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YOUNG GHOSTS

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Ohio University

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at the

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YOUNG GHOSTS

MICHAEL AENEAS CRIFASI

ABSTRACT

Young Ghosts is a post-apocalyptic horror novel written in the style of literary fiction. The story is broken into three acts, the first of which constitutes the following thesis. A critical introduction, describing the influences, aesthetic, and future designs of the work, precede the creative portion.

This narrative plays out in the third week of a world-altering epidemic and is set in the modern day. At the center of the epidemic is a disease, unknown in origin, which kills only children. The Piper is the name given to the mysterious epidemic, noting its similarity to the minstrel/child abductor of fairy tale.

The story's central characters are the Temple family: Chris, Carol, Darrien, and Brandi. Set in the fictional southwestern Ohio city of Arcadia, *Young Ghosts* focuses on the desperation of young father Chris as he watches death creep closer in. Already grown semi-estranged from his wife, Carol, Chris does all he can to save his two daughters, Darrien and Brandi, from the disease there appears to be no safety from. Throughout this struggle, the Temple family leans on the other young families populating the incredibly close-knit community of the Blue Pines sub-development. Almost all of these young families have children themselves.

At the end of Act I, the madness bred by the inescapable disease finally infects the Blue Pines community. In this moment, the offering for salvation given by the strange Alister Vandermime, a scientist in his seventies, suddenly becomes a possibility.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic - a set of principles underlying and guiding the work of a particular artist or artistic movement

TO BEGIN: INFLUENCES AND ADMISSIONS

Young Ghosts doesn't attempt to be a horror writer's first great novel. The opening act contained here is only a start, and a messy one at that. What *Young Ghosts: Act I* proposes to be is a *good* first try at a novel: a try where all the elements required of a "real" novelist first appear. These "writerly" elements range from the technical to the thematic, the aesthetic to the idiosyncratic. This critical introduction explores the process of learning these elements and then combining them into their currently rough form. To begin, however, it's best to survey the professional works that made the author want to

learn to use these elements in the first place.

Clive Barker broke onto the novelistic scene with *The Damnation Game* (1985). However, before *The Damnation Game*, Barker – not even ready for a full novel – served up short stories in *The Books of Blood* (1984), which included his famous “The Forbidden” (adapted as the film *Candyman* in 1992). Hovering about the same period, both in publication and writing, two novellas appeared: *Cabal* (1985) and *The Hellbound Heart* (1986). Recaptured and revised by cinematic professionals (who worked with Barker), these not-fully-realized stories became things finished, big, and memorable: the films *Night Breed* and *Hellraiser*. The horror movie fan knows these works, knows they belong in the upper echelon of *smart* horror. But going back to read these works in print, to read their paper and type first bodies, one immediately finds the cracks. One feels jerkiness in the narratives; one sees gaps in tension’s upward arc. The characters are individual, but they are not always *real* to the reader. Rather than live and writhing into the imagination, they are *roles* – fit for an actor to flesh out with a personal take. Dialogue moves beyond the stage of wood, but still doesn’t sound from outside the author’s own writing voice. In short, readers of these works, every now and then, are *aware*. They are aware that they are in the act of reading – that they have entered a magic picture show on a still-visible stage. These momentary flashes of reality, seconds when the machinery shows behind the flesh, separate an author’s first *good* work from their first *great* work, horror or otherwise.

And at this point in my writing career, this is where I stand. I am not yet the spinner of suck-you-in literary/popular fiction I aspire to be. I strive for the imagery and freedom to indulge prosaic complexity of Clive Barker, while I still look to tell the good horror story – both literary and popular – of Joe Hill. But, ten years seriously into my

craft, I'm still not there. You can't tell all the time. But every now and then, every 20th line or so, an awkward bit of my skin breaks the surface. It's there in an extra prepositional phrase, or in the refusal to use a contraction when it's right for the scene; it's there when a metaphor twists into 2nd place poetry or when a character throws out a slip of information the conversation doesn't call for (*Do you get it? Do you? I don't want to explain it but I feel like I have to. Ok, there. I told you. But I didn't over-explain, did I? No, no. I mustn't have done that. Not again.*)

But in the midst of *Cabal*, "The Forbidden," and *The Hellbound Heart* came *The Damnation Game*. And while *The Damnation Game* is still a first novel, it is, of course, a first *break-through* novel, like Stephen King's *Carrie* or Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* or Joe Hill's *Heart-Shaped Box*. Carefully constructed and comfortable, it wraps itself back around its center of utter brand-newness and fantastically unique with layers of well-established tradition. This is a constant throughout break-through popular novels. In so being, these novels are in truth country music and classic rock – they use the same elements of all the lesser-rans who fill their genre, but do this so damn well, while also owning at least one fantastic element of core newness, that their familiar shells are forgiven, and in time, forgotten altogether.

Calling up to the best examples of the "good" horror author, the minor-leaguers not quite ready to be brought up, there is the Stephen King before *Carrie*, he of "The Mangler," "Graveyard Shift," and "The Boogeyman." Neil Gaiman, one of the finest storytellers of this generation, did not lay his masterpiece *The Sandman* at the world's feet when he first came to D.C. Comics, let alone shape *American Gods* in his first novelistic try. First he penned *Black Orchid* and *Stardust*: each short, mesmerizing, weird, and beautiful, but all together too strange to really be called complete "stories."

And before Joe Hill gave over *Heart-Shaped Box* there was the collection of short stories that would eventually become *20th Century Ghosts*. Some of these short stories, like “Pop Art,” are breathtakingly unfamiliar. One, “The Cape,” might be the greatest short horror story written in the last twenty years. However, packaged all around these stories are those also-rans, those derivative yarns like “The Black Phone,” “The Widow’s Breakfast,” and “In the Rundown” – professional works for their technical marks, utterly forgettable for their contribution (or their lack thereof) to the genre. Bad works and good works together in one, these pieces represent writers’ first real swings at the pros. These swings may not have been taken on the big-league field, but they’re pro swings all the same. And in these swings, swings taken maybe ten or fifteen years after first sitting down to write the teenage imitations we all roll through, something matured. The swinging player stepped into the batting box complete that day. All the legwork, all the learning and all the exploring of the craft’s multitudinous, though required, rooms had been taken care of. The time had been put in, as they say. Time to move beyond development and into really *playing*.

ON GENRE – WRITING IN THE HORROR VEIN: PART I

My genre is horror, my thoughts post-apocalyptic. I’m ever concerned with what happens after the “big death” – both of the whole world and of the little worlds we live individually. These little worlds – my world, your world – are those laid to ruin by unspeakable, unavoidable, senseless tragedies brought on, so often, by nothing more than the general indifference of life. Death doesn’t have to be death either. A sudden cancer diagnosis. A divorce. The loss of a life-long job. These little apocalypses are enough to

blow a life to pieces as sure as an atom bomb. Worse yet, these lives go on, living in the fallout. This fascinates me. What do you do in the morning, the month, the year, after? What do you do when the devil is real and the two of you have to share the same bus? You have to go on and you have to get better somehow. And, though my horror stories must often lead to a standard conflict and conclusion, I refuse to return the world to the assumed order it once had. My characters, like all the people I know, have to walk on with the scars of their personal traumas. No one escapes. This is the great genesis of *Young Ghosts*, magnified to global proportions, but viewed through the keyhole of the Temple family. The big death waits just a breath away. But sure as it can come, so sure is it that some will survive. And they must go traipsing on, their ghosts bounding along behind.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION: PART I

I don't know if *Young Ghosts* will be my *Cabal*. I remember thinking this when I first wrote it. This was a "complete" version, as we say in the business: a work with every page written is "finished," Shelia Schwartz, Creative Writing Professor at CSU, told me. A work with every piece of story fleshed-out is "complete." This complete short format of *Young Ghosts* appeared two years before beginning the thesis process. Outbursts of response came in from many different readers, old and young. The positive criticism came heavier than for any other work I'd let loose. Readers who struggled through my earlier efforts, those skeletal models devoted mostly to one real fiction-writing element or another, walked up with a new shine in their eyes.

Unsolicited praise, I've learned – I think all creators learn eventually – is the only

praise that matters. While valuable criticism can be requested, true praise, like true endorsement or true affection, must be freely given. What I mean is simple: you never have to ask someone if your story is good. If it is good, they will seek you out, simply overflowing with all the things they want to discuss. As they have access to you, the writer, in a way they've probably never had before, they can't help but pepper you with questions. In the sometimes mundane eggshell dance of modern life, a good creation gives a person something genuine – something *real* – to talk to the other person about. In many “lite” relationships, this comes as a blessing: a conversation that isn't forced, praise not needing to be trumped up from the subtle disappointment it really is. So you never have to ask if a story is good. If you do, then it is not. Simple rule. Never fails.

So being the case, I felt a corner finally turned with the early *Young Ghosts* draft, then titled “The Snowman.” I finally felt all the bits and pieces of craft worked into a whole. I also felt “The Snowman” showed a spark of real horror storytelling I'd only grazed in my work before. This sensation arrived in the personal horror felt while penning the agony of a helpless father watching his child die. To this day, when re-reading the burial scene of *Young Ghosts* second act, I can't help but close my eyes.

With this sensation in mind, I ran off with the idea that “The Snowman” was in fact my *Cabal*. I hadn't arrived per se – I knew, somewhere in the depths of my heart, that another work, called *The Dead Waves*, would probably eventually be my breakthrough work, if anything ever was. But, still, with “The Snowman” I thought I finally had something outside of a short story that announced my place in the on-deck circle. This was the story that would win me the recognition of “young writers to watch” on the horror scene. So what did I do? I sent the story right off to the L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future Contest*.

This national contest is my benchmark for success. Short stories to short novellas are eligible: anything under 17,000 words. Winning one of the quarterly competitions means \$1,000 and publication in the annual anthology. It also means the possibility to be declared the grand prizewinner of the year, but I couldn't care less about that. Going to a Barnes & Noble, like the one I worked after college, and pulling a *real* book down with my *real* story would have been more than enough. It would mean vindication and a brighter future than I ever really thought possible.

The rejection letter came with a handwritten yellow sticky note:

Michael – Next time, please submit something under 17,000 words.

After moving beyond the initial anger at my word count being miscalculated (I knew the limit was 17,000 and had brought it in around the 16,900 mark), I did the early-writer thing and felt good about the handwritten sticky note (and the individual, human recommendation to resubmit it *obviously* signaled). Still, I was half-broken by the failure and, in that moment, writing fiction for a living moved from career goal to hobby. I'd put in my two post-college years of crap jobs and embarrassment at friend's weddings. It was time to let it go. Time to admit my place as the occasional dabbler with a touch of local talent – nothing more.

In my bitterness, I sat down two hours after throwing away the rejection letter and reworked another story, a werewolf piece with an ugly twist of modern realism titled "Lineage." In continued bitterness, I resubmitted to the *Writer's of the Future Contest*, this time sending "Lineage." I also submitted "Lineage" to the Creative Writing Contest at CSU. Within the same strange three-month period, I took Honorable Mention and 2nd Prize in both, respectively.

The gods being cruel, and so being the temptation of second place, I kept writing.

I also kept what would become *Young Ghosts* in the wings. I kept it in because of the technical prowess it displayed (a friend hailed it as the first natural dialogue I'd ever written), but also, really, because it was the most terrifying thing I'd ever composed: a fantastically fresh concept I'd brought into the world and could trace back to no imitation of any particular source in modern horror. For one of the first times, I'd written something really non-derivative. In the genre I work in, this is incredibly important, and incredibly hard, at least for me. So in starting graduate school, *Young Ghosts* came with me.

PLOT SUMMARY: TO ONE DAY BE "COMPLETE"

Young Ghosts unfolds in the grips of a world-altering epidemic. A disease, unknown in origin, appears in the first weeks of July, present day. It spreads at a plague's clip, striking victims across the globe simultaneously. This mysterious, unified blitzkrieg gives the epidemic a near supernatural specter, only inflamed by the tick that makes it different from all others: the disease – aptly named “The Piper” somewhere along the way – kills only children.

The narrative of *Young Ghosts* plays out in the third week of the epidemic, when most of the world's children have already been lost. Centered on the Temple family of Arcadia, Ohio – a Cincinnati suburb – *Young Ghosts* focuses on the desperation of a young father as he watches death (the *big death*) creep closer in. Chris Temple, already grown semi-estranged from his wife, Carol, does all he can to save his two daughters, Darrien and Brandi. His neighbors, a close-knit tribe of thirty-something families populating the Blue Pines Development, do the same. Their efforts fail quickly.

It's at this point of breaking that Alister Vandermime comes to the neighborhoods' doors. There, he offers salvation to the children of the Blue Pines. The disease, like any parasite, is gluttonous and stupid, he tells everyone. As it can only feast on children, eventually it will exhaust its supply. *Simply put*, the old man says, *it will eat itself out of existence*. A child must stay uninfected only until this moment. However, as The Piper infects at a near perfect rate, everywhere, there seems no way to stave off contagiousness. But Vandermime promised a solution, and a solution he has. *What children are safe from The Piper?* he asks. *Those already dead*. Or, he says – holding aloft a tube of frozen embryos – *those not yet born*. With this, he offers the Blue Pines families the opportunity to cryonically freeze their remaining children until The Piper passes.

Perhaps more important than offering a literal solution to the very real epidemic besieging the world, Vandermime also offers a bulkhead against the epidemic's other deadly revelation – children taken by the Piper *come back*. Whether after-images of unspeakable trauma or real apparitions twisted by horrible death, these ghosts act on the scarred psyches of all who remain living. Few will admit their visions, but more and more see the dead as the days go on. Madness, already primed, spreads quickly. Bloodshed follows.

Chris Temple is one of the first to realize the crumbling barrier between life and death, but also manages to resist his deepest fear. Still, adrift in a world soon to be overrun by the new dead, Chris eventually takes the deal of Vandermime, and in doing so, seals his remaining child in a cryonic grave. Believing he is taking the only chance left to save his children and save his friends' minds, Chris convinces the other parents to do the same. By story's midpoint, a hundred children are interned alive in the cryogenic

cocoons of the Prometheus Research Center.

Sanity begins to return shortly after. Vandermime and the families wait, huddling together as they painfully watch the rest of the world's children, the world' children that can't fit into Prometheus's finite haven, continue to rot away. But eventually, as mysteriously as it came, and just as the old man prophesized, the disease begins to subside. Overjoyed, the parents of the Blue Pines turn to Vandermime.

But the old man is gone. Gone with him is the only knowledge capable of returning the frozen children back to the world and of keeping them from joining the armies of child dead now haunting the fringes of their old homes and the "night-world" they believe they belong to. Panic returns. This time, instead of sailing through broken vessels in the single unharmed hull, the families of the Blue Pines sink at the rest of the world finally break free.

With grief-fueled zeal, the families hunt down Vandermime, who has absconded to Florida with their remaining savings. Brought to his knees before the mob, ghost children ringed around, Vandermime admits his con: the cryonic process never worked. It didn't work before the plague, and the plague didn't suddenly change its fortunes. *But what does it matter?* he asks the families. He gave them a solution when they thought none existed and they gave him fair pay. No fake divinity was invoked. No snake oil was passed off for something true. A solution was offered: a scientific solution based on logic, available before the world went to hell. Nothing had changed just because the world did, except maybe what made sense. Such was the nature of life.

The families, resigned to their sin – their great Grecian tragedy even in the face of a world crumbled around them – slaughter Vandermime. Then they, now wet husks of walking death themselves, return to the Prometheus labs and take up a vigil. As the rest

of the world rejoices in the children who did live, the Blue Pines join their tiny dead and begin to fade into the ether of the Southwest Ohio hills.

Only Chris Temple, and his wife Carol, return to their home reunited. Chris, reversing the con, convinces Carol that their act was not a fool's errand. He does this by telling her that the cryonic freezing may never have worked in the past, but that this didn't mean it wouldn't work in the future. Carol eventually comes to an understanding: the act gave them hope, and it gave them possibility. She agrees to see the world through Chris's eyes. *But what do they do next*, she asks her husband. Chris answers her, the ghost of his youngest child smiling from the shadows of the yard. *Wait*, Chris says. *Wait*. And as they watch the deathbed of their youngest daughter burn into ember, the young ghosts and the night-world they bring with them closes in.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION: PART II

So many of my MA courses at Cleveland State University tie directly into this story, and into the thesis project on whole. In a way, these classes map an evolution of *Young Ghosts* as surely does the path of "The Snowman" in the years prior. And, if it hasn't been made clear by now, *Young Ghosts'* evolution is really my small evolution as a writer of fiction, for a profession, and as an enduring piece of life.

Some classes, including Composition Theory (ENG 506), Workshop in Teaching (ENG 507), and Workshop in Teaching (ENG 507 II) cannot be made to fit into this influential collection, other than in tangential fashion. But this tangential fashion still proves valuable in retrospect. On arrival as CSU, I'd spent considerable time working the craft of writing, including a history of submitting for professional publication and

receiving a mixture of success, rejection, and editorial feedback. But I'd gone about this process in isolation. Don't read this wrong: I shared my stories and my writing with many, many individuals, most of them quite credible, before each and every submission. What I didn't have was the chance to work in the close proximity of others who spent as much time working the nuts and bolts of writing as I did.

I am thus indebted to Dr. Mary (Murray) McDonald, the professor of several of these classes and the individual responsible for welcoming me into the rigor, expectation, and collaborative atmosphere of composition, fiction or otherwise, in academia. Without the grounding of process, especially in terms of research and selection of editors she provided, I would not be where I am today. Consequently, a fellow writer of horror, and the best I have come across personally, Mark Justice, came into my writing sphere while I attended one of these classes. Mark continues to spur me to not only write better, but to just *keep writing* horror. He reminds me that we take what we do seriously and that this is 1.) okay, 2.) fun, 3.) worthwhile, and 4.) something we couldn't quit doing, no matter how hard we tried. Any fiction author, especially a genre author, needs a person like this to keep them going, or at least keep the believing.

Training to become a teacher even helped my writing in unexpected ways. I wouldn't use the semicolon or the tactics of sentence beginning-and-end-placement quite so well without this experience, or my time as a Graduate Assistant instructor in the CSU Writing Center. Strange, but true. As Stephen King states in *On Writing*, the first level of a writer's toolbox is always command of the language at a grammatical level. Vocabulary, metaphor, symbolism – these elements set the good writer off from the tone-deaf recorder, but are nothing if the writer lacks fundamentals. I can honestly say the focus on grammar and composition I undertook in these early courses improved me in

this distinction. Like the jump shooter who spends so many afternoons working on knee bend and wrist snap to make muscle memory, I feel my early composition courses let me write without getting gummed up thinking. This is a good feeling.

One early course, Practical Criticism (ENG 510), taken under Dr. Adam Sonstegard, provided a similarly unexpected, though more direct, influence for *Young Ghosts*. In this course of this class, focused on the fundamentals of literary criticism, we read both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the short works of Henry James, including his classic story of ghost children, "The Turn of The Screw." I'd read *Darkness* so many times before, but studying it with the heavy lens of lit crit. applied and finding it's mood and horror roots more than capable of standing up to the dissection reaffirmed my belief that horror could be literary and transcendental of era. The influence of James' "Turn" unearths itself more simply: the story is such a pillar of American/English horror and ghost story that to attempt writing in the genre without knowledge of it would be a cardinal sin. I hadn't read "Turn" before Dr. Sonstegard's class, and had we not covered it, I may have proceeded in writing horror with the fallacious belief that knowing the "basics" of the story was enough. On a deeper level, the intelligent and vocal manner of the ghost children in James' work execute brilliantly. A child ghost in my story whisks about with the same unnerving flightiness and preternatural supremacy. Just thinking about her scares me right now. Writing her was more frightening still, as I imagine must have been the case for the equally childless storyteller James.

My deficiencies as a teller of fiction, as mentioned before, prove a little trickier to tackle than are the disciplines of composition, instruction, and literary enjoyment through critique. But the concept of improving the storyteller rests as the bedrock of all Creative

Writing tracks and Masters in Fine Arts. In the face of the born genius, these paths of study seek to make the storyteller better by dissecting the art at the same elemental level as composition is dissected in the diagram of a sentence. I've mentioned many of the elements previously, though I may not have given them proper names (beats, dialogue, point-of-view, etc. – more on this soon to come.)

The first course to speak of on this level is the Creative Writing Workshop (ENG 602) I took with Shelia Schwartz. Before moving further into analysis, I need to mention that Shelia was slated to be the original advisor for this thesis project. The changes she suggested I took to heart. I also firmly believe these changes drove the story into a format my eventual advisor, Professor Imad Rahman – whom Shelia personally recommended – was willing to take a chance on. In this course, my first creative workshop at the graduate level, I came to know some of the problems that so far plagued my storytelling. Inability to remove enough flowery window dressing from my scenic description demonstrated one issue. A lack of practice with dialogue made up another. A habit of pressing for too much subtlety, to the point of creating confusion, made up one more.

However, a tendency to create plots too overly complex for the short story format perhaps served to be the greatest of my deficiencies. Sheila convinced me that the short story, in modern times, sat as the playground of the emotional epiphany. The works I produced, including all their casts of characters, immense back-story, and reams of unexplained off-stage action, required the novella or novel's space. This explanation convinced me many of my "finished" short works were not really "complete." Many of them tabled, I decided to move full go into a project I had always wanted to take on: a novel-length work. Though I didn't intend *Young Ghosts* to be said work, when Imad

suggested it needed to be, it was this earlier course and advice of Shelia's that made me agree.

The next class to speak of in the growth of my abilities is the MFA Nonfiction Workshop (ENG 611) on Creative Nonfiction I took under Neal Chandler. Not only did I travel to Youngstown just to take the final course taught by Neal, but I also took the class in the ranks of MFA-caliber writers from the NEO MFA program. These writers, every one of them, were better than me. They probably remain so. But they also pushed me to up my game in writing as much, if not more so, than Neal did. I have a natural distrust of the writing workshop; I think everyone bullshits to protect the egos of others and to eventually protect their own. There were few, if any, punches pulled in this workshop, and these writers knew what they were talking about. Neal, facilitating the course, taught us about the form and crafting the various staple pieces of the new journalism and creative nonfiction worlds. He also introduced us to the world of professional publishing not with hippie optimism, but with the grounded belief that it was a legitimate world to work in, that people really did it, and that the option was available to us *if we were good enough*.

Most importantly, Neal knew how to pinpoint and define specifics of what was wrong in writing, from *all* levels of the toolbox. Neal crushed me on grammatical errors I routinely overlooked but made me look stupid (misplaced modifiers topping the list), killed me on writing in the passive voice, and refused to let me slide with narrative exposition that danced around the true bloody tissue of what I really meant to say. Neal kicked my ass. If he didn't give me the stamp of approval of being a "real" writer by the end of our course (he wouldn't lie just to be so kind) he did show me the level of polish, consistency, and content required to work in the world of professional fiction and

nonfiction authorship.

Beyond professional sophistication like what Neal's class taught us, there were specific technical elements I wanted to concentrate on with *Young Ghosts*. These were elements I'd identified on my own in my personal analysis of work I admired. These same elements, however, also showed up in one of my courses at CSU, which brings me to the elements of storytelling learned under Dr. Adrienne Gosselin in Craft of Literature (ENG 512).

The elements I personally wanted to develop further, and stood as elements we were lucky enough to cover in Dr. Gosselin's hybrid workshop/theory course, included the following:

- a concentration on character, especially on characters that did not resemble me in experience, life-view, or temperament;
- sharing of a world I knew well, that of the hidden suburban America in contemporary times, years after Updike's investigations;
- the use of 3rd Person Limited point of view for narration, a norm of popular fiction;
- a hyper-intensifying of pace, something I call the *Harry Potter* influence and something I attribute to fiction well received in the cinematic present;
- a learning of how to slow down this same pacing without losing momentum;
- a focus on molding my tendency toward cinematic fixtures, including removing their trouble spots (*P.O.V. cross-cutting*) while retaining their usefulness (*the television as narrative informant*);
- an attempt to write more unique voices in my dialogue, which would create characters easily identifiable as individuals thanks to their attributed speech alone;

- and a focus on specific grammatical difficulties, including staying away from lengthy sentences and multiple prepositional phrases, especially those ending a sentence, and, at the same time, a breaking out of the stilted need to always remain grammatically perfect.

Other technical elements I wanted to concentrate on adhered to those presented in Renni Browne and Dave King's *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, first read in Dr. Gosselin's same ENG 512 class. Chapters of the book deal with basic writing adages. *Show* is privileged over *tell*. *Lists* are okay to create, and can actually have a profound and positive impact upon *pacing* when used properly. However, unlike other manuals of the craft, specific and recognizable examples, including some from works the caliber of *The Great Gatsby*, appear alongside the adages, providing clear examples of how to put theory into practice. Other chapters deal with previously unfamiliar terminology such as *proportion*, *beats*, and *sophistication*. Very quickly these terms became cornerstones of my writing lexicon, both in speaking of writing as well as self-editing myself in the manner the book's title encourages. The complete checklist of do's and don't from *Self-Editing For Fiction Writers* is one I continue to see mentally every time I sit down to grind, and it informed the whole of process involved during the progression from "The Snowman" to *Young Ghosts*.

One other lesson from Dr. Gosselin's class is vital to mention. An assignment asked us to research a place we would never want to go. While this may seem a simple enough – perhaps even *simplistic* enough – workshop assignment, I must say that it was not. First off, it forced all of us to conduct the practice that the imaginative so often and so easily shy away from: research. Real nose to the ground, honest-to-God, look-up-some-facts research. I had done a great deal of research in the past – makes and models

of vehicles used in my stories; medical inquiries to make diseases, deaths, and dismemberments more believable; etymology of names for symbolic value; and even the history of disasters and the history or stories about those disasters when tying a ghost back to an event people could recall at the murky fringes of their own memories. But, this assignment showed me, I had been lazy in my research. In my estimation, I only did research, like a novice academic, to *fit* or prove the story I *had already* molded. What I had not done, and what blew my mind when completing it and then using it for a fresh story, was conduct research *before* I had a story idea.

So often, when questioning whether I could ever exhibit the profundity of sheer production needed to be a professional writer, I say to myself “I have no ideas. Everything sounds like the same shit, the same story, told over.” Doing research on Modesto, California (which I found at the top a Google list of worst cities in the U.S.), I suddenly created a character, and more importantly, a character history, that I not only liked, but I could also sink my teeth into. The revitalization of this moment was revelatory. I would never be out of ideas; I didn’t have a stunted imagination: I just needed a little nugget of something new and fascinating, and perhaps one more nugget of something else new and fascinating, to crash it into. From this collision, set down into reliable process, a million more stories could be born – that was if I wasn’t too lazy to put in the same work in the future and abstain from becoming so self-defeatist as to think the well of my story-ideas had hit perpetual repeat.

After my workshop experience, finished up by Dr. Gosselin’s hybrid, I moved into the last critical course of the MA. And it was Dr. Jennifer Jeffers’ Graduate Seminar in the Post WWII Brit./Ang. Novel (ENG 695) that brought a frightening critical revelation to the surface of my creative consciousness: reading and analyzing the crisis of

identity and gender streaming through the selected works of this course, I realized a thread weaving through my own works. This thread owed nothing to mood, setting, genre, or even plain old lack of ingenuity. This thread was a *theme*, a great critical theme that my writing by no means, even among male writers I admired, looked upon for the first time. This theme was the crisis of masculinity in the 20th /21st Century male. For all my stories of demons and dead, of broken hearts and flighty women, of fathers and sons and wives and daughters, a theme arises time and again: each one of my male protagonists struggles not only with external antagonists romantic, familial, and supernatural, but also (and more centrally, I now realize) struggles with their own inadequacies as men.

My male characters – even those like Chris Temple in *Young Ghosts* who do reach maturity, adulthood, and established social productivity – live in fear of symbolic castration and cuckolding brought on by their own mysterious inner failings. And while every story I have written does not feature such a male protagonist – I offer my share of females and even sexless things at heroes – even in these other tales, if one explores deep enough, I think the hallmarks of the masculine crisis infecting first Britain in the mid Century and then America after the turn, bubble not far from the air.

Sitting through Dr. Jeffers' course on this subject, and the semi-follow up of Studies in 20th Century Lit: Contemporary British Novel & Film (ENG 535) – perhaps a follow up because I wasn't ready to leave the subject matter just yet – delivered this truth to me. In fact, this fascination led me to read Guy Garcia's *The Decline of Men* and any other contemporary literature I could find on the subject. In the end, I come to the conclusion that I am fascinated by this crisis. So being the case, I have set it down into my most serious work to date, *Young Ghosts*. I do so because my fascination really

derives from an overwhelming urge to resist and overcome this ongoing cultural faltering. I see the failing of men in my grandfather's and my father's and my own generation. I see this failing grows from insane definitions and images of masculinity placed upon men, fantasy roles as harmful to femininity and gender equality as to the men who must live up to them. Seeing and abhorring this largely unspoken affliction, I guess I wish to "wrap my hands around the darkness," as Carol does in *Young Ghosts*, meaning I strive to write fiction for men of men that doesn't cripple men. I find this purpose noble, if narrow. For the time being, I admit it though, and yet still find it strange to think this purpose was identified in the unlikely realm of a literary criticism class, especially one I initially believed – and maybe even rightly so – to be over my dullard's head.

ON GENRE – WRITING IN THE HORROR VEIN: PART II – MOVING FORWARD

I'll admit that killing off the world's children, as I begin to do in *Young Ghosts*, is a third turn of the screw. The idea of the Pied Piper, of the old nursery rhyme and the musician's revenge, has tugged at me for years. In an interview, Stephen King admitted his shape-shifting evil in *It* arose from a similar childhood disquieting, this one being of the fairytale troll under the bridge. In the same conversation, King claims he knew he'd have to deal with his troll and bridge fear through the catharsis of writing someday. *It* was his way to do so. In a way, I had to do the same. The story of the Pied Piper, of a helpless society still gluttonous enough to refuse fair payment for services rendered true, does not necessarily scare me. That it causes a *disturbance* seems the better fit. The story of the Pied Piper created a *disturbance* within me, and this disturbance was

something I had to deal with eventually. Hence, *Young Ghosts*.

The essence of this terrible disturbance is the essence of almost all the horror stories I've written. This essence is the mistake you can't take back, the one made with good, if not flawed, intentions. Coupled with parenthood, this is the great primal terror of early King stories – *Pet Semetary* and *Cujo*. It is the Faustian deal, as well as the evil desire of complicity striking in Barker's *The Damnation Game* and Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*. To have your child die and you still live, with the child's blood on your impotent hands – this is the great terror. This is also the terror of the post-apocalyptic. Here, the world ends and you keep living: guilty, lonely, and without hope for the future.

Great horror is also knowing that a choice will become tragedy and using this for gain. The original Pied Piper tale is a morality play: the wicked villagers of Hamelin pay the price for renegeing on their promise to pay the rat-catching Piper. As *Young Ghosts* intends no direct retelling, but instead a treatment, this lesson does not replay. Instead, *Young Ghosts* brings Alister Vandermime in with his promise of cryonic salvation. Vandermime doesn't know for sure that his remedy is a paper tiger, but the point of his certainty is moot. He doesn't care. Alister Vandermime is *disturbed*, though perhaps at the fault of the world he inhabits, the crumbling of which triggers his full psychosis. But in true post-apocalyptic fashion, he is only *so* disturbed. Most of the time, his cognitive functions operate brutally well, like Heath Ledger's character-defining portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Like the Joker, Vandermime rationalizes only in a fashion necessary for sanity in a disturbing world. He is, in this way, just like everyone else. Nihilistic? Yes. But in a world certain to end after only two more generations, what's wrong with making enough money to live out the end of days in Roman excess?

Alister Vandermime's original motivation for tricking the parents of the Blue

Pines into paying him to freeze their children is just that. Everyone is going to die anyway. Vandermime just wants enough money to burn down to Florida and live out his remaining days drinking, sunbathing, boating, and staring at the Gulf sunset. The cryonic freezing might even work. So, in a manner, Vandermime *does* provide some type of salvation to Arcadia's children. They won't die of the Piper disease, after all. Of course, when the children start returning as angry ghosts, seeking a world of their own (another theory behind the original Piper myth), motivations have to change, even for Vandermime I think, which is something I'll need to tackle in Acts II and III.

On the topic of motivations, I have to answer the question of where I want *Young Ghosts* to go. *Young Ghosts* Act I, appearing as the thesis that follows, represents a foundation for completing the full *Young Ghosts* short novel. Acts II and III will follow the plot laid out previously. For this continuance, recall that "The Snowman" represented a finished story. So being, in enlarging Act I into what is now the establishment of *Young Ghosts*' world, all major plot development remained the same. Narrative exposition, such as the end-of-summer BBQ; new characters adding dynamic, like Dr. Frank Lupiwitz; and complications, including the implied attraction between Chris Temple and Samantha Corringer, arose to flesh-out the world necessitated by the story. More than anything else though, visceral details of a world quickly sliding into the post-apocalyptic, including visuals of a nighttime neighborhood shut into individual fortresses, came into being. They did so in order to ground readers in the crumbling scenery the action and characters' desperations needed to play against. But, as stated, these additions in many ways prove simply cosmetic.

Likewise, Acts II and III, in drafts not appearing here, contain all the germinal elements and narrative structure to complete the majority of story action Act I starts in

motion. Originally, they were to appear with this work. However, one change – really, an expansion of an idea not given its due in the original novella – requires Acts II and III to be much larger and much different than they are in “The Snowman.” This one element grew in ways that demand attention in the rest of the story’s arc, and in many ways not yet investigated. Being so, they may alter the very backbone of the narrative originally devised. This expansive element consists of the young ghosts themselves.

The ghost story is my constant. The American ghost story – complete with the concept of new ghosts, those requiring the creation of new histories to take the place of the established European or Asian heritages – over and over is the one I seek to tell. For me, the newness of the United States is fertile ground for tilling ghost stories not borrowed or bound by the limitations of literary convention and Gothic lineage (*Heart-Shaped Box* is perhaps the best recent example of this). Like America, the American ghost story is still inventing itself, and its rules. It is a more frightening ghost story because its ghosts can only be so old, as only so many generations of a family are truly *American*. What I mean is this: tread too far for an evil count or beheaded duchess and one must return across the Atlantic, to Irving’s Hessians or Stoker’s Transylvania. Tell an America ghost story, to the contrary, and one talks of ghosts that someone still living either remembers, or knew outright. We are close to our ghosts in America. Being so, we hold a *stranger* relationship with them.

For years I have expounded the theory that the ghost story is not about death but instead about guilt. Ghosts linger as reminders of the past, either caused in error or neglected in shame. A classic American horror convention rests in tying these ghosts – and, in doing so, tying the bad “outsider” – to the Native Americans who preceded the settlers. Famous ghosts from *Pet Semetary* to *Poltergeist* owe their roots, literally, to

American Indians and their dead. The cruelties these manifestations perpetrate upon their white protagonists evoke white guilt in barely-veiled manners. So is the nature of almost every ghost story: the bones in the attic belong to the apparition seeking justice. Only exhumation and the light of day will let the spirit rest. No ground is broken with these theories; I'll admit that. But they are necessary to elucidate in order to explain my aesthetic in *Young Ghosts*, and more importantly, the pivot from which the story turns.

What fascinates me is the *origin* story of the ghost, told not just in flashback (retread in almost every new horror film made today) but instead told as the *central* story itself. Instead of an alien antagonist woken from generations before, I love the idea of the ghost as *contemporary*, as the dead of someone known and personally loved. Again, this is no new ground to tread. But the ghost of a child remains the turn of a screw to this concept made already more interesting when juxtaposed against the classic ghost from olden days. And when this child ghost – made all the more frightening because, as Dr. Lupitwitz eventually remarks, “if dead men tell no tales, dead children tell less” – holds as many agendas and desires as the living protagonists it antagonizes, and these agendas involve complexities too vast to fixate upon attention lust and revenge alone, then the interest of the new ghost story only grows. Warring sides suddenly crop up. With them, crop up conflicts much too great to contained within a novella.

Such is the challenge *Young Ghosts* runs up against. This occurs the moment the ghost children and their night-song lay claim to the world their living parents still inhabit. Civil, generational, and ideological conflicts erupt. And in these conflicts, all that is needed is one agent provocateur to settle the battlements blazing. So is the case of Alister Vandermime, and his proposition to freeze living children in order to keep them from joining the ghostly armies of their nubile brothers and sisters.

This is where I want to go with *Young Ghosts*. I want to flesh-out the skeleton I've revealed above. Around this fairly simple plot and twists I want to explore the psychological disturbances of a future first lost to death, then lost to something much worse. I want the dead children arising from *The Piper* to experience the apocalypse of their ends, but then wake up to realize they can keep going. I want death to twist them into seeing their parents and the orphaned older generations as playthings to be tortured into abandonment of the world they will make their own. In the end, I want to explore life, death, youth, and mortality turned upside down. More importantly, I want to explore the relationships and feelings of people as they endure this cataclysm. I want to explore this because I want to explore the amazing ability to remain and redefine human even in the face of everything that makes doing so seem perpetually insane. And at the same time, I want to move people to rethink notions of what is "supposed to be" and reconsider what maybe simply "is." This is my ongoing fascination with horror: terrible things exist and terrible things will come to pass. Terrible things will appear that we could never have imagined. But in the end, they will have to be endured, because much of life is enduring the terrible in order to earn the chance to make the memorable, and, eventually, the incredibly joyous. For this, the horror novel remains our safe and entertaining test ground. And the ghost story reminds us why we work so hard to stay alive.

CONCLUSION: FINAL THOUGHTS AND PASSING OFF

I have always wanted to write a novel. It has always constituted, to continue the sports metaphors that color my thoughts as much as my work, the ultimate goal. Perhaps

this is the goal of all young writers: one published novel hovering about in print, just long enough to impress someone special in a bookstore on a snowy evening ten years down the road. All my short story work, all my novella work, conducted in that evolutionary order, led to the novel project. Learned from the authors such as King and Barker and Gaiman who I emulated as a teen, these shorter works were my testing ground for different elements to be used in the novel, as well as the way to build a publication history before seeking an agent. Will I submit *Young Ghosts* for publication once it's complete? Or will I shelve it as my practice novel, before moving on to projects I think even more interesting and more likely to add something to the world? I don't know. But it doesn't matter. This thesis process brings me closer to the goal than I've ever before enjoyed. With a little more work, I'll have a real minor league work under my belt. If lucky, I'll then be ready to take a more professional swing. And then another. And another. And one day, I might just finish that novel that makes me proud, makes me satisfied, and even allows me to rest.

Then the real writing might just begin

Michael Crifasi
November 2, 2009
Avon Lake, OH

CHAPTER II

YOUNG GHOSTS

PART I.

Two weeks after the first thousand children died, Chris Temple stared at the living room television. From the dark corner by the empty fireplace, the big floor set hummed. The mechanical decay had started four days ago, and its notice marked the TV's change from simple appliance to something else entirely. Left on as it was, every hour of every day, the fifty-six inch Panasonic now lived as a houseguest.

Chris shifted on the ottoman and leaned further into the TV's radius.

The TV (*No, not the TV*, Chris thought. *The guest*) told the story of an epidemic blitzing the world. It chattered on and on, while on its screen, thousands of sick children grew into millions and millions grew higher still. Around Chris, wrinkled blankets, crushed pillows, empty glasses, and growing dust gathered in the still room. A bottle of hand sanitizer sat on the television itself, half its liquid contents already drained. Tissue boxes – bought in threes and still shrink-wrapped together - stacked by an unused wall. Fifteen boxes in all stood ready for immediate use.

In the middle of the new clutter – now reminiscent of the storage rooms in the Surgery Center he managed – Chris realized something. With a hand lifted to wipe the sweat from his neck, he realized he'd come to hate the glowing box, hate the ghostly presence it had grown into. What he hated more though, were the new ghosts it brought into his house, hour after hour.

That's right, he thought. New ghosts. Fresh, young, ghosts. Guests. Ghosts. New guests, new ghosts. A world filling up with ghosts that shouldn't be. Not so soon. Not yet. This was not the way the world came to an end. Not now. Not yet. It couldn't be.

Chris had never kept a TV on for so long. Carol, his wife the vice principal, would leave one on when she was alone. The girls sometimes fell asleep watching movies in the den. But when Chris came to shut them off, either Darrien or Brandi would wake and make him start them over. And, once, on a long lake weekend, the family left the kitchen set on for three days.

But that was it.

"...No. The worst thing is you can still see them. They're still there. I swear to Jesus, I can still see them..." the TV said.

Chris pulled his eyes from the news channel and got up. His tall frame unfurled slowly. As he did, the remote fell to the carpet. Without chasing it, he walked to the kitchen. He didn't dare look back.

Once in the kitchen, he glanced around the small room at the back of the house. A glass of once-boiled water rested on the counter. Unopened mail piled on the kitchen table. Newspapers spilled off one of the kitchen chairs. The top-most issue told the story of so many below it: *Epidemic Real. Millions Die. No Cure Comes. If The Cincinnati*

Gazette still ran off the presses and got delivered, Chris hadn't seen a new issue in his driveway for a week. From his windows though, he really couldn't see the entire yard. And the idea of going outside, of opening the door without emergency, just registered as ridiculous these days.

Sudden hunger pangs below his shirt – the same Packers tee he had not only slept in, but also worn the entire sweltering day before – drove him to the pantry. In the back, he came across a single onion bagel, cinched in plastic. He turned the roll over in his hands, eyeing it for signs of rot. The girls didn't like bagels. Unsure still, he opened the bag and sniffed.

Still good, he thought to himself.

But what if, what if this is where the disease started, where it lives...

He popped the bagel into the toaster, set it to high, and killed his thoughts before they grew.

Carol appeared in the doorway, dressed in a white halter-top and blue OR scrubs. She didn't look at Chris. Instead, she grabbed the water jug from the fridge and began to make coffee. Deep lines creased her round cheeks, leaving marks where she'd pressed into the bedspread for hours. Meanwhile, the little thirteen-inch under the walnut cabinets returned from commercial. Body suddenly gone rigid, Carol grabbed the tiny Toshiba remote and raised its volume.

“...still no word on exact numbers, but confirmations received from all major continents and over 75% of developed nations. To repeat, all seven major continents and 75% – that's seventy-five - percent of developed nations...

Initial hot spots such as London, Paris, Sao Paulo and Beijing reporting alarming increases. No difference here at home: Baltimore, Charleston, Philadelphia,

Phoenix, San Antonio, Denver. All already posting confirmation rates above 60%. Authorities in some locations, including nearby Cincinnati, admit their estimated numbers may be too low. And, according to the CDC, child fatalities have skyrocketed...

“Shut it off,” Carol said. Her thin left hand moved to her forehead.

“You’ve got the remote,” Chris said.

Carol shut off the television. She tossed the remote to the Formica counter and crossed her arms. The remote spun as it slid. It clattered into the backstop before eventually dropping into the empty sink.

“Well,” she said, blue green-eyes turned to the window.

“What?” Chris said.

“Are you going to wash the girls, or do I have to?”

And just like that the conversation changed, changed as it could only since children starting dying and the world went into hiding just two weeks ago.

Chris poured two glasses of sterile water – no ice – into plastic dinosaur cups. He left the kitchen then, and his wife, without another word. On his way up the stairs, he glanced out at the empty neighborhood.

A month ago, in the Blue Pines development, even an early Thursday morning in July would have buzzed with joggers, dog walkers, young parents, pets, and children. Now, as they had been for days, the streets were still. Un-mowed grass caught small piles of letters fallen from mailboxes. Uncollected newspapers, weeks old and sealed in yellowing plastic, caught the spray of still-running sprinklers, themselves sinking into their own muddy ruts. Garbage spilled across driveways and stained sun-drenched gutters. Everywhere, the yards and cream-colored development streets stood dead still

and empty.

Except for one figure, briefcase in hand, moving down the sidewalk.

Chris froze. He watched the figure, the stranger in the dead landscape. *Who is he? Why is he out?* Chris's overworked mind spun on rusting cogs. *Who? Who? Who? Does he wear a red mask? No. That's a story. A story. But still. Who walks outside? Now?*

But the suit-clad stranger disappeared beyond the window's edge in a breath. After a few movements that strained to see farther, Chris gave up. Finally, he started climbing again. Only one thought really moved him forward though: the realization that the figure outside had certainly been an adult.

...child fatalities...

A deep sob sounded from the kitchen. The TV clicked on once more. A bodiless voice rose in volume. This time the voice didn't belong to an anchor or commercial; it was the President.

"No, we don't know anything else. We've got what we told you, and that's it. You know that if we had anything, anything even a little helpful, Diane, we would have informed the public. You know, I've got three children myself..."

The rest got lost in the creaking of stairs leading to the girls' room.

This is how The Piper – the disease that led children out of the world – began. This is where the first ghost walked in from, and where it walked out from as well.

Almost up the dark staircase, Chris made up a story for how the disease had started. Jolene Madison, a nine-year old Florida girl, complained to her sister, Alena, twelve. Jolene, Alena, and their mother had sauntered into the First Christ Church of the

Risen summer BBQ in Lee County an hour before. The annual event was the largest in the country. It brought 40,000 people in on the first Saturday in August, brutal heat or no.

Hundreds of children, literally hundreds, littered soccer fields and softball sandlots spread out behind the mega-church and full parking lots. They even played games with adults between the rows and rows of black pickups and blue town cars resting in makeshift grass lots. Horseshoes went up. Beanbags came down. Footballs crowned the Florida pine trees, white clouds, and crystal sky.

“I’m sick,” Jolene said.

Alena, face disgusted and freckled with flecks of summer milkweed, turned to her sister.

“You aren’t.”

Jolene clutched her stomach. Her sweating brow shone with a film of wetness and matted brown hair.

“I *am*,” she said.

Alena got off the slide and pulled Jolene to her by the blue sundress.

“You *ain’t*,” she said. “You’re hot, but you *ain’t* leaving.”

Jolene didn’t say another word. Instead, she dropped to the ground. When she did, her sundress pulled against her body, caught in her sister’s hand. Skin slid off Jolene’s body as her limbs crumpled. Hot, sticky, and rank blood jumped into the air. The shed skin, like an old rubber wetsuit, spilt wide. Alena screamed and screamed, but could not drop the dress. She screamed and children ran, ran in every direction into the afternoon.

Christ, stop it, Chris thought. No one knew when The Piper – named for the fairy

tale's double-crossed rat-catcher and his hideous revenge – had first appeared, let alone where. Cases had seemed to show up all over the world simultaneously. Doctors, sweat soaked, said maybe the disease had been in a latent stage and had gestated once the summer months hit. No one believed them, and truth be told, they didn't believe themselves.

In fact, all that was true of Chris's story was the way little Jolene died. The skin did pull away. Only in real life, it rotted first. And it didn't happen in quick minutes. It happened in slow, agonized days. In less than 60 hours, a child rotted to death from the outside in.

With the wish to just close his eyes and sit in the shadows that enveloped the staircase, Chris exhaled sharply into his beard. Behind him, the kitchen TV talked to Carol. From the other direction, voices came from the living room as well.

There, little ghosts were left alone to flit out of the TV and settle into the house: his house. Chris, like more people than admit, was deathly afraid of ghosts. And now he lived in a world – a real world – full of them.

Paused outside the bedroom door, Chris's bare feet sunk into the carpet installed only months ago. Twisted at the waist, he attempted to knock with his elbow without spilling any water.

“Brandi? Darrien?” he said. “Are you awake? It's time to get cleaned up. Mommy's going to make some breakfast, but you've got to get clean first. Ready?”

Muffled groans ruminated from beyond the dark door.

“Girls, I'm coming in,” he said, and pushed inside.

Sunlight fell through slats in the bedroom shades. Dust particles circled the air.

Little tremors of panic stuck Chris when he saw the aerial debris. He shook his head, trying to shake away that which he couldn't control. Barely settled, barely back to what he thought of as a man, a father, he forced himself into a weak smile. His feigned look appeared just as two squinting pairs of eyes and two bed-matted heads rose above pink sheets. His little brunettes awoke. In the corner on plastic cloths, their clothes sat folded and laundered, just as they were every single day now.

Brandi sat up straight first, her little face doing its best to squeeze into a believable sulk.

"Daddy, I don't want the pills," the seven year-old said.

Chris started to reply, but was cut off.

"If we don't take the pills, we can't have breakfast."

Darrien's deeper voice issued from where she curled back under the comforter. As Chris knelt and set the two glasses on the nightstand, sheets rustled. Suddenly, the round, dark eyes of his nine-year old fixed on him.

"But I don't *want* to be cleaned up first," Darrien whispered. Her voice seemed far away. "I'm tired of getting cleaned up all the time. I don't *like* doing it anymore."

Chris looked into the glints of his daughter's eyes.

Baby, what can I say? What do you say about something so bad it makes you want to crawl out of your own skin just to feel okay again?

The line of thought nearly sickened him. Somewhere, ghostly little voices snickered.

"I'm sorry, Little Tiger, but Mommy says so," he said when he could talk again. "She says you've got to stay clean."

"Can we at least take a bath now?" Brandi said. She pouted behind her father's

back, her attention stolen. “Why do we always have to wait on the water, Daddy?”

Chris, who knew his youngest daughter’s motivations better than she, felt an actual, and unbelievable, smirk twitch in his cheek.

“Not yet, Brandi Baby,” he said over his shoulder. “Not until later. You know Mommy and Daddy have to get it just right.”

He reached for the bottles of antibiotics and vitamins by the bedside.

“Can we go outside today, Daddy?” Darrien asked.

The question froze Chris. Darrien’s whispered words were meant only for him: Darrien was old enough and smart enough to know exactly what she was asking, and exactly why her sister should not hear.

Chris dropped his eyes to the orange bottles in his hands.

“No, Darrien,” he said. “No.”

He popped out pills for his daughters. Each girl got one antibiotic and a little pile of vitamins. A glass of water followed. When each girl began to drink, Chris reached for the box of sanitary wipes on the floor. There, mentally, he prepared himself for the prospect of cleaning his naked daughters with antiseptic cloths for yet another morning.

“...you can still see them...”

The girls gulped down their pills. Brandi issued a cute “yuck” that set Chris’s lips trembling. Mouth just managed not to split open, ready to mutter and blubber, Chris took back the empty glasses and replaced them on the bed stand. When he did, he caught Darrien’s eyes. Her look burned into her father’s cheek. Shamed, Chris looked at the sun coming in through the shades. There, he watched tiny particles slip through the bedroom and thought about life before the disease settled in.

“I fucked your wife, Chris. You know that, don’t you?” Adam Corringer said. Cedar smoke drifted up around his salt-and-pepper hair, hair dyed for the look. Without a glance to check the effect of his revelation, he pulled a kebob from the giant silver Brinkman grill.

Everywhere else, the “adults” of the Blue Pines neighborhood slipped in and out of little conversation triangles and laughing semi-circles. School had ended for the year earlier in the day and – just like every mid-June – the neighborhood gathered to celebrate. Bob Gremmin, owner of Gremmin’s Deli and Gremmin’s Discount Market, stirred the crowd when he showed up with his wife Denise and son Tucker. A surgical mask hung from Bob’s neck as he walked – grinning – over to the other men. Denise flicked back a piece of blond hair and ushered Tucker away from his father quickly. Bob meanwhile cracked his beer and took a bow to acknowledge the groans of his friends, some who muttered that, this time, he’d taken it too far. And when Tony Stratton pointed out Denise’s quick departure, Bob leaned in close and explained her anger: *only bought masks for me and Tucker*, he said; *she’s too cold a bitch to ever catch fever*. Everyone laughed. Bob Gremmin, mask pulled up, laughed loudest of all.

Dovetail Park sat in the middle of the Blue Pines cul-de-sac community nestled on the north end of Arcadia. The park’s picnic tables and tennis courts hid deep in the tall trees retained when the houses and streets went up just ten years before. Jogging trails connected the streets within the Cincinnati suburb and snaked off into the woods, leaving the clearing’s green boundary as porous as a sponge.

Once, one of these trails had left Chris a wreck, Carol a banshee, and the families of the Blue Pines turned into a vengeance mob in just two hours of a winter afternoon. Most of that day had already been forgotten – a close call averted into no more than a

cautionary tale. But while some sting remained in the back of Chris's chest over the incident, especially in moments when Carol fell into a dark mood and dredged it up, the warm, lightly-breezed summer afternoon and blossomed trees of the current day made him relax and forget.

“What?” he said then, only registering Adam's verbal barb in the last of instants.

He wore a sleeveless old Eau Claire city basketball jersey, an intramural hold over from just after college. Adam's clean, teal-blue La Coste polo, obviously just ironed, made him miss sleeves suddenly. A glance around scuttled the feeling quickly though.

Most of the other thirty-something men – Bob and Tony, Phil Ressick and Mark Montessor, Dick Fay and Daniel LeBarge, half a dozen more – had sleeves, but their shirts showed Hooters slogans, paint stains, and at least one faded Guns'N'Roses shirt that couldn't be worn for many more end-of-school barbeques to come. Once all the kids – few even in middle school yet, including Darrien and Brandi – grew a littler older, questions would come up about why the bombshell blonde was slumped against the shadowy alley wall, why her panties were dragged down below her bare knees, and what “Guns'N'Roses Was Here” meant in context.

The soft-cheeked siren grabbed Chris's eyes. From under her rolls of blond hair, her pursued ruby lips spoke to him.

It means I got fucked, Chris. It means I got fucked by a whole rock band. And I liked it. I like being fucked by a train. Do you like that, Chris? Do you like that I like that?

Yeah, I like it, Chris thought. The t-shirt siren's worn-out smile made him forget everything, including sleeve conundrums and Adam Corringer's off-color remark into the Brinkman. *Everyone likes it, but you know that. That's why you're bullshit on a t-shirt.*

But I do like it.

“Chris. Earth to Chris Temple, tallest man in Arcadia. Mountain Man Chris, come in. I said I fucked your wife.”

Chris looked back to the grill, cedar smoke, and the Paul Newman eyes that drove the women of the Blue Pines crazy. Of course, the hairy arms hanging from Adam’s blue polo didn’t match his movie star eyes, and his salt-and-pepper dye job ruined his “natural beauty,” even his wife Samantha said so, but the depth of his gaze, the sincerity of it, got to Chris just as much as when he’d met Adam and all the close-knit school friends he’d inherited when he’d married Carol. And, still, Chris didn’t know how to play things with Adam. Not just yet. But he’d get there, the old ball player in him said: *nothing can’t be done with practice.*

Adam had two kids of his own – a boy, Brian, and girl, Kristen – the same age as the Temple girls. The kids played together. Naturally then, the families spent a lot of time together, making them one of the family pairs within the tribe of the Blue Pines. They could say things to each other, things even the others couldn’t. Fucking Carol, fucking Carol like a train, was just one of those things Adam could say to Chris, the other guy in his unit. Sometimes it angered Chris: there were rumors of something between Adam and Carol way back before Ohio State, back between high school and freshman year, rumors Carol denied, and Chris mostly brushed off as he would any locker-room trash talk. Besides, though he would never cheat on Carol – didn’t know how a married man, a man lucky enough to be *in love* and not just *fucking* could do so – Samantha “Sammi” Corringer did take care of her body. She kept especially good care of her legs, runner’s legs. And when she wore little blue shorts and boat shoes like she did today, her legs shadowed in the middle where her muscles met and her tan deepened. If Chris was

going to screw outside of his marriage, well then—

“Dammit, Temple, I’m trying to say something here.”

Chris came back to the mid-June day.

“If you’ve been fucking my wife,” he said, turning full on into the tasteless joke, “then you can start paying for my kids. In fact, they kind of look like you. Especially Brandi. Where were you around May, seven years ago?”

Adam may have had Paul Newman eyes, but he did not have Paul Newman’s brain. So being, Chris got to look down the five inches separating the two men and watch as Adam’s mind twisted behind his eyes. The smell of sweet mango glaze and cedar slipped into Chris’s nose at the same time, making him want to eat, but also making him want to make sure the girls and Carol had gotten enough too.

“I…wait a minute,” Adam said, his brain faltering on how to roll the joke back into his favor. Quickly, as usual, he gave up. “Oh, fuck it. Yeah. I’ll send a check. But seriously.”

Chris lifted a kebob and pulled away a chunk of pink meat.

“Seriously?” he said.

Adam looked over into the oak trees for a minute, his joking countenance suddenly gone. He lifted his fat Foster’s can and took a drink. Then he brought his ‘seriously’ to light.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time it’s happened between the group,” he said.

Chris stopped chewing. He watched as Adam looked over his shoulder and at a redheaded man and blonde woman talking by the stone-gray water fountain.

Then it was Chris’s turn to be slow to come around.

You like that, don’t you?

“You mean Ally and Brent?” he said, identifying the pair as if needing to solidify what Adam accused. At the end of his sentence he burped. When he did, he could taste cold Foster’s push out onto his lips and beard.

“I don’t know for sure, but Samantha says she thinks Ally’s been trying to tell her on their last few runs. And, Brent, well, I don’t really keep up with him anymore. No one does.”

“So you don’t know—“

“No I don’t, but even if they’re not, others here have. I know it. You know it. Nobody talks about it, but we know. I know you don’t know all the history here, but let me tell you. College? Those years after in Columbus? It was like *90210* sometimes. Remember that show? All the passing around, like some kind of swinger high school? Dylan would show up with Brenda one weekend then Kelly the next and nobody at the Peach Pit skipped a beat. Even that old guy who ran it, whatever his name was. Nothing. ‘Nothing strange here. Just California.’”

Chris didn’t really hear Adam’s tirade build steam. And it was Nat, wasn’t? Nat ran the Peach Pit, before and after dark. Didn’t matter. Instead, Chris watched Brent Bayhood and Ally Ressick talk by the water fountain. He watched as Ally dipped one shoulder and pressed her chin into the other, a smile barely suppressed. He watched as Brent winked and somehow moved closer without really moving. His wife, Sera, was across the park, walking with the pretty Erin LeBarge and the not-quite-as-pretty Megan Fay. Beyond the two, a kickball game raged, kids and more than one overweight, fairly drunk adult throwing the ball at a runner and missing badly.

“I mean, shit-on-all, Chris. They’ve got kids. Both of them. And if we never said anything then, we sure wouldn’t now. Not with the kids. I mean I love what we

have, all of us. Such great friends. We're so close, even the guys. That's important when you've got kids. We're lucky, all doing this together. But, c'mon. You just can't let some things go. Kids know, you know. Samantha always told me that, during bad fights. 'The kids would know' she said. 'Go out and do it; the kids would know.'"

"Yeah," Chris said.

Carol had caught his glance from across the picnic area. She and Samantha had grabbed beers for themselves and were headed towards their husbands. On the way, they finished their beers. As they moved closer, they blocked Brent, Ally, and their new-summer secrets from view.

"Yeah?" Adam said. "Yeah what?"

Chris turned. He looked into the Paul Newman eyes looking up at him. With a deep drink of cold, rich, canned beer, he replied:

"Kids do know everything. They do. But what are we? We're all – all of *us* – we're just kids. You, me. Carol. Sammi. Everyone. We're still just *playing* grown up. We're still just kids too."

Then Carol and Samantha were on them. Samantha – Sammi – grabbed Adam and twisted his polo in her strong hand. She looked at Chris as she did.

"Can I talk with him for a second, Chris?" she asked. When she did, she held Chris's gaze with an intensity that made the can he held very cold. For a moment Chris felt odd, but then he realized why Sammi stared so intently after pronouncing her words: she was drunk. At 4:30 on a Wednesday, she was drunk. It was then he felt a hand on his own arm and Carol moving close to him.

"Sure," he said, and turned to his wife. From the corner of his vision, he felt more than saw Sammi pull Adam away. As they walked off, their voices hushed, led by

Sammi herself.

Carol looked after them.

“She’s not drunk.”

Chris, in shock, had to rework his grip on the Foster’s can.

“What?” he said, trying to change his face into anything less obvious.

“She pretends things around you. Especially when she wants to talk about something you’ll think is stupid. Lesley does the same, but I guess you know that.”

At the mention of Lesley Davidson, Chris involuntarily flicked his eyes to the tall, athletic woman standing near the table of watermelon and juice boxes. Lesley Davidson had been a famous volleyball player in the area, during college and her short time playing professionally. She was beautiful as well, with strong Nordic features slimmed and hardened by her life since the fame disappeared into the well of misfortune that had found her after. Jim Davidson had been struck by a drunk driver while helping one of his tow-truck drivers on a first assignment. A little older than the rest of the group, Lesley had been left no time to mourn Jim. Their two daughters and one son, not to mention the auto repair businesses Jim had owned, fell to her before her tears could even begin.

“She’s got the back of the shop stocked with bottled water and dried food, you know? She told me she knows it’s stupid – it’s just a flare up in Asia. It will never get here and it’ll pass like every flu scare always does. But she can’t help it. She just has to be...She just has to be how she is now. Don’t tell her I told you.”

Chris looked back down.

“How was the last day?” he asked.

Carol shrugged. She grabbed his beer and took a deep drink herself.

“Fine. Once or twice someone asked if any of the kids were sick, but that’s it.”

“And what did you tell them?”

Carol looked back up to Chris. A frown etched across her lips, she handed back the can.

“I told them lots of kids were sick. Kids get sick. That’s what they do. But they also get better. That’s what they do too. I told them Brandi and Darrien were sick just two weeks ago and I didn’t worry for a second. I told them not to worry either. But like I said, not many even really asked. Most were more worried about getting report cards through email instead of mail this year. For some reason they feel like anything other than a stamped school envelope and a list of “A’s” and “Has Great Potential” written in red ink just won’t count. Really, that was the worst headache I had all day.” She paused for a second. “But if that’s the worst of my worries, I think we’re in for a good summer.”

She grabbed the beer once more. With a sure move, she swallowed the rest of the contents, crushed the can, and smiled up at her husband.

“Nice jersey, by the way,” she said.

Chris’s jaw slackened for a moment, but then he snorted and reached for the cooler nearest the Brinkman. Top flipped back in a quick move of his big hand, he plunged into the ice.

“Another?” he asked.

“Sure,” Carol said and reached out to meet him.

Behind, the kickball game roared as the rubber ball went sailing by an unscathed little runner and rolled deep into the grass beyond.

The doorbell rang. It was Friday and Chris should’ve just gotten home from work. Friday meant pay day at the Surgery Center, and everyone complaining his

department fudged the checks. It was incredible what little separated doctors and nurses when it came to their biweekly funding fix. *Come on, Chris*, he could almost hear them say. *You know we deserve a little more. You know what we have to put up with from them.*

Instead of collapsing in bed, all his mid-level management done for the week, Chris sat, shackled to the CNN *Special Report* as he had been all day again. The news so engrossed him (*gleefully flashed by the ghost machine*, he thought, *the stinking houseguest that never leaves. Three days up long ago, and what a stink. Thank you, Mr. Franklin*) that a second ring had to sound before he looked up. Meanwhile, late afternoon blazed outside.

Chris walked quickly to the front door, avoiding a Nintendo DS and a *TeenBop!* magazine as he did. While in motion, he searched the hedges around the front walk. Finding no one, he shot his eyes to the rectangular windows running up the edge of the front door. There he found nothing either. Instead, he found himself worrying about the quality of his window seals.

At the same time, he caught the smell coming from under his arm: it was rank. Suddenly, the sweat that filmed across his flesh and under his hair came to him, the sweat of giving up showering just to have time to attend to the girls. The feeling of dirtiness, of dishevelment – of *decay* – flittered across his skin like an army of centipedes and slugs. His back prickled, the feeling of eyes piercing his vulnerable side joining the hallucination of insects. A sudden urge to spin dug at him. Only the fear of what he might find kept him from doing so. Instead, his hands went out to meet the door handle.

The beige door itself showed scuffs and fingerprints around runner and knob. Reached out for the handle, Chris tripped on the frayed edge of his baggy carpenter jeans.

Balance caught just before a big hand went through the plate glass to door's side, he stood up straight, smoothed his decade-old (*decayed-mold* he suddenly thought) Packers tee, and reached out again.

With a deep breath, he opened the inner door to reveal the storm glass beyond.

On the other side, stood the stranger he'd seen yesterday, dressed in suit and hat. A briefcase extended from his fist.

At the sight, Chris' own mind went reeling into absurdity:

Death of a Salesman, he thought. *The Return*. *In 3D*. *No red mask though*.
Shame.

He nearly smacked himself. It wasn't funny. How the hell could he joke, even to himself? *But how did you stop your brain from being your brain*, he thought, *especially just for situation and propriety? And sanity? Now that was the joke. Especially now*.

"Hi," the stranger said.

He smiled.

A hundred creases, lines, shadows, and wrinkles turned his sunburned skin to elephant hide. The folding flesh looked so convincingly pachyderm that his teeth may as well have been ivory.

Chris stared.

Awkward seconds passed. Then the man outside spoke.

"I'm Alister Vandermime," he said.

Smile loosened, the older man took off his olive fedora. The act revealed a flaking and liver-spotted, though not poorly shaped, head beneath. The hat got tucked in the crux of one baggy sleeve attached to a double-breasted charcoal suit. Eyes traced down, Chris noticed an American Legion pin on one lapel and, on the other, what might

have been a Mason crest. As he was studied, Vandermime stood silent and patient.

Good soldier, Chris thought. Finally, he dragged his eyes back up to the intense brown gaze of his guest.

“Chris,” he said, recalling his own name. “Chris Temple.”

“Chris,” Vandermime said. “Could I possibly talk with you inside?”

He then nodded at the storm door.

“No,” Chris said.

A twinge of guilt immediately pricked his spine.

Vandermime’s folded cheeks twitched for a second, but only for a second. The movement passed so quickly that Chris thought he might’ve made it up.

“That’s fine,” Vandermime said. “In fact,” he went on, “that’s why I’m here.”

Chris’s beard began to itch again. Beads of sweat grew at the crown of his receding hairline. They tickled and begged to be swept away.

“I’m not a salesman, Chris” Vandermime said. “I want you to know that up front. But I do have something I’d like to tell you about – something I think’ll help with your problems.”

He said problems, Chris thought. *Plural. He means the ghosts. He knows about the ghosts. He sees them too.*

Chris faltered for a moment.

“Problems...” he began to say.

But then a natural rationality and cynicism welled up with a fury. It stood him up tall, all the way to his full six-six. *Jehovah’s Witness*, he suddenly thought. *Of course.* As the TV talked in the living room, he found he wasn’t surprised. This would be the perfect time for God’s doorknockers, his thoughts continued. He tightened his jaw,

meaning to keep his contempt from showing. He managed people for a living; he knew about control. Sometimes, some days, he even felt he was good at it.

But the stranger's next words robbed him of any control he'd grabbed back from the abyss of *problems*.

"I want to help you save you kids."

Chris's face began to slip.

Two weeks trapped in the house caught up to him then. Cleaning Darrien and Brandi, wiping their naked bodies with wipes as if they were infants and not nine and seven caught up too. Carol reading and rereading the newspapers they still had, cross-referencing articles for some clue, some hope, caught up as well. Dried apricots, granola bars, Boy Scout popcorn, and water, so much boiled water, boiled water that definitely tasted different than real water, caught up. Carol crying and crying in an empty bathtub caught up. Calls from both sets of grandparents and barking angry commands for them to just stay away for God's sake caught up. Cleaning and re-cleaning the air filters caught up. Putting the cat out and having not seen it for days caught up. Watching the street with narrow eyes and no breath caught up. Fear of everything and its chance of infection caught up. Everything of a world that couldn't exist, a world more dying than alive caught up too. It all caught up at once.

And then the screaming started.

"GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!"

Vandermime's eyes jumped over Chris's shoulder. Chris turned just in time to catch Carol rushing down the front hall, from where she'd evidently been listening silently.

"GET OUT OF HERE! GET OFF MY PORCH AND GET AWAY FROM MY

HOUSE! DON'T YOU SAY A WORD ABOUT MY KIDS! DON'T YOU SAY ANOTHER GODDAMN WORD!"

Carol's mouth *O*-ed wide. Spit sprinkled Chris and the door.

Vandermime leaned backwards as Carol's hand crashed down on the metal handle. Her bare arm, running taught from a faded yellow tank top, tensed to twist it down.

Vandermime stepped back off the porch. He nearly fell into the azaleas as he did.

"*Shit,*" Chris muttered.

He just managed to grab Carol's hand before she let the outside in. Stopped and embarrassed, Carol crossed her arms quickly and stared into the hedges. She refused to even glance at Vandermime.

Outside, the stranger, finally balanced, reached down and picked up his briefcase from black mulch and returning weeds. His hat came next. It got dusted off and returned to his head in neat, though obviously forced, strokes.

"I'm sorry," he said. Brushes swiped along the briefcase, he moved a little to his side, trying to catch Carol's gaze. Unable to do so, he straightened himself entirely. Then he nodded to Chris in a tight way that signaled one more apology.

Without another word then, he headed down the drive. He sidestepped a neighbor's yellow cat on the way with barely a look. At the sidewalk, however, he threw a glance back.

Chris caught it alone.

Then Vandermime was gone, walking briskly across the street. Shadows and big oaks soon took him completely.

Carol started to relax. Chris still held her firm. A cocoa barrette pressed against

his sweating forehead. It smelled of melon.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “He’s gone. Don’t you see?”

Carol threw off his arms and spun. Faced up to her husband, her blue-green eyes showed red irritation.

“What were you doing, Chris? *What were you doing?*” she said.

Confused, Chris shook his head.

“I just got the door,” he said. “I just answered the door.”

“Jesus Christ, Chris, I can’t believe, with what’s going on, with what *happened*, that you were really just standing there. With the door open!”

Without another word, she brushed by and rushed up the stairs. The door to the girls’ room opened and closed quickly. In the moments after, two young, upset voices started to rise.

Chris dropped his chin.

He took a last glance out the storm door.

The street outside showed empty.

Still stung, he swung the door shut and headed back to the living room.

There, hunched on the torn floral ottoman, he sunk into the television once more.

“...*safety? What safety...*”

“...*well, you could live in an iceberg, Charlie. Works for the penguins...*”

Later, after giving the girls each a bath (boiling enough water was a two hour ordeal, even with both he and Carol sharing the work) and eating a dinner of canned meals (dated and sealed more than a month ago), the girls watched a movie they already owned (*Pirates of the Caribbean* – seeing the walking and rotting pirate skeletons nearly

made Chris reconsider the choice a quarter of the way in) while their mother and father whispered in the bedroom.

“Do you really think we should go out right now? Chris said. He sat on the maroon comforter of their unmade queen bed. “Do you really think we should go to *Adam’s* right now?”

“Don’t start with that,” Carol said. She fixed her blouse in the bathroom mirror. The blouse was black, fitted, and offset by tortoise shell buttons. “Don’t even *start*. Besides, *we* are going over there to meet our friends so *we* can all talk about what to do.”

“And what good is that going to do? The *government* doesn’t know what to do. What are a bunch of us going to come up with, over at *Adam’s*?”

“So you’d rather just sit here?”

“I am *not* just sitting here. And at least *I’m* not turning off the TV every time I get too sick to watch.”

Tears suddenly welled at the bridge of Carol’s nose. The change came so abrupt and unexpected Chris didn’t know how to react. In the next ripe moments, he rose and moved to her.

“Christ, I’m sorry,” he said.

He wrapped his arms around his wife. She didn’t return the embrace. “I didn’t mean.... Christ.”

“Stop saying that,” Carol said.

“What?” Chris said, pulling back a little.

“Christ,” Carol said, her head still on his shoulder.

“Why?”

“It’s like we’re asking him for something.”

Chris hugged her tighter.

“Ok,” he said. “We’ll go. We’ll talk to the girls. They’re smart. They’ll be alright for awhile.”

Chris had gone to college in Wisconsin, at tiny Carroll University. There, he had played center for the basketball team. Carroll was one of only a handful of programs that had recruited him, which, for Chris, had been more than enough. Immediately after graduation, he had taken his MBA and moved to Ohio for a job. There, he’d met Carol only because a coworker at The Arcadia Spinal & Surgery Center – the private surgery practice he now managed accounts for – happened to be one of her old college friends from Ohio State.

Ohio State, Cincinnati, Miami, Xavier. Even if they didn’t go to high school together, they – the Tribe of the Blue Pines – went to college together or close enough to meet on weekends. So being, they met everyone they’d share their young adult lives with during the same four-to-five-year span. Now they did everything together: holidays, birthdays, weddings, vacations, binges, funerals. *A generation born codependent*, Chris’s mother liked to call them, *carving out a niche we couldn’t have imagined*.

But the group also made decisions together, and Chris had to admit, a lot of those decisions were good ones.

As he backed the midnight blue Tahoe down the driveway, he concentrated on the rearview mirror. As he did, Carol kept her eyes fixed on the house. The SUV’s running lights came on automatically, even though the mid-summer twilight and clear sky required only little artificial illumination. Reversed into the sandstone-colored street, they immediately found themselves behind a giant dump truck loaded with slick black

trash bags.

Between them, the radio talked: too small to be a ghost machine, but with enough history to quickly become eerily Rod Sterling in the crumbling world they inhabited.

“...and the State Department has asked you not go to the hospital...”

“...too much risk of contamination and spread...”

“...turned away...”

Carol changed the radio station. Next to her, Chris turned on his blinker, meaning to turn right from Dale St. and onto Barrons Ave. About to round the curve, houses of their friends became came into view: the Davidsons, the Fays, the Strattons, the LeBarges – all of them silent and shut up tight. In a neighborhood like the Blue Pines, open garage doors were so common one took them for granted. Seeing all the closed down doors now, Chris couldn't help but think of the vacant condo villages he'd seen on TV. Those built in places like Phoenix and Las Vegas when the market boomed. Those that became the ghost towns no one could ever have imagined when the bubble burst.

The thought of preplanned ghost developments made him very uncomfortable.

Just then, the dump truck's blinker began to flash too. Chris frowned. Carol had taken her hand from the radio's dial.

“...oh, you know, screw the official word. They don't want you at the hospitals because there's nothing they can do. If they could do anything, don't you think they'd have their own...”

“...Mr. President! I...what the President means...”

“...Yes, Mr. President, what do you mean?”

“...what he means, Diane, is that it's best if people keep to their homes, where they are safe...”

“...Is that true, Mr. President? Is home really the safest place? Is that where your family is? The Vice President’s family? The Secretary of...”

“...Are you finished, Ms. Dodd? You must know that the President could not possibly disclose...”

“...You know, Diane, it doesn’t really matter where my family is, now does it? It doesn’t matter at all, because no matter where they are, they’re no safer than yours. Is that what you want to hear?...”

Carol clicked the radio off. She turned to Chris, who caught her motion from the corner of his eye. Carol’s left hand moved from her lap to rest on the console between them. Her lips parted.

“Chris, I think maybe—”

She never got to finish.

Instead, she was thrown against her seatbelt as the rushing world suddenly came to a grinding halt.

Chris’s fingers splayed across Carol’s chest. He wrenched the Tahoe to the right, praying he could stop in time to avoid the steel gate of the garbage truck that’d just been t-boned by a metallic Honda Civic barreling through the stop.

The Tahoe screeched to a stop, only feet from the gate. Chris’s head struck the driver’s window. Shining pain closed over him. In a few more seconds, the world returned to normal.

“Carol?” he said, eyes closed, head ringing. “Are you okay?” Carol? Carol—”

Silence.

He opened his eyes.

Carol sat unnaturally still, back holding a loose curve, hands flattened dumbly on

her thighs. She stared out at Barron's Ave.

"Look," she said.

She nodded out the passenger window. As pain grew in his left side, Chris pulled off his seatbelt and raised himself. His hand braced on the steering wheel. But even raised up, all he could make out was a single trash bag laying in the street.

Nothing else.

"Carol, I don't see anything," he said, breath hitched. "I'm getting out."

He heaved himself out of the SUV and slammed its heavy door. Ahead of the Tahoe, fractured voices argued about blame. These voices mixed with the hiss of angry engines. A sanitation worker, not yet involved, jumped down from the dump truck and into sight.

Chris meant to signal to him and raised his ashen palms. But the worker ignored him. Instead, he ran out of sight. Hands dropped and angered, Chris headed around the front bumper of the Tahoe.

As he moved, Chris imagined. He imagined himself walking not across a suburban development street, but through a desert box canyon. He saw himself swinging his hips and holding his hands high, fingers splaying tense and ready. A big gun belt rode his waist. Brutal Western sunset slapped down on his back. Cowboys were not scared, Chris knew, not even of worlds filled with ghosts. The desert breeze kicked up then, and out front, a mysterious black cloth rippled in the evening shadows, ready to tear backwards at any second. But Chris was ready. He was not afraid. The desert and the sunset and the gun belt said so.

But there was no breeze. There was no desert. Instead, the Midwestern evening was timid, romantic, and a touch soft: just like the awkward big man loping over to the

mess of plastic fascinating his wife.

From the black plastic bag, something poked awkwardly outwards, like a tree limb. Even from a distance, Chris could tell it was misshapen and – oddly – deflated. Its surface had no solidity to it. A rotten peach, perhaps thrown against a brick wall, came to mind. The bag itself appeared wet and expanded at the bottom, like a stretched condom fitted around a spigot. A putrid smell coasted on a shift of the wind. The smell climbed up Chris's nostrils. Immediately, the back of his throat filled with mucus.

As he pulled the collar of his Packer's tee over his nose, Chris finally reached the bag. There he stopped. With a quick breath, he leaned forward and squinted.

Inside the bag, inside the shadows and hot summer darkness, sat a crushed orb. Just like the rotted peach Chris had first imagined, this orb was splattered with slime and chunks of matter. But he couldn't tell what it was, not from the current distance.

Not ready to move closer, Chris tuned his attention to the larger trunk-like mystery he'd first seen poking out of the bag, which now proved to be purple, orange, and pink in color. This protrusion he followed from the bottom up, noting bulbous folds of some type of strange rubber running the length. The protrusion couldn't have been more than a foot long, probably less, and appeared bent in the middle. Moving towards the sky, Chris studied the funny-little split ends at the tip. Some were curled and blackened, but two stuck out straight, fat and gooey as they were. *So, two little split ends he could see. There* was another one for sure, curled and pointed in a perpendicular direction. And *there, yes*, was one more. That was *four*. And could that crushed nub be...? It was five. *Five*. The protrusion split into five little separate braches, just like a tree limb or a—

Chris's eyes went wide above his shirt collar.

It was a dead infant.

He tumbled backwards. Fallen onto his ass, gagged, he yanked at his tee's collar and rushed to breathe fresh air.

Immediately he clambered to his feet and spun, looking for Carol. Headed back to the Tahoe in jerky lunges, he spread his arms wide, trying desperately to wedge his body between her and the rancid baby body behind.

“Carol. *Baby*. Don't look—”

But Carol's dead-still gaze had already gone beyond him and instead found the rim of the dump truck's basin.

There, dozens more trash bags showed above the greenish-white lip. Many piled high in the basin's center; many more almost spilled to the cracked street themselves. The dump truck's bin was at least eight – maybe ten – feet deep. Quick calculations flipped in Chris's mind. Spit dripped off his lips and soaked into his collar as he did. The whole basin was filled with tiny, rotted victims of the Piper.

They're still there.

Still here.

You can still see them.

I swear to Jesus.

“Wish I could say this is the only one.”

Chris turned to the shadowed sidewalk.

Alister Vandermime stood staring at him, briefcase in hand and hat on head.

“I've been watching all day,” the older man said. He looked past Chris and at the little apocalypse in the bag. At this, his eyes narrowed “I must've seen three of these trucks already. And let me tell you, it's not as if I'm looking for 'em.”

Chris glanced back at the Tahoe. Mercifully, Carol covered her face with her hands. There was no telling how long it would be before she looked up and saw Vandermime. There was no telling what she would do when she saw him either. But Chris couldn't fight his curiosity in the moment. He simply couldn't. Back prickled, he turned back to the older man.

"They're all like this?" he said, nodding to the trash bag.

Vandermime looked him in the face. His own features were stone.

"The little ones," he said. "Yes."

Chris closed his eyes. A nursery rhyme turned over in his head: the nursery rhyme of the Pied Piper.

And so The Piper led the children out of town, led them out of the world. He led them where he had led the rats, and where he led the rats was...

Eyes opened – though refused to look at the bag, the dump truck, or Tahoe behind – Chris waited as the summer twilight settled and Vandermime's features became clear. The old man now looked back at the bag, his features truly stone, brown eyes blazing within them. The intensity of the gaze was not something Chris could have seen in the faltering daylight. But he saw it, he knew he did, and for whatever reason, it unnerved him.

"I'm sorry about back at the house," he said then, with no real idea why, except perhaps to break Vandermime out of his God's gaze stare. "It's just that my wife.... She doesn't want to hear about Jesus or Heaven or any of that right now..."

Trailed off, Chris watched as Vandermime failed to look up. Suddenly very embarrassed and angry, he turned away.

When he had turned to the Tahoe, he had expected Carol to be watching him,

watching him with rising and unquenchable anger. But she wasn't; her head still rested in her hands inside the cab.

“Chris?”

Chris couldn't stop himself from stopping, couldn't stop himself from turning around. With steps more fitting a man much younger, Vandermime closed the distance between them. Taking Chris's right wrist, he crushed something into the younger man's palm.

Brown eyes sharp and clear – and those of a person much fitter and smarter than Chris had originally thought – Vandermime moved in tight.

“I don't believe in God,” he said. “But I do believe in chances to make things better.”

He smiled then, weakly and at the corner of his mouth. In another second, he looked over to the bag and his sad smile wiped away. His features took on their stillness again. Finally, he released Chris's hand and leaned back.

Not knowing what else to do, Chris stepped backwards a few small steps. Then he turned and walked around the Tahoe, past Carol and her still-covered face.

In a moment he was in the SUV. Carol's sobbing leaked out loud and hysterical as soon as the door opened. Hands wrapped around the wheel and shifter, Vandermime's pamphlet crushed against leather, the engine roared. The Tahoe then reversed direction in a big sweep and headed back to the Temple home.

On the way back to the house, Carol talked.

She *talked*.

“This isn't real,” she said. “And that makes it real. I know that. I know that

feeling, like in a minute you'll realize you've been down practicing, practicing for the worst thing. You're doing the grown-up thing. The parent thing. You're imagining the worst, then imagining even worse than that. You say, 'Okay. I can handle this.' I see my fear; I eat my fear; my fear goes away. I can do this, you say."

She'd put only a little make-up around her eyes, dark to match her blouse. It ran in little tributaries down her round cheeks now, making her Egyptian and clown-like in the dashboard light.

"Then you imagine something worse, and worse," she went on. "You keep seeing and eating and it keeps going away, sliding out of you like, like, I don't know. Your whole body just drains. I can do this, I can handle this. This is as bad as it could be, and if it happens, I can do this, because I'm a mom."

Chris scanned the manicured yards to his left and right, and the lamp-lit walks leading to starter homes of charcoal, colonial blue, and sienna. The summer nighttime pulled contrasts from the deep green grass and bright violet-white lanterns poking out of them. In this contrast, all the flaws of the lawns and front gardens disappeared. Aqua pool lights twinkled on bright lacquer fences peaking through empty side yards. There, little wisps of smoke and shimmering fog flitted in and out of bush shadows. But they weren't smoke and fog, Chris knew, even if he refused to look. These little wisps were ghost boys and ghost girls, who winked at the Tahoe as it passed by.

She's right, they sang in unison. This is real. This is the night-world. And it belongs to us. Do you remember seeing it, when you were young? This is the night-world. This is where your world goes when the sun goes off. This is our world. It's forever, and it belongs to us.

And it doesn't belong to you.

Go away.

Go away, or we'll make you.

A sudden image of Brandi and Darrien singing the night-song, dead and singing as they peeked over the hedges in the Temple's front yard struck Chris like the driver's window glass. He pressed the gas down in anger and fear, but let up quickly. He let up because he realized he had gotten them only a street from home.

"So what do we do now?" Carol said, to no one but herself.

As she talked to the windshield, her hands clasped and unclasped while her biceps pulled her forearms back and forth as she worked out her thoughts.

Carol was an ex-athlete too. Her actions made Chris think of this fact. Carol had played volleyball, basketball, and tennis. She'd been even better than Chris. Of course, while Chris had kept playing through college, Carol had not. Simon Francini, Carol's father, had coached his daughters – both Carol and her younger sister Beverly – through volleyball and tennis. He'd pushed them, pushed them so hard they'd become used to the pushing. Carol revolted as soon she got to college: spurned her scholarship offers and played nothing more competitive than intramurals. But the pushing she couldn't get rid of. So she pushed herself in grades, pushed herself through her first years of teaching, her Master's in Administration. She pushed herself through her vice principal position, while pushing herself through all the family's accounting, house keeping, and plans for retirement. It was this old athlete, this woman who could push herself in ways he wanted to, that Chris fell in love with. It was also the woman who said she had fallen completely in love with him.

But all that had changed, changed when he made a mistake with their own daughter. Since that mistake in Dovetail Park (*which really wasn't a mistake*, some part

of Chris's brain whispered to him) Carol hadn't been the same to him. Her pushing came out on him then, had come out in an avalanche eight months ago. Her judgments came with it: *what were you doing, what were you doing just standing there?* The worries about other men – and about her just leaving – started shortly after.

But as she continued to talk now, the eight-month edge seemed to have left her voice.

“What do we do?” she said? “We buckle down and we certainly don't break, that's what we do. We breathe really deep and stick to the routine. Oh, Dad would love this. ‘Stick to the routine, stick to the routine. It'll get you through.’ Consistent, consistent. We've done fine so far. We've kept the girls clean, we've kept the house closed. We've gone out before and it doesn't come with us. There's enough food for now, but we'll take a count when we get back. We'll plan for a week, plan for longer without telling them. We can keep boiling water. There's enough single people, people without kids out there. They'll keep things running. There are good people out there.”

Another voice, a singsong voice, tempted Chris to step in right then. But he didn't. He shut-up the singsong voice, or at least quieted it enough to sink it away for awhile.

“We can wait, we can hold on. This can't last forever,” Carol went on. Even as she pounded through her strategy, Chris could hear her running out of steam. It was only a little lapse, but it betrayed a bigger tiredness behind it. Still, it was Carol. She would not stop until she was done.

“No, don't pull in the garage: I don't want it open. Do you hear me? Just stop here, on the right. That way we can see anyone coming up. I'll call Adam and Sammi. Tell them we turned around. They can fill us in on what the others said. We can do this.

I see my fear; I eat my fear; my fear goes away. Okay, I'm getting out. It was just one truck. I don't know if I even really saw as many bags as I thought."

When the Tahoe was shut down and its door closed, Chris followed Carol up the walk.

But once inside, it was not she who got on the phone.

This was because the house phone already rang when they walked in.

And it was for Chris.

On the phone was Frank, Dr. Frank Lupiwitz, Chris's closest friend at the Spinal Center. Frank had no children, had never married. He would love to have married. A secret romantic, he watched episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Gilmore Girls* on his office television between consultations. But he was also short, ugly, and balding. To top this list of qualities, or because of them, he silently detested most everyone he met.

"Big Man," Frank said. "I've been calling for an hour."

Frank's bitterness found itself outweighed by only one thing: his skill and curiosity in medicine. His theories on extreme cold and the rehabilitation of damaged spinal nerves already proved realistic and groundbreaking. As Chris admired him so much, he forgave Frank his other shortcomings. The gratefulness – really, the adoration – the doctor returned made others jealous. Sometimes it made Chris uncomfortable, his being the only one Frank would really talk with. But the man was brilliant; God just decided the brain he'd been given meant he got little else.

"I've been..." Chris said. Trash bags and Carol's self-deception came to mind. A glance down told him he also still crushed Vandermime's pamphlet in his hand. Without opening the glossy card-stock, he tossed it to the hallway side-table. "I've been out,

Frank.”

On the other end of the line, background noise filtered in.

“You were out?”

“Yeah. We we’re—”

“You said you couldn’t go out. You called earlier in the week and said you couldn’t come in because you couldn’t go outside.”

Anger flooded Chris’s arms and chest. He nearly crushed the handset through the wall. *Easy*, he thought. *It’s Frank. He doesn’t get it.*

Do you think he’d get it about the ghosts? His mind went on. Do you think he’d see them too?

“It’s the girls, Frank. I said I couldn’t leave Carol and the girls. Not with what’s going on.”

More background noise sounded from the Center end of the line. There was a lot of chatter there. Finally, Frank came back.

“Oh. Well. You’re right. That is what you said.”

Jesus, Frank, he thought. *Thanks.*

“But you’re going to have to come in, Big Man. We need you here.”

Once again, Chris nearly put the phone through the wall.

“What the hell are you talking about, Frank? I’m not coming in. I can’t. What could you possibly need?”

Then he thought about the chatter he could hear in the background. He looked at the clock in the kitchen. It was nearly nine thirty: the Center closed at four thirty on Fridays. But all those voices. Not a TV. No way.

“Frank? What’s going on? Who’s there?”

The little doctor, who Chris knew to coil up early in conversations, pounced at the question.

“*Everyone*, Chris. Fucking everyone is here. Some of them have five kids. They’ve got them wearing masks, got them shut up in cars. I can’t even go in the lobby. They’ll pull me outside, or pull me apart.”

Chris suddenly grew cold. Frank didn’t understand the desperation mobbing the Spinal Center or the irrationality of seeking any medical advice, any at all. Chris took a deep breath. In the living room, Darrien and Brandi argued over the next movie to watch. Between them, the ghost machine buzzed blank – its doorway temporarily closed by the DVD connection.

“Is there anything you can do for them?” Chris said, staring toward the voices down the hall.

“No. Of course not. What the fuck am I going to do? What’s wrong with you, Big Man? You know that. Maybe you could do something. Talk to them. That’s why I called—”

Chris cut in.

“Lock the door.”

A second of dumb silence came from the doctor. Now aware of what he was hearing, Chris now made out the frantic adult voices just fine.

“What?” Frank said.

“Lock the door, Frank. Lock the door between the lobby and the rest of the office, if you haven’t already. Lock up the labs and the meds even tighter. Then shut off the lights and leave.”

“Big Man, I—”

“I know you want to help, Frank. You’re a good man, a good doctor. But if there’s nothing you can do, then you’ve got to leave. Those people need to go home. Being there, you’re giving them hope.”

The cold honesty of his own voice shocked him. He grew nauseous as he waited. Finally, Frank returned.

“Ok, ok, Big Man. You’re right. Sorry I called. Take care of Carol and your kids.”

“Thanks, Frank. You go home, too. I’ll call you when I can.”

Something occurred to Chris then, a sane question in an insane day.

“And Frank?”

“Big Man?”

“What were you doing at the office?”

“I wanted to do some research.”

“On?”

“The Piper.”

Chris suddenly saw himself outside the doors of the Spinal Center, imagined himself beating at the windows, elbowing the very people he’d normally greet with a big, bearded smile.

“Did you find out anything, Frank?” he said, wondering if the greed he tasted could be heard.

“I did.”

He nearly screamed in desperation.

“What, Frank? *What?*”

“It’s really bad and I don’t know where it comes from. I don’t think it can be

stopped either. Not by us, anyway.”

Fucking Frank. Fucking Frank—

“But it has to get better, Big Man. All diseases go away eventually. No big deal.”

Chris shook his head. The television talked again. He slouched, exhausted, as the sounds of a movie echoed down towards him. It was time to get off the phone. Time to leave Frank and the Center and the bullshit of hope.

“Thanks, Frank,” he said.

“You too, Big Man. Sorry again to bother you. I’ll lock up like you said.”

Chris hung up.

It has to get better. Chris thought. *Eventually.*

But that was the problem, wasn’t it?

Time was never really on your side when it came to disease.

In fact, it picked the other side.

And it almost always picked a winner.

Chris sunk back into the couch, his legs spilt wide on the ottoman. The air conditioner pumped full blast from the vent behind. A forgotten Dell laptop computer sat on the cushion next to him. Somewhere upstairs, Carol walked back and forth. The girls had both been sent to bed an hour ago, allowed to stay up late to watch one last movie: *Wayne’s World*. The family watched it together, sharing a frozen pizza from the big cooler in the dirty basement. Now, it was after one o’clock in the morning, and Chris sat alone.

There was no point in going to bed. Carol hadn’t wanted to talk after they’d

gotten back to the house, nor after following Chris on the phone. She'd called Adam and Samantha, only to find that almost no one had showed up. Instead, they'd all decided to postpone the meeting until tomorrow afternoon. Without hesitation, Carol had signed herself and Chris up to go as well.

Sitting across from her in the dining room, Chris had tried to get her to relate what'd they seen on the street – and in the dump truck – to the Corringers. Carol refused. *Wouldn't do any good*, she said. *What good would it do?* She was calm for a great deal of time after, even displayed uncanny humor and patience with the girls during the movie. The four of them shared the couch together, Brandi lying on Chris, and Darrien – without her usual defiance – accepting her place nuzzled against her mom. When the movie ended, the girls actually went quietly to bed. They seemed tired, but for their parents, for the moment, that was okay. Strangely contented by the night, Chris asked Carol to come back down and join him after putting the girls to bed. They could use the laptop to look some things up, he said. There had to be more information out there that the news couldn't, or wouldn't, provide.

Once again, Carol refused. Instead, she claimed she was tired herself. With a brief smile, she headed upstairs. There, she moved around at least every five minutes for what was now going on two hours.

Chris had the news on, MSNBC this time, but had the volume turned all the way down. The images he watched – the fires, the mobs, expert after expert refusing to comment, city officials begging workers to keep showing up, especially if they had no children – waved over him as he clicked through his searches online. Nothing was more current than the medical blogs, but from what Chris read, they were no more reliable than the electronic conspiracy boards. After midnight, Chris moved from the current day to

diseases in general. He searched back through plagues: Red, Yellow, Black, Bubonic Typhoid, Ebola, Lassa, Super-flu. He watched a slow time progression of a Bolivian boy's body decompose in a missionary bed. Even in the stilled frames, the boy's rising chest and frantic eyes betrayed his agony as something ate him away while he was still alive.

Eventually Chris progressed back into diseases long forgotten: St. Vitas Dance, the Pox. Here the artwork often came emblazoned with black skeletal figures dancing around upturned faces exploding with ragged, screaming Os of mouths. Little devils with horns, spiked tails, and sockets for eyes watched over the skeletons and damned, their pitchforks prodding the skies. Chris's cursor rolled over one of these devils. Its legs melted into a wisp of ether, leaving it floating above all the others. There, right between the devil's empty eyes, the cursor turned to a white glove and a single pointed finger.

On the television screen, rough footage from a camera phone showed what could have been a pile of burning tires – if only the tires had been horribly, horribly misshapen and humanoid *before* being torched by the flames.

The little devil focused back on him, Chris clicked his cursor. As he did, tree branches, those of a Japanese maple planted by his and Carol's hands, rattled against the living room window.

On screen, a dialogue box appeared, words lain out in curling black script and attributed to an Anglican monk born over six hundred years before:

The world swallows only so much death at once, it read. When the stream grows too thick, the Heavens spit back. And so the dead become demons, and demons call the world home.

Chris looked up at the television. Horrified, he found mortar guns pounding into

a forest sky. Searching for the location of the live event, it took a minute before he realized he watched a commercial for a WWII documentary. The insanity of commercials playing still did not register with him then. Instead, he thought of all the dead from the Second Great War. He thought of all the monster movies and *Outer Limits* episodes sucked up so easily in the decades after. Had his parents, as children, taken the macabre with such ease because they lived in a time when the dead were so near, so present?

Outside, the branches of a Japanese maple scraped at the glass: a Japanese maple Chris had cut down two months *before*, in May, when it was eaten alive by beetles.

Go away.

This is the night-world.

Go away or we'll make you.

Chris tossed the laptop aside. It stopped with its screen faced into the couch back. He wanted to move to the window, wanted to see what was out there, because now, for the first time, he was sure there was something there. He just wanted to see the ghosts, look at them looking at him, get it over with. There would be too many to ignore later on. They would overrun him. And eventually, if he couldn't figure out something to do, joining them would be his own two little girls.

Chris put his head in his hands and sat forward, legs off the ottoman and big naked feet slapped to the floor.

He sat like that for a long time.

What finally broke him out his position was the phone.

Incredibly, at 1:30 in the morning, the house phone rang. Out of sheer reflex, Chris grabbed the black cordless and punched talk. Upstairs, the floor creaked as

someone got up and walked quick steps towards the upstairs landing.

“Hello,” Chris said.

“Chris,” the voice on the other end whispered.

“Sammi,” Chris said, recognizing the voice.

He hushed his own voice when he spoke: did so without thinking.

Samantha Corringer’s voice was raw; it spoke with the cracked echo of tears still there but out of effort and fluid to carry them.

“Yes,” Sammi said. Whether he wanted to or not, Chris pictured her as she had been at the BBQ weeks ago. Now in his mind, however, tears ran tracks through her make-up. “Chris, I just wanted to call and...and see if you were coming tomorrow.”

In a normal world, Chris might have teased. He might even have flirted. But in this one, when he was unable to even go to his own window, he just said he would.

“We’ll be there,” he said. “Carol told me. We’ll be there.”

“Thank you.”

“Sammi,” Chris said. He noticed the laptop beside him. Without turning it, he pushed the screen down until it clicked. “Are you alright?”

“Am I—”

“Never mind.” Creaks sounded down from the dark landing. “Stupid question, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s—”

“We’ll be there tomorrow, Sammi. Tell Adam.”

“Okay.”

Chris prepared to hang up, simply too tired for anything, even this strange night-world conversation.

Sammi was not done, however.

“Chris?” she said.

Muffled sounds came from the other end of the line. The sounds echoed as if the woman spoke from inside a closet.

“Sammi?”

“Hold on,” she said, silencing Chris.

He waited as told, but only because he felt too stunned to do anything else. What sounded like a shout came to Chris, along with the sounds of other voices, but Chris couldn't be sure. Looking at the TV, he dismissed his misgiving and his curiosity. Everyone's ghost-box probably ran non-stop these days.

After another moment and some strange rustling, Sammi returned.

“Okay. Chris? I've got one more question.”

“What?”

“It's going to be okay, isn't? I mean, eventually it's going to be okay?”

Chris closed his eyes. The hand not holding the phone went lifeless. It hung dumbly over his thigh.

“Yeah. Eventually, it will be.”

His lie echoed down the line.

“Good,” Sammi said. Another muffled sound came through the phone. Chris thought to ask what it was, but thought of his phantom Japanese maple and thought better. In the meantime, Sammi continued.

“That's good,” she said. “I just wanted to hear that, Chris. I'm glad you said so. I'm glad I called you.”

“I'm glad too,” Chris said. What little adrenalin the strange phone call had

dredged up ran out of his body. It gave way to waves of exhaustion the likes of which his early tiredness could not have imagined. “We’ll see you tomorrow, okay Sammi? We’ll see you tomorrow and talk more then.”

“Right,” Sammi said. “Right.”

“Goodnight, Sammi,” Chris said.

He moved to put the phone down.

Just before he clicked the end button he heard Sammi’s reply:

“Right.”

Chris set the phone down beside him, between his hip and the quiet laptop.

Only then did he recall why he had taken out the laptop in the first place.

He glanced at the table to his side.

There, rested under the big ceramic lamp, crumpled and whitened at the edges, sat Vandermime’s pamphlet. Without touching it, Chris clicked off the light and sent the pamphlet and its strange promises into television blue shadow. When he did this, he thought of his doctor friend Frank and the research that had made him famous. But only for a second: it was all he had the energy for.

Then and there, Chris put his head back on the worn cushion and fell asleep. He fell into darkness almost immediately, too tired even to run and hide from whatever waited for him outside.

Let them come, was his last thought.

Let them come while I can’t see them coming.

Chris dreamt.

He was in bed, a large bed: a bed he did not own. Carol was next to him. She

moved below the sheets, her knees forming little pyramids, a valley of soft white satin billowing down between. Asleep, her sea-swell eyes were closed and her brown hair rustled softly on the ivory pillowcase.

To Chris's right, the bed pressed right up against the wall. Two massive windows, set an equal distance apart – from each other and the corners of the room – dominated the wall's ghostly face. Light shades dressed the windows. Each of them had been drawn to half-mast. Outside the windows, the lawn crept and crawled back to a ring of pines at the property's edge. The lawn itself was blanketed in a field of pristine white and gray: it was snowing heavily.

“Daddy.”

Chris sat up. He looked out the nearest window and into the snowy shadows in the direction of the voice.

Across the lawn, a tiny black silhouette walked towards the house. With each deliberate step, the figure swept up little avalanches of frozen cotton.

“Darrien,” Chris whispered to the darkness, finally realizing that the silhouette outside was his oldest daughter, clad in pajamas, snowflakes gathering on her shoulders.

“No, Daddy,”

Chris suddenly understood his mistake. He had begun to sweat. Next to him, Carol murmured and gyrated below the sheets.

“Brandi Baby, is that you?” he whispered, his hand moving to touch the fogging glass. He knew this was right: the shadow moving across the yard was thin and tall, but it was still not his oldest daughter. Chris would have known his baby girl's voice anywhere, even through snow and thick windowpanes. Meanwhile, his double daughter moved closer. Coming within only twenty feet of the widow, the shadow kept walking with

unwavering deliberation, like a ring bearer counting its every step to the front of the church.

Suddenly, Chris was afraid.

“Brandi Baby, why are you outside in the snow?” he said. His voice had grown louder, and for a moment, he feared he’d woken Carol. Behind him on the bed, miniscule rustles told him his wife remained dreaming. The voice of his youngest brought him back, answering his question too clearly to really be outside.

“Because he doesn’t play, Daddy,” Brandi’s voice said. “He says he does, but he doesn’t.”

Chris was suddenly very cold. He looked around. What he found made his head quiver, as if he had looked over a cliff’s edge and suddenly been struck with vertigo. The sheets of his bed were gone. He now lied on a soiled mattress, its fabric yellowed and browned; it’s springs showing their heads through soft places all over. Some even dug into his butt and pressed cold and hard against his back. A tingling below his belly sent his eyes to his groin. There he realized he was naked. The pubic hair he had stopped trimming years ago tufted up and concealed his manhood as it shriveled up against one of his thigh. Nervous and sickened, he twisted frantically sideways.

Carol was gone.

The room itself had even become darker. It should not have been so dark, but beyond the festering mattress, the light from the windows penetrated nothing.

Shoulder flesh prickled, Chris suddenly knew that the figure outside had drawn even closer. A sudden conviction became certain to him then: he did not want to be at the window when his daughter arrived. With all his effort, he turned his eyes to the window, ready to lose his breath as he found the silhouette right outside the glass.

Instead, he found the figure still ten yards away. Confused, Chris twisted back to the window, hands reflexively covering his crotch as he did.

He should have been able to see his daughter clearly then. He couldn't though. Even with the distance closed, all he could make out was the outline of his girl coming through the storm of snowflakes.

Her voice however, could have come from the room's shadows themselves.

"Her heart is not cold, Daddy."

Chris cupped his balls. Their wrinkled packaging bristled under his big palms.

"I don't understand you, Brandi Baby," he said. His mouth and his body worked opposite each other. While his mouth talked, his body tried to retreat across the cover of springheads and sweat stains. Unfortunately, only the mouth seemed to succeed.

"Who is he?" Chris went on. "Who is she?"

It was then that the silhouette arrived at the window. The little shadow girl's feet must have been buried in a least a foot of snow, but she did not shiver. In fact, she did not move at all.

"They still play commercials, Daddy, even at the end. Don't you see? Even in the end, they never stop the commercials."

"Who?" Chris said. His voice had risen as the paralysis began to grip him utterly. "Who, Brandi Baby? Who!?"

Wordless, the silhouette girl raised one arm from a motionless shoulder before turning to point back at the yard it had just crossed.

"Them," the shadow said. It's little head nodded, just barely, to show Chris it meant him to look.

He did.

Chris's chest seized. A tremor shook the fatty tissue grown recently above his cupped loins. Eyes fixed, he stared at the snowy yard, which was no longer empty, nor even the same size.

A hundred other shadows stood out in the snow now, each no more than a foot tall. Their profiles were chubby and soft, their little naked limbs plump and marshmallow smooth.

The shadow turned back from the field of snowy cherubs.

"There are worse things, Daddy, ..."

"...than watching your..." Chris followed, not knowing where the words came from. As he did, his left arm lit up in pain and his weak chest muscles convulsed

"Yes," his dead daughter told him. "There are worse things."

Chris, who was crying, who knew that he was having a heart attack, wanted to ask his shadow daughter "What." But he could not, because in his dream, at the moment when he could imagine nothing worse than watching his dead daughter while he convulsed and lied helpless to reach out for her, Chris Temple died. In his dream, Chris Temple died.

Chris woke and pitched forward. Not to be truly sure, but more to shove the embarrassing truth home, he sniffed his hand, which was down his pants. There was no urine on his hand, however. What he did smell was the pheromone-rich musk of his own crotch. Quickly, he recoiled and wiped his hand on his shirt. No dryness returned to him though: his shirt was utterly soaked through, so much so that he could feel individual chest hairs through the thin cotton of his tee. The hot wetness registered to him then. It slobbered across his back and pooled beneath him on his thighs and calves. His hair

tingled where beads ran through whatever ruts they could find.

He was covered in night sweat, the likes of which he'd only ever felt with the flu. But that was it. Sweat. No urine, no (*blood either*, he thought but didn't know why) other liquid of any kind. He'd had a bad dream – which had faded too quickly to recall – and had sweated himself awake.

Chris looked around then. The television, for once, showed an off-air message. It had been years since Chris had seen one, and for a moment, he thought triumphantly that the ghost machine had died. But the message of “End of Daily Programming – Programming Resumes at 5:00 AM” killed his perverse hopes quickly. The times of the message registered clearly then as the cool of the house made his sweat-covered skin tingle. Chris looked at the DVD clock. It told him the time remaining until “Programming Resumed” was not long. It was 3:51. The ghost machine, at least on its current channel, would wake in just over an hour. Then he looked at the window where the Japanese maple had once been, his sleep-drugged eyes only half open.

And that's when he saw Brandi.

His eyes flew open. With this motion came a fresh wave of pain in his head.

“Brandi Baby,” he said, before he even thought to do so.

His youngest daughter stood still before the living room window. A trick of the light made him think for a moment that she stared right at him. Embarrassment over his open fly pricked him. But then he realized his daughter wasn't looking at him at all. He stared at the back of her pink pajama-glad body and long brown hair running down to mid-back. His dream, imagined to be completely forgotten, came back to him in a fractured rush. Sweat, somehow still pumping, trickled out of his flesh again.

“Brandi Baby,” he said, leaned forward onto the couch's edge. His thighs got

cold when he moved, the old sweat on them squished between skin and denim. “Brandi. Look at me, Baby. What are you doing up?”

At the window, Brandi did not move.

“Brandi, look at me.”

No response. Not even an involuntary tick of the head.

In that moment, Chris knew he would have to rise. He knew he would have to go to the window. He remembered the phone call from Sammi now. He remembered the moments before, the phantom maple and the little devil on the laptop screen. *And so the dead become demons, and demons call the world home.* For a moment then, he slid back into the couch. Fear embraced him. It pulled at him, urged him further back into the couch as it did. *Come back, it said. Come back. Best not to go where you know you can't.*

Brandi continued to stand still before the window, before the garden where the ghost maple had raked the window, where Chris was sure the night-world and the ghost children stared back inside.

Go away, the fear said. Go away, or they'll make you. Back to sleep, Chris. This world does not belong to you.

Chris slapped both hands on the couch cushions and thrust himself up. The remote clunked into the closed laptop; springs groaned and released. With cement-weighted steps, Chris began to cross the room.

“Brandi. Look at me. What are you doing up?” Chris said, and tried to gauge if his voice sounded parental or petrified.

Brandi turned.

Chris stopped.

“Daddy?” she said.

Chris’s knees, scarred and operated on at least twice, twitched under his giant frame.

“Brandi,” he said. He stumbled that last feet to take a knee before her. At eye level now, he grabbed her shoulders. He looked her right in the eyes, a view that, shamefully he admitted, blocked his view out the window behind and whatever stood outside it. “What are you doing here? What are you doing up?”

Brandi’s soft face was slack. Her eyes moved back and forth across her father’s face, as if trying to recognize him. This thought chilled Chris and made him want to shake her back into reality. Only his own fear kept him from doing so – that, and his daughter’s response.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know.”

Chris pulled her to him and hugged her. His eyes shut as he did. After the quick embrace, he pushed her back to face him and smiled. A flashing glance out the window behind her was all that managed to reach him.

“Then let’s go to bed,” he said to her, knowing his parent voice had miraculously returned to him, even if he was unsure how long it would last.

Brandi, for another terrifying moment, did the search-her-father’s-face movement again. But only for a second. Then she nodded her consent.

“Okay,” Chris said and hurriedly lifted his daughter into his arms. Turned quickly, he walked in big, quick strides out of the living room and into the moonlit hall. In seconds, he climbed the stairs with Brandi in his arms and eyes closed, navigating their way back to her and Darrien’s bedroom by perfect memory.

As he got to the door and prepared to tuck his daughter in, he at last opened his

eyes. In that moment between tight-shut personal darkness and return to the familiar vision of his daughters' bedroom, his one flashing look out the window returned to him.

And with it, came the sight of his phantom Japanese maple – gone for two months now – its leaves red again and eaten through by worms. In the instant he'd seen the tree he knew it had changed: someone, or something, had decorated it for a perversion of Christmas. And what grotesque ornaments they'd selected.

Black and white musical notes, musical notes fashioned from yellowed and decayed reams of sheet music, hung from every branch. Heavy with disease themselves, the maple's limbs bowed under the greater weight of their new adornments. Each and every origami clef ran with streams of rheumatoid mucus, all of which showed slick lines of crude so rich that in their midnight luminescence they could only be veins of human blood.

This was the night-song, and Chris had finally seen it.

The next morning, the new routine repeated. Complaints from the girls about the breakfast of toast and dried apricots grew louder, but also died quicker. Chris could see the exhaustion not just in their dipped shoulders, but also in their flat, over-washed hair and the shine of their over-scrubbed cheeks. After breakfast, Darrien went right back to bed. Brandi went into the living room and found her Nintendo DS. As she played with it, she slumped into the leather Lazy-boy next to the couch, which nearly swallowed her in its cyan skin. At one point, Chris looked in and found her little eyes closing even as her thumbs still worked. This naked struggle made him want to crawl back into bed too, or at least back into his groove on the nearby couch.

It also made him think of their strange encounter (*and the death tree*, he thought)

of the night before, but he chased away this thought away quickly.

The meeting at the Corringer's had been set for one o'clock. At nearly one, following a lunch of pop tarts and Slim Jims, Chris caught Carol's arm as she headed downstairs.

"Carol," he said.

She sighed and looked back over her shoulder.

"We're going to go, Chris. I may not work with doctors like you, but I know something about kids getting sick. When one does, they all do – fast. But if, if this thing could travel in the air or could hurt us – adults – it already would've. I know you're proud of how tight you've sealed up the house, but really, where do you think the air from the air conditioner comes from?"

Chris let his hand drop.

"Come on, Carol. I—"

"If it's out there Chris, it's going to get in. But maybe by putting our heads together we can come up with something. Maybe there's somewhere we can still go. Somewhere we can hide the girls that's really safe. A lake cabin or something? Doesn't Tony have one of those, up in Canada?"

Chris thought for a moment about the big white estate – nothing cabin about it – outside Toronto. A lot of the families had shared it for a week last summer.

"Yeah, he does."

"And no one's kids here are sick, right? We'd know. Isn't that true?"

Chris said nothing. It was true, as far as he knew.

"So maybe we're lucky right now," Carol said, "and maybe we've just got a little more time."

She turned to him then and, surprisingly, chaste as the act was, kissed him on the cheek.

“Besides, if nothing comes of this, I promise we won’t go out again,” she said, stepping back. “Not to Adam’s, not to the hospital, not anywhere. Not unless we both agree. Okay?”

Chris nodded. The kissed area of his cheek tingled. When Carol walked down the stairs in quick little steps, he followed. At the bottom, he thought about joining her as she told Brandi to stay put and be in charge. Instead, he let himself out quickly through the front door.

A short, quiet ride followed. When at last they pulled up to the Corringer’s house, the dash clock read 12:58 p.m.

The Corringer’s salmon Victorian perched at the corner of Barrons Ave and Preston Street. On the front porch, Carol knocked on the thick black door. Behind her, Chris’s head began to throb: pain from the near-accident returned and radiating across the cracks of his skull. The headache was so strong in that moment, and the scent of Adam’s flower gardens so heavy, that Chris felt as if he was being forced to fight for each breath he took.

With a glance back at the driveway and street, he noted with bitter anger that the Tahoe was the only vehicle in sight. *So much for postponing*, he thought. A fresh flash of pain reprimanded his sarcasm quickly. But the absence still bothered him – enough that he thought to speak.

“Carol...” he said.

But Carol had already tried the door handle and found it unlocked.

“Adam! Sammi!” she called into the house. “I’m coming in. We’re coming in.”

Without hesitation, she pushed her way into the dark foyer. She disappeared into the paneled living room before Chris could even set foot on the great sea-green rug covering the indoor tile.

Door shut behind him, it took a moment for Chris's eyes to adjust to the contrast from the brightness outside. When his vision did settle, he swept his gaze over the familiar furnishings, rustic artwork, and plaques of antique firearms that adorned the two auditors' home.

No one gathered in the foyer. There were no piles of shoes indicating any further presence either. Chris looked into the dark dining room. He found nothing set up. It was at this sight that his *headache* turned to head *buzzing*. All meetings at the Corringer house took place in the great dining room. Now, the thick mahogany table sat dusty, silent, and shadowed. The whole house was silent. The only sound, other than the chattering of cicada outside, came in the hiss of running water from the kitchen.

Moved in that direction, Chris came upon Carol. She stood slack as she stared into the empty, albeit, messy living room. There, blankets lay crumpled together and wrappers of candy bars and empty bottles of Gatorade lay strewn on the caramel carpet between them. On one cherry end table, a spilled mug of coffee sat congealing in its own contents.

Chris put a hand around his wife's bicep. He sucked in a breath against his battered ribs. The buzzing in his head grew worse.

"Carol," he said. "I think we should go. Something's not—"

Carol pushed Chris's hand down. She stepped away. When she spoke, it was in the voice she'd used following the dump truck and trash bags.

"I know something's not right," she said. "I know. But we've got to check on

them; they're our friends."

Without another word, she headed down the dark hall leading to the kitchen.

After a last moment, and a last survey of the battered living room, Chris followed.

When he arrived at the lit doorway of the thin kitchen, he found Carol stopped once more and staring at one of the missing hosts.

Adam Corringer stood in front of a polished Sealy sink. A bright red apron emblazoned "Bobby Flay Grilling Brigade" hung around his waist. The sleeves of his blue Henley were rolled up, exposing the reddened and swollen muscles of his forearms. Below, his hands buried deep within the tufts of bubbles overflowing his washtub.

When Carol's first step landed on the kitchen's pretty copper-colored tile, Adam's handsome face popped up. When it did, his salt and pepper hair swung across his forehead.

"Hey! Carol, Chris! How are you?" he said. "Come in! Almost finished here."

Carol spoke first. Chris stood behind her, occupying the shadows of the doorway.

"Where is everyone, Adam?" she said. "We've got to tell—"

Adam's blue eyes, big as dumplings seconds ago, narrowed.

"No one made it." He shook his head. "Some of them – Tony, Phil, Lesley – they called and said they couldn't come, but the rest, they just never showed. Sammi and I waited, kept checking the windows, but no one showed."

Carol – the Carol from the car ride yesterday – started talking once more. This Carol's voice amped up the buzzing between Chris's ears. Her words only made the buzzing more sickening.

"Adam, we've got to tell you something. On the way here yesterday, we were in an accident. We were *almost* in an accident. But what matters is that we nearly hit a

dump truck. And it was filled with—”

“Where’s the kids, Adam?” Chris cut in.

It was not the buzzing pain that drove the words from his mouth; it was the sudden, terrible premonition that he’d even more suddenly begun to understand exactly what was wrong in the Corringer house. Something from his phone conversation the night before told him so: his strange after-hours conversation with Sammi.

He also ignored the vicious look Carol fired back at him.

Instead, he kept his eyes on the hands of the auditor, which still worked within the bubbles of the sink.

Adam’s eyes, meanwhile, focused on Carol’s. Only after a long moment did he bring his Paul Newman-blues to meet Chris’s.

“Upstairs,” he said.

“Chris,” Carol said. “Will you please let me—”

“Where’s Samantha?” Chris said.

“Upstairs,” Adam said. “With the kids.”

“*Chris*, for God’s sake!” Carol said.

She turned back to Adam. The auditor returned his look to her, but only after a last lingering fix on Chris.

“Adam, you’ve got to tell Sammi that there are men driving around trucks filled with trash bags,” Carol went on. “And in the trash bags, in them, are little babies. They’re so rotted you can’t even see what—”

“How is Sammi doing, Adam?” Chris said.

For the first time, Adam’s hands stopped fidgeting in the bubbles.

“Upstairs,” he said.

His voice cracked as he spoke. He pulled his hands out of the sink and let them drop to his sides.

“I mean fine. She’s fine. She’s upstairs with the kids.”

Then he turned, palms still on apron, to face the Temples.

It was then that Chris and Carol saw for the first time the Colt Peacemaker tucked into the waistband of his apron. Carol gasped. She choked back into Chris. Chris gripped both her bare arms, doing so in a manner he prayed would communicate his need for silence.

“We’re just going to go up and check on Sammi, if you don’t care,” he said then, using the voice he did with angry doctors and nurses on payday – and Frank when things got too heavy in a consultation. “I’m sure she’d like to hear about the girls.”

At the same time, he started to inch backwards in millimeters, dragging Carol with him.

Adam turned slowly back to the sink. He put his hands on the edge. His right hand, still soapy, slipped. In a split second, his head pitched forward. Carol recoiled, her skull knocking into Chris’s chin. The auditor righted himself in a quick motion. With a shake of his head and a harsh blink, he looked up. There, he stared out the bay window recessed between the mahogany cabinets.

“No,” he said. “No, I don’t think you should go up there, Carol.”

Chris started to pull Carol into the shadows as the auditor – the old Brinkman grill-master himself – went on.

“Sam’s really tired, and the kids.... They just got to sleep a little while ago.”

He leaned back from the sink then. And, in what looked like a truly absentminded gesture, he pulled the old varnished Peacemaker out of his waistband and

cocked back the hammer with his soapy thumb.

“That’s alright, Adam,” Chris said. He’d moved both hands up to squeeze Carol’s shoulders very hard, so hard he could feel his nails breaking flesh. “We’re just going to get going. But you’ll call us and let us know if anyone else shows up. You’ll tell them we still want to talk, still want to help, okay?”

“Sure, Carol,” Adam said. “I’ll do that.”

The hand not holding the Peacemaker began to sweep up and down upon the apron. Bubbles knocked free floated to a silent end on the tile below. Chris, meanwhile, almost had Carol out of the kitchen.

“You can still see them, you know,” Adam said suddenly.

Chris stopped. He couldn’t help it.

I swear to Jesus, a familiar voice said in Chris’s head. It was his. *I can still see them.*

“Who’s that?” he said to the auditor.

Adam rubbed his thumb on the Peacemaker’s hammer.

“Everyone,” he said. “They’ll be here later. Come back, Carol. Okay? Come back and see everyone.”

Chris found his legs again.

“We will,” he said, and moved backwards the final steps. “You just let us know.”

He then led Carol swiftly down the hall, maneuvering her quickly through the foyer and out onto the front walk. His heart pounded the whole way. The muscles of his back twitched beneath the patches of hair that covered them, waiting in terror to be torn open by a hundred-year-old bullet.

Once he had the shell-shocked Carol tucked into the passenger seat, he rushed to

his side of the Tahoe. The engine fired up in seconds. Foot unleashed on the gas, he pulled away from the curb and twisted up the radio. He turned it up so loud he couldn't hear anything but the pounding of snare drums and screeching vocals as they shot away on empty streets.

Thanks to this screaming rock'n'roll, too loud to even have a name, Chris never knew for sure if he actually heard the Peacemaker's report thunder down Preston Street, or if this detail was something he simply added later.

End PART I.

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