laid in so long. That and the fact that I can smell you and it’s not pretty. I can’t see you but if I had to bet, I’d say you were a scrubby look’n little fucker too.”

Leon laughed triumphantly at his delivery and was about to follow up when the invisible wave hit them both. It was enough to silence them both, and inspire Chad to sit bolt upright. His heart smashed into his rib cage.

“Daamn!” Chad muttered.

Leon patted him on the shoulder.

“Just get focused and don’t forget what I told you before.”

“Yeah,” Chad reached down between the bar stool to retrieve his book bag. “If I remember it’s something like ‘run away if shit gets too crazy’. Did I get it right?”

“Yep!” Leon fished into his pocket and handed Chad his spare door key, adding “Make sure you come back here to see if I’m still drinking. Don’t make my blind, drunk ass walk home by myself.”

Chad spun off the bar stool and walked briskly towards the door. The music had become an abstract throb in the air as his heart pounded to match the beat.

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The night air outside was moist and alive. River Street smelled like a pungent mix of paper mill and electricity. In the immediate vicinity, the slight whiff of ozone was something only Chad and Leon could pick up on. The air sent small snaps of static over Chad’s skin, down the sweat on his back and between his buttocks. He hated how a breach always felt like being molested by something insubstantial.



Chad made his way away from the throng of chattering party goers and onto the cobble stone streets. He walked down twisting alleys that no local in their right mind would venture into. At one point a shadow moved behind him. Chad spun around, gritting his teeth. Bright blue needles of fire flashed behind his retinas and bathed his face in neon. Whoever was about to mug him somersaulted over themselves in a comical escape, panting in horror. Chad grinned and continued walking.

The park at that hour was thick darkness interrupted now and then by pools of yellow, artificial light. The place screamed ‘please rob, beat, rape, kill and eat me’. Chad wasn’t worried about bums and criminals that slink around in the darkness. Addicts and the desperate homeless dudes that hung out here always made themselves scarce when the *Hymen* was about to tear. The faithful hated it being called that, which only made it more fun for Chad to say.

Chad saw them sitting on a bench, making out. They were obviously both local students either too horny or drunk to realize being here at night was suicidal. Chad reached into the front zipper pocket of his book



bag and curled his slender fingers around the cylinder. His sprint became a jog as he raced toward the couple.

In the impossibly long moment of his feet pounding on the sidewalk, Chad felt envious of the guy. The girl was undeniably hot. She was wearing her ‘art school punk rock costume’ as Chad liked to call it. Black fishnet stockings hugged her shapely legs up to the red and black plaid skirt. The dude on the bench with her was nearly smothering her with his mouth. Her skin glistened with sweat and saliva as she moaned, eyes shut tight.

The couple grew closer in his sight. His heart became a steady drum in his ears and Chad’s gate went wider. Each footfall sent him bounding higher and closer. His thumb flicked the hidden trigger on the cylinder. Chad’s weapon unfolded with a loud *pop*. It sprang open with a sizzle of power, glowing a beautiful network of small iridescent veins.

Mr. Lucky Bastard caught Chad in his periphial visions and quickly shot a protective arm around his girlfriend. As Chad’s right sneaker connected solidly with a corner of the park bench, his skinny arm came around in a wide arch, weapon humming and glowing. Chad leapt into the air and hung for an impossible moment. Then the blade edge formed a split second before striking its invisible target.

A cloud of blue sparks exploded over the couple’s heads. The entity’s form briefly unraveled from within, showing Chad a glimpse of its unfathomable rage. It’s mouth grew wide and misshapen before vanishing back into the electrified ozone above.

“THE FUCK?!” Mr. Lucky Bastard barked. Chad was aware of this, but it felt displaced and foggy. The Entity’s scream shattered glass inside his head. It sent agonizing shock waves down his spine and set his brain on fire. Chad collapsed to the sidewalk and felt his knees crack with a new jolt of pain.

Through his squinting eyes he saw the couple running hand-in-hand in the opposite direction. They couldn’t see their airborne assailants, though. The *entities* snaked chest-level at a sickening speed towards their targets and caught the boyfriend. He snapped upright like god yanked his marionette strings taunt. The girl screamed.

In the breath of time between standing and running, Chad saw the second creature (more aqua and substantial than its associate) whistle towards the girl. In one smooth motion, Chad collapsed the crackling staff down and clipped the weapon to his side. His gaunt hands snapped out and covered the boyfriend’s face as his body spasmed. Chad pumped so much power through his quivering arms that his heart twisted violently. The entity poured from The-Former-Mr.-Lucky-Bastard’s face. His eyes bled crystal blue light and the creature hissed a diatribe of curses even Chad couldn’t comprehend.

The word *Heretic* stood out, echoing for an eternity inside his skull.

The girl’s fist connected like a mule kick. Chad felt two of his molars snap from their sockets. The force of the blow sent him spinning end over end. The ground slammed into him with a cruel thud, blasting the air from his lungs.

Through his jogged vision, Chad saw her step over him, planting a heavy black boot on either side of his face. For a brief moment he caught sight of her underwear. He cursed himself silently for the momentary pause it gave him. Blood and flecks of teeth dribbled from his mouth and made small stains on the street. Her voice was smooth and exhilarated.

“I can feel how much you want her.” she ran a hand into the waistband of her skirt. “Being driven by the simplest of instincts is why you’re all doomed.”

Chad spun around and clasped both ankles, feeling the geometric pattern of her stockings. He pulled up with all his strength, sending the punk rock girl onto her back. She shrieked in pain and surprise, her heavy black boot smashing against Chad’s neck. He leapt backwards, hand arching towards his belt, feeling a rush of relief as his fingers caught the smooth surface of the cylinder. The waffle of her boot mashed Chad’s nose.

His ass hit the ground, which was mercifully grass this time. The weapon snapped outward into a thin staff. As Chad’s left hand caught the base, he swung fast and hard. A thin semi circular blade appeared at the killing end, catching meat and bone. Her legs folded in on themselves at the knees. The grisly sound of sinew and bone coming undone would haunt him forever. That awful sound was why he refused to eat chicken.



*Well...at least any of the parts with too many bones.*

She dug her elbows against the soft, wet grass, lurching towards Chad. With a quick gesture of his wrist, the staff was whirled around 180 degrees. The base of the cylinder came down hard against her chest. Chad twisted the shaft in opposite directions, engaging a long blade. The force of it pinned her back to the turf.

Her sternum shattered. The blade cleaved through heart and ribs, piercing her between the shoulder blades. Chad murmured a chant. The words came effortlessly this time, and the park was lit with a thousand flashes. The power pulsed down his arms and through the cylinder. The network of mechanical veins pulsed and throbbed. The weapon shook. Their pain was mutual. Chad could feel every agonizing moment in brilliant lucidity.

As the Entity was forced to exit, her body expired in a cloud of fire. Chad's hand snaked up to put a half-assed shield over himself before he was vaporized as well. The Entity left beautiful trailers in every color of the spectrum as it swirled towards the heavens.

Blood had begun to pour freely from his nose and mouth, staining his shirt. The girl's boyfriend was moaning in the grass. His chest rose and fell in uneven, panicked breaths. Chad couldn't be sure, but this one might not lose his sight or hearing. If he was really lucky, some day he would be able to say full sentences without slurring his words. He quickly stuffed his hands inside the poor bastard's pockets and found a wad of money. It was jammed deep in Chad's front pocket.

Chad collapsed his weapon and put a shaking hand to his face. The power pulled cartilage even and mended it at the break. Blood vessels slowed their frantic pumping of blood. White blood cells worked over time to repair the tissue damage. The teeth would take weeks and cause horrible stabs of pain, but he would eventually regrow them.

Chad's footsteps were unsteady as he leaned against a tree and let his stomach eject its meager contents. When the painful spasms subsided, he stuck to the alleys and pools of darkness to find his way to Leon's apartment.

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The walk back to Leon's place was free of any entanglements with the authorities. They were usually absent during any real emergency and Chad worried about how guilty he looked of some violent act. His face was bloody and the bruises had still not fully faded.

Weakness and fatigue overtook Chad around Henry street. His knees threatened to buckle underneath him and his whole body quaked. Using the power often drained him to the point of sickness. The idea of having to spend several days to recuperate wasn't that appetizing. Leon's apartment was small and smelled funky. The damp mold 'this shit town' (as Chad called it) generated often played havoc on his sinuses.

Sirens off in the distance. The sparse street lights barely lit the cobblestone streets, but he knew Leon's apartment was only several blocks away. The dizziness and nausea made the world wobble out of focus. Chad made a determined lurch forward, hefting the bookbag around his shoulder. *Fuck, it gets heavy*, Chad thought.

The process of inserting the key into the small brass lock proved more difficult than it should. But the bolt slid and the door swooped open. There was a swell of relief as Chad stumbled onto the couch. Leon's place was in a much more organized state than last time. Chad reckoned that Leon must have gotten a bit more adjusted to the blindness.

Chad's spinning head began to calm, and the floor beneath him started to cease its slow rotation. The metronome pounding inside his skull dulled to a mild hammer by the time Leon got home. The door pounded open loudly and Chad bolted upright.

"Door WIDE fucking open!" Leon barked. "And you didn't fucking come to get me like you said you would either, gawd dammit!"

Chad moaned, pulling his legs off the sofa and placing them as softly as he could on the floor. Dirty feet on



the sofa (which was already fucking filthy) would inspire a fresh round of abuse.

“Sorry,” Chad’s voice sounded dry and raspy in his ears. “I had a rough night.”

“Sounds like it,” Leon’s cane tapped lightly on his journey to the kitchen. “Want some tea?”

“Please,” Chad grabbed the remote to the stereo. Light, liquid jazz filled the room. He always loved Leon’s music selection. The man’s love for all sorts of music was their first patch of common ground.

There was a stretch of silence, where only the preparation of the kettle and the music could be heard.

“So you don’t wanna talk about it and I probably don’t want to know...so are you hurt bad?” Leon’s hands scanned the cupboard drawers gingerly until they found the packet of herbal tea.

“Naw, I’m okay. Well, I’ll be okay tomorrow. Right now I feel like dog shit on all accounts.”

“What else is new?” Leon said with a flat laugh.

“Do you need the bathroom before I take a shower?” Chad peeled of the shirt, which felt like a saturated, disgusting mess.

“Nope,” Leon sat back on his stool in the kitchen “...all yours.”

The shower was like an all over body orgasm. As the hot water cleansed the blood and sweat, Chad soothed his heart into a calm rhythm and healed his nose. The blue power splashed each droplet of water with tiny pin pricks of light. The bruises receded and the pain subsided - at least in his nose. The broken teeth were a steady pulse of sharp agony.

Chad carried his sopping wet clothes (which he washed in the shower with him) to Leon’s dryer and threw them in, hitting the spin cycle. He walked back to the couch wearing a towel and thumped down with a grunt. His lemon tea was waiting for him, sending up a small swirl of steam.

They sipped the tea and listened to the music. Some bluesy hip-hop was cued up and soon the room filled with the mellow rhymes of two very enlightened rappers. The police hadn’t smashed the door down and arrested anyone yet.

“Life could be worse,” Chad admitted. “Not much, but there’s always more down, right?”

“Yup.”

“How’s Brit?” Chad put his tea back down and laid his wet hair against the back of the sofa.

“She’s good,” Leon smiled from his chair - a big leather comforter from that rent-to-own place down the street. “Baby is due in August.”

“Grandfather Leon,” Chad grinned.

“Ah screw you.”

“Leon, hate to press your hospitality, but do you have any painkillers, weed, alcohol or all three?”

“Possibly. Which one is top of the list?”

“Whichever will leave you the *least* high and dry.”

“Cool...be right back.”

Leon returned with a white barrell-shaped pill and a small bottle of Jack Daniels.

“Go into the kitchen and eat something before.” Leon sat back down in his chair. “Otherwise you’ll be puking this place up real good.”

He woke to a dull throb in his jaw that turned into a series of painful stabs. Chad rolled off the sofa, groaning as a wave of nausea hit him. He was still naked except for the towel - something that would have made him incredibly uncomfortable save for Leon’s blindness. He shuffled to the dryer to inspect his clothes. Calling them ‘damp’ would be a misuse of the word. Chad decided to put them on anyway.

His entire body ached. A day to recuperated would be nice. He knew that wasn’t a good idea. It was amazing



he had been able to pull off his little crusade for over two years now without being arrested. Chad's realization that what felt like a lifetime of self imposed misery could end in incarceration.

*Getting your ass filled by some greasy lowlife or doing this...I wonder which I would hate less.*

The blood stain on the front of his shirt hadn't faded, but it would have to do. He felt bad enough about how often Leon had helped him out without resorting to borrowing clothes. Besides he doubted they would fit.

*I make the poor mother fucker blind and then rob him every time I come to town. Fuck, I HATE this city.*

Chad raided the fridge, realized the uselessness of a note midway through trying to find a pen and left as quietly as he could. The walk out of town was uneventful. The police either suspected the victim's (now gibbering) boyfriend as the culprit. Either they hadn't placed Chad at the scene or he looked like every other local art student or vagrant.

Stealing a car would be pushing his luck - spreading his good karma too thin. He would wait until he reached that little white supremacist, redneck shithole a couple hours north. Chad hoisted his black book bag higher on his shoulder and began walking.

Walking for long stretches of time gave one the chance to think a lot about times gone by. Chad had walked this country road so many times that it had long ago lost its ability to surprise. Sure the first time he saw the llama farm (a fucking llama farm for crissakes) he was pleasantly taken aback, but those days were long gone. It would be picturesque if it wasn't so boring.

So what to ponder?

Sex. Women.

A tiny smile spread across his face as he thought back to the girls. There weren't many, but most could be reminisced upon fondly. Amy in high school was a beautiful blond, with straight shiny hair that was way to straight and way to shiny. But she was beautiful. That decades sexuality was categorized by skin tight jeans and hair cuts that were way too self aware.

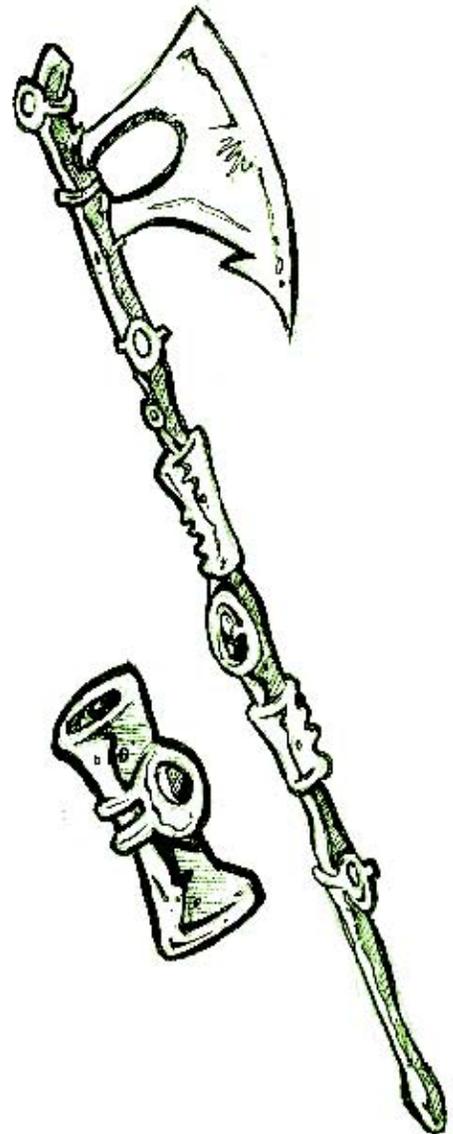
Amy had a smooth, curvy little waist and pretty little round titties. Chad's smile grew a bit more pronounced, and so did the swell in his groin. He pushed the thought from his mind with a inward grumble of frustration at not being able to enjoy the small pleasures. No pun intended.

When left to drift unfettered, he would inevitably think about what brought him to where he was today - the unpredictable equation. Chad closed his eyes for a second and took a breath, enjoying the soft touch of the wind and whistle of breeze over the grass. Here was where the land emptied out into a wide green expanse on either side of the little two lane road. It was actually pretty serene.

He wondered what Randy was up to right now.

Randy had been the first voice he heard when he woke from the coma eight years ago. It came to him slow, drifting through the fog and into his conscious mind. Chad opened his eyes and sat upright, feeling disconnected and confused. Randy dropped the novel he was reading, eyes wide with disbelief. He choked for the words, shaking his head.

"What?" Chad felt a surge of panic. Nothing was right. Dozens



of questions brought him towards panic. Randy didn't look right. There was something...different about his appearance. His hair had thinned and his gut had grown larger. His face was crease. For Crissakes he looked *old!*

"Holy Christ!" Randy said, a huge smile creeping over his face. "You're awake! How do you feel?"

"Scared...Randy, what's going on?"

Randy got up from the chair he was sitting in. Chad looked around the room he was in. He didn't recognize it, but it had the depressing lived in feel of a hospice. It smelled slightly funky. Twin beams of sunlight penetrated the thin drapes over the window. Randy placed a strong hand on Chad's shoulder, looking him in the eyes.

"Just stay calm, okay? Everything's okay. There's...Christ I can't believe you're awake."

"Can I have some water?" Chad's voice sounded strange in his ears. It was raspy like a smoker's voice. His entire body felt weak. A thick comforter covered his legs. He reached for it, but Randy placed a hand over his wrist to stop him.

"Alright," Randy hurried through the door, almost tripping over the paperback novel he was reading from. He returned with a glass of ice water, handing it gingerly to Chad. He held a protective hand around Chad's wrist as he took it. His arms were frighteningly thin. His slender fingers shook.

As Chad cautiously sipped the water he became aware of the i.v. in his arm hooked to a bag of saline.

"There's a lot to...um...to take in," Randy stammered. "You've been in a coma for a long time. A lot's happened."

"How long?" The same strong, comforting hand found its way to Chad's shoulder.

"Almost six years." Randy's eyes showed a sense of fear that the news would shock Chad back into his slumber.

"Shit. What happened. Where...where's Dad?"

"I don't think we should go over this right now. You just woke up and..."

"Where's Dad, Randy?!" Chad felt a sickening wave of fear come over him.

"Chad, your Dad's gone. He's been gone since you fell asleep."

Chad fell silent as tears welled up in his eyes and the jumbled memories began to gel in his mind. He remember the chaos and fear. He recalled the sound of the gunshot against the hollow walls of the...what was it...the carpet warehouse. It was an empty carpet store. The memories began to elude him and despair threatened to squeeze the air from his throat.

Chad closed his eyes and shook the memory away for the time being. It didn't help to dwell on this. He reminded himself of that as he walked uphill. He knew that a warm meal and some rest waited for him. Chad would gather his thoughts in Bettertown, Georgia and figure out the best course of action. The art student didn't have a lot of money on hand, but it was enough to get him a bit further down the road.

He didn't like being this close to the city, and wanted to put as much distance between himself, the burnt cadaver of the punk rock girl and her confused boyfriend as possible. It didn't help matters that everyone in this bumfuck town recognized a stranger upon sight. His arrival would stick in their minds.

*Maybe I should just keep walking but damn I'm starving.*

He stood on the side of the road for a moment before digging into his front pocket to produce a quarter. *Should I stay here or keep going?* He posed the mental question to himself before flipping the coin and catching it in midair. Heads...heads means yes. *Okay, best two out of three*, he thought before repeating the process. He dropped the coin and had to chase it as it rolled down the street, mocking him. By the time he retrieved it, Chad came to the conclusion that his method for decision making was pretty stupid.

He decided that Bettertown was a bad idea and kept walking. He cursed the universe for his lot in life.



Jim Baker's bad mood was slowly simmering towards a boil. His wife, Christy seemed to be going out of her way to infuriate him. Every comment was a verbal dart designed to raise his blood pressure. The sound of her voice was like a rusty nail dug over a chalk board. She sat in the passenger's seat of the dilapidated R.V., filing her nails and educating him about his lackluster status as a husband and adventurer.

"I told you not to pick a fight with that guy," She worked the nail file over her left index finger with a sound that made Jim want to strike her. "You just have to be combative all the time. You deserved to get hit. And while we're on the topic, I think it's *really* childish that you don't just heal yourself."

Jim's salt and pepper beard quivered in silent rage. He felt his jaw clench and his teeth locked together. The dentist had been horrified at Jim's last dental visit. Jim's right eye was beginning to heal. He could see out of it finally, though it was inflamed and swollen.

"Can we please not talk about it? I'm concentrating." Jim consciously soothed the edge from his voice, knowing that Christy would jump on the slightest hint of aggression. "Let's just listen to the radio okay?"

"Great...static is much better than speaking to your wife." The raspy sound of rounding out the nail on her ring finger accelerated. "All they play is southern rock in this town and I *hate* southern rock. You can't even get a cd player in this shit box."

"Christy...please!"

"Fine," she threw the nail file and it ricocheted off the dash board. They spent the next twenty minutes in silence.

Christy was a beautiful woman in her younger years - devastatingly beautiful. While she had gained some weight and gravity had stretched her a bit, it was the septic state of their relationship that distressed Jim lately. The transmission on the vehicle was slipping. Jim could feel it whenever he accelerated. The forethought of the resulting argument made him cringe.

It was Christy who eventually spoke. Thankfully, her tone had softened.

"So do you think we're going in the right way?"

"I'm as sure as I can be."

"Good," Christy retrieved the nail file and continued sawing. Jim's worn face broke into a sinister smile.

*I'm coming, Chad. This should be interesting.*

When they got into town, the day was bright and sunny. They had parked the R.V. at a campground nearby and caught a bus into the historic district. Quaint shops and cute bookstores and endless novelties clogged the streets. This place was always considered a top tourist destination on the south. Jim enjoyed the general surroundings, but despised the people. They were so fake and overly friendly - jovial even. It was enough to make him vomit.

So was the heat. By mid afternoon it made you feel feverish. Sweat poured down Jim's back, saturating his Old Navy t-shirt. He looked almost ridiculous in it - like a middle aged man trying to dress like a teenager. While Christy sat on a bench drinking her lemonade and pretending the bums were phantoms, Jim squinted his eyes and looked up at the sky.

The hairs on his arm stood up. He felt the fading throb of power in the air. There was definitely a breach here, which surely would have brought Warner. He stood there in the middle of the sidewalk as people passed on either side. Some were flamboyant art students dressed to show off their eccentric 'creativity'. Others were tourists happily snapping pictures and chirping like birds.

"Here," Christy handed Jim a newspaper. Jim read in silence. His weather beaten features sank, shifting his beard like a small woodland creature. Christy hated his beard, so he delighted in nurturing it.

"That bastard got away with it again! Fuck!"

"Don't you think they would have found the girl's ashes?" Christy finished her drink and tossed it away. One



of the vagrants eyed the empty cup with a heartfelt look of sadness.

“Not necessarily,” Jim sighed and stared blankly into the sky. “Sometimes the heat atomizing them.”

Jim’s jaw flexed and his fingers worked themselves into quivering fists by his side. He breathed deeply, trying to will his blood pressure down.

“Well, let’s go back to the trailer,” He looked over at Christy, momentarily taken aback by how surprisingly soft her features looked. “after we get you some lunch at that deli you like.”

The same oppressive heat that was currently giving Jim Baker a migraine was affecting Chad about a hundred-and-ten miles north. His decision to pass Bettertown meant exhaustion and stabbing pangs of hunger. There weren’t any motorists charitable or trusting enough to pick him up. By the time he reached Flannigan County, he was miserable.

The soft blast of air conditioning wafted over him as he entered the diner. *God that feels good.*

A brown wooden sign instructed him to wait for a hostess. Normally the five minutes it took to get noticed wouldn’t have bothered him, but these days he wondered if it meant a call to the police. A short chubby woman in a yellow ochre apron led him to a booth on the far side of the diner, away from the largest congestion of customers. Chad supposed he couldn’t blame her.

He ordered a sweet tea and a chicken breast salad, trying to be as friendly as possible. A brief assessment of his money confirmed what he already knew - the bills had not mated and produced any offspring in his front pocket. In less than three days he would be penniless, and that’s if he barely ate.

He ate his meal in introspective silence. His fork jabbed methodically at his salad, sifting for something other than lettuce. *Why the hell did I order a salad?* When he had finished his meal, Chad smoothed a dollar bill out on his left thigh, trying to be discrete. The power came with a considerable effort. The heat and walk had fatigued him. Sparks crackled from his fingertips. He closed his eyes tight as small beads of sweat bubbled to his forehead and ran down this bridge of his sharp nose.

Under the table, the image of Washington wobbled in and out of existence, melting into a passable version of whoever that old fart on the twenty was...Jackson? Chad was momentarily distracted by his ignorance of something so simple and almost lost it. He was never that good at optics, and if he didn’t use the bill right away or got a waitress that looked too closely, his effort would be wasted.

Chad hoisted his book bag onto his shoulder and walked to the cash register, handing the money over. The mid afternoon had brought a crowd, which was good. Maybe she would be in a hurry. The waitress shuffled to the register looking overworked and tired. She took the money from Chad. He strengthened his concentration, visualizing every detail of a twenty dollar bill. Cash was dispensed, and he handed her two dollars and quickly left.

Chad’s brisk walk turned into a full fledged trot as he worked to gain some distance from the restaurant. That poor overworked and sadly unattractive girl would possibly lose her shitty job for this, but Chad realized he had done things a hell of a lot worse on his travels.

*Like spending money I couldn’t afford on a prostitute. That was stupid.*

His tennis shoes kicked up small clouds of dirt and pebbles as he walked towards the highway. Chad wondered how long he would put up with this before breaking down and stealing a car.

Night passed into evening at that eccentric southern, coastal town. *To speak its name out loud brings bad luck,* is something that Chad Warner would often think, if not say. Jim Baker wasn’t aware of that. There were a great many things about his enemy that Jim didn’t know. It kept him up at nights, mashing his back molars together.

All of the most interesting ironies that linked the lives of Jim and Chad would remain unknown to both parties. This would remain true during both of their entire lives. For instance, the same bar that Chad had conversed with



Leon the night before is where Jim found himself in the evening hours.

Just like the night before, the air was filled with lively music. Tonight the band was tired, and they were just going through the motions. While the folks on Saturday were an interesting mix of locals and crazy party-goers, the Sunday crowd was lame. They desperately held on to the spirit of the weekend.

Christy had wanted to come here. Jim knew that his neanderthal attachment to sex was the only thing keeping him in this nightmare. He was convinced she did this on purpose. The only reason could be to punish him. He wanted to be home in that 'horrible' trailer sipping some merlot. Fucking bitch.

To make matters worse, Christy had recently befriended an alpha male. She sat in the adjacent booth chatting with him, making physical contact with a hand on the forearm here, a brush of the fingertips against a biceps there. Jim's blood began a slow, steady simmer.

The penis-dragging missing link had a baseball cap on for gawd's sake. Jim was having trouble seeing what the hat advertised, but he was pretty sure it had something to do with southern pride. He always found the concept vulgar. In Jim's mind, southern pride translated into blatant racism. In a maelstrom of good times and music, Jim Baker was on the verge of a breakdown as he studied his wife flirting with that specimen of manhood.

He ordered another drink to numb the fire brewing in her gut. As the waitress walked away, he silently hated her. All of the hairless monkeys that frequented this place probably drooled all over her, giving her huge tips and building up her already inflated ego. The endless quest for sexual conquest was just one check mark in a growing list of things that made Jim despise all humanity.

Jim was on his feet and stalking towards the hulking alpha male without willing his limbs into movement. All one-hundred-and-fifty pounds of him loomed over the table, eyes blazing with undiluted hate.

"Christy, we're leaving. Say good night to your pet monkey."

Silence fell over the table. The redneck's biceps seemed to throb with the expectation of a healthy ass kicking to come. He looked up at Jim with a look of smug conquest. Christy's smirk prompted an itching in Jim's right hand. Oh how he wanted to feel the sweet sting of his palm against her pretty, exfoliated face at that moment. Mr. Alpha Male spoke.

"Buddy, I think you need to leave us alone."

Jim took a deep breath through his nostrils, trying to calm the volcano inside his chest. The heartburn was wearing a hole in the lining of his stomach. Consequently, the power began to spark in his veins. He could feel electricity emanating from his heart and bleeding down the veins in his arms. Tiny sparks exploded at his fingertips.

"Christy, it's time to leave," Jim said in a flat tone, ignoring the presence of the man he wanted to murder outright.

Christy's new friend stood up. The muscles of his chest pulled his t-shirt tight. That had to be intentional. He was a monolithic statue that dwarfed Jim's older (and much more frail) frame.

"Buddy, I'm not going to repeat myself. Go home. The lady's made her choice."

"Shut your fucking mouth you cock sucker!" Jim's words were spat from his poorly groomed beard. Acid churned in his stomach. Thin ribbons of power shot like sea serpents through his bloodstream. He imagined reaching into this fucker's chest with unseen hands and pulling his internal organs apart. Jim imagined the sweet satisfaction of seeing him bleed explosively from every orifice.

Jim was airborne before his vision of murder was complete. The neanderthal had pushed him, sending him sprawling onto the floor. It was vile - slick with spilled beer and lord knows what else. It felt like the bottom of a river bed. A bolt of pain ran up Jim's backside as his spine connected with the floor. He collided with several patrons who were dancing. They yelped in surprise.

His hand snapped out with a sizzle of released fury. The bar stool closest to Jim flew through the air, connecting its target in the middle of his finely sculpted chest. The alpha male grunted as three of his ribs gave way with a brittle crack. He struck the floor a split second before gravity brought the bar stool down on his forehead, opening



it up with a gush of blood.

Jim Baker rooted his sneakers into the viscous surface of the floor and launched himself at his target. Though no one in the bar would admit to it after they sobered up, several saw the halo of greenish blue color that erupted from Jim's clenched fist. His knee met with the redneck's groin as his fist pulverized the man's jaw. Over the din of the music, the horrified bar patrons could here the wet compression of bone, teeth and gums.

He was yanked off of his victim by hands as strong as iron. The bouncer yanked Jim toward the front door and ejected him out into the cool night air. The contact of cobblestone against his skinny body was agonizing. Before the pain could subside he was aware of Christy's soft voice easing in through the sound of the music.

"Oh baby...oh baby!"

She had her arms around his neck, planting soft kisses on his cheek. They hurried back to their R.V. and had frenzied sex on the floor, next to the refrigerator and stove. As dawn began to flood the trailer with orange light, Jim held his wife in his arms. She was sleeping silently and happily. Soon Jim drifted off into a peaceful slumber with thoughts of bloody genocide and the end of all humanity.

