The STEPHEN KING *Sampler*

from **Later**, **Joyland**,
and **The Colorado Kid**

A HARD CASE CRIME SAMPLER
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INTRODUCTION

When Max Phillips and I first came up with the idea for Hard Case Crime 20 years ago, we never dreamed we'd wind up working with Stephen King.

This all began in the winter of 2001. Over drinks one night at the storied Algonquin Hotel in New York City, Max and I were lamenting that no one seemed to publish the sort of books we'd grown up reading anymore: slender, irresistible paperback crime novels, small enough to be stuffed in a jacket pocket, short enough to be read in a night or two, exciting enough that you'd stay up late that first night to finish them rather than go to sleep not knowing how the story ended, and typically fronted by a racy painted cover showing a gorgeous *femme fatale* who looked she might have stepped off a movie poster.

In 2001, no one had published books like those for many years.

So we decided we'd do it ourselves. We'd start a brand new line of books that would look as if it had started publishing back in the 1940s and somehow just never stopped.

But how were we going to get anyone to pick up one of our books?

Well, there was plenty of work to do before we got around to solving that problem—first we had to choose the books we were going to publish (or write them: Max and I decided early on that we would each write one apiece); we had to design the covers and choose a typeface for the interiors that looked suitably old-fashioned; and on a more practical level we had to find a book publishing company willing to actually print our books and distribute them to stores. Those steps took almost three years. But eventually we got them all done, and then we were back to the original question: how to get anyone in the 21st century interested in picking up books that looked like they came from the middle of the 20th?

And the brainstorm we hit upon was this: no one had ever heard of us or our books yet, but maybe there was a well-known writer out there who loved old-time crime novels as much as we did and would be willing to write us a blurb that would help entice readers to give us a try. People who might never pick up a book by an old-time author whose name they didn't recognize, like Wade Miller or David Dodge or Peter Rabe, might take a second look if they saw a supportive word or two from an author they did know and respect.

So we decided to reach out to Stephen King.

Why Stephen King? Well, we didn't know the man, but we knew he shared our passion for this sort of book. He'd said so publicly more than once. He'd gone on the record about his love for the paperback crime novels of writers like John D. MacDonald and Lawrence Block. Hell, he'd even named the

evil pseudonym in his novel *The Dark Half* "George Stark" after Richard Stark, the dark half of one of the writers we were going to be reprinting, the great Donald E. Westlake.

So I wrote to Stephen King. And held my breath and crossed my fingers and told myself not to be surprised if I never heard back. The man was busy, after all, and had to get a ton of random inquiries from random people wanting random things. No reason to think ours would catch his eye.

Then about a month later I was minding my own business when a call came in from Steve's agent and long-time editor, Chuck Verrill. "Steve asked me to give you a call," he said. "He wanted me to let you know that he does not want to write you a blurb—"

"Of course," I said, "I understand completely. That's completely understandable."

"—because," Chuck went on, "he wants to write you a book instead."

I sat on the other end of the phone while this sank in and tried to sound cool, like this was the sort of phone call I got every day and twice on Fridays. But inside I was turning cartwheels.

Because however much a blurb from Stephen King might mean to a fledging line like ours, a book would of course mean so much more. A book would put our little labor-of-love line of old-style novels on the map.

And in fact it did.

The book was *The Colorado Kid*, the story of a dead man found mysteriously on a beach off the coast of Maine, and it not only became a *New York Times* bestseller (as all

of Stephen King's books have), it even inspired a TV series called *Haven* that ran for six years in more than 100 places around the globe. Publishing *The Colorado Kid* was an extraordinary experience, an extraordinary act of generosity on the part of its author, a man who owed us nothing whatsoever and chose to support us purely out of a shared passion for what we were doing.

But here's the even more extraordinary thing: eight years later, he did it again.

I was minding my own business—I swear I was—when another phone call came in from Chuck Verrill. "Steve has written another book he thinks might be a good fit for you. Would you like to take a look?"

Would we?

Holy moley, would we ever.

And this book, about a murder that took place years earlier in a small-town amusement park, was *Joyland*, a beautiful, heartfelt novel that to this day many people list among their favorite Stephen King novels ever.

But wait—like they used to say on those Ginsu knife commercials, there's more.

Because eight years after that, I got another call. "Steve has another book he'd like you to take a look at."

"What's it called?"

"*Later*."

"You'll tell me later what it's called?" I said, feeling like I was either Abbott or Costello, I wasn't sure which.

"It's called *Later*," Chuck said, "and Steve thought you might like to see it."

*

And so, here we are, 16 years later—*Later!*—and we've gotten to have the indescribably wonderful experience of working with Stephen King, one of the greatest living storytellers and one of the kindest gentlemen on the planet, not just one time but three.

If you've never read any of his Hard Case Crime books, you are in for a real treat. They're full of all the qualities that make his books so widely and enduringly popular with readers of all stripes, and they are also full of the qualities that, in a much more modest way, have made Hard Case Crime books popular over the past 20 years.

If you like the taste you get on the following pages, we hope you'll pick up the full novels—they're really wonderful. And we hope you'll also enjoy the taste this Humble Bundle selection gives you of our other books, books by authors you may never have heard of, but who have marvelous stories to tell and will keep you up late at night telling them.

Charles Ardai
New York City, 2021

The COLORADO *Kid*

1

After deciding he would get nothing of interest from the two old men who comprised the entire staff of *The Weekly Islander*, the feature writer from the Boston *Globe* took a look at his watch, remarked that he could just make the one-thirty ferry back to the mainland if he hurried, thanked them for their time, dropped some money on the tablecloth, weighted it down with the salt shaker so the stiffish onshore breeze wouldn't blow it away, and hurried down the stone steps from the Grey Gull's patio dining area toward Bay Street and the little town below. Other than a few cursory gleeps at her breasts, he hardly noticed the young woman sitting between the two old men at all.

Once the *Globe* writer was gone, Vince Teague reached across the table and removed the bills—two fifties—from beneath the salt shaker. He tucked them into a flap pocket of his old but serviceable tweed jacket with a look of unmistakable satisfaction.

"What are you *doing*?" Stephanie McCann asked, knowing how much Vince enjoyed shocking what he called "her young bones" (how much they both did, really), but in this instance not able to keep the shock out of her voice.

"What does it look like?" Vince looked more satisfied than ever. With the money gone he smoothed down the flap over the pocket and took the last bite of his lobster roll. Then he patted his mouth with his paper napkin and deftly caught the departed *Globe* writer's plastic lobster bib when another, fresher gust of salt-scented breeze tried to carry it away. His hand was almost grotesquely gnarled with arthritis, but mighty quick for all that.

"It looks like you just took the money Mr. Hanratty left to pay for our lunch," Stephanie said.

"Ayuh, good eye there, Steff," Vince agreed, and winked one of his own at the other man sitting at the table. This was Dave Bowie, who looked roughly Vince Teague's age but was in fact twenty-five years younger. It was all a matter of the equipment you got in the lottery, was what Vince claimed; you ran it until it fell apart, patching it up as needed along the way, and he was sure that even to folks who lived a hundred years—as he hoped to do—it seemed like not much more than a summer afternoon in the end.

"But *why*?"

"Are you afraid I'm gonna stiff the Gull for the tab and stick Helen with it?" he asked her.

"No…who's Helen?"

"Helen Hafner, she who waited on us." Vince nodded across the patio where a slightly overweight woman of about forty was picking up dishes. "Because it's the policy of Jack Moody—who happens to own this fine eating establishment, and his father before him, if you care—"

"I do," she said.

David Bowie, *The Weekly Islander*'s managing editor for just shy of the years Helen Hafner had lived, leaned forward and put his pudgy hand over her young and pretty one. "I know you do," he said. "Vince does, too. That's why he's taking the long way around Robin Hood's barn to explain."

"Because school is in," she said, smiling.

"That's right," Dave said, "and what's nice for old guys like us?"

"You only have to bother teaching people who want to learn."

"That's right," Dave said, and leaned back. "That's nice." He wasn't wearing a suit-coat or sport-coat but an old green sweater. It was August and to Stephanie it seemed quite warm on the Gull's patio in spite of the onshore breeze, but she knew that both men felt the slightest chill. In Dave's case, this surprised her a little; he was only sixty-five and carrying an extra thirty pounds, at least. But although Vince Teague might look no more than seventy (and an agile seventy at that, in spite of his twisted hands), he had turned ninety earlier that summer and was as skinny as a rail. "A stuffed string" was what Mrs. Pinder, *The Islander*'s part-time secretary, called him. Usually with a disdainful sniff.

"The Grey Gull's policy is that the waitresses are responsible for the tabs their tables run up until those tabs are paid," Vince said. "Jack tells all the ladies that when they come in lookin for work, just so they can't come whining to him later on, sayin they didn't know that was part of the deal."

Stephanie surveyed the patio, which was still half-full even at twenty past one, and then looked into the main dining room, which overlooked Moose Cove. There almost every table was still taken, and she knew that from Memorial Day until the end of July, there would be a line outside until nearly three o'clock. Controlled bedlam, in other words. To expect every waitress to keep track of every single customer when she was busting her ass, carrying trays of steaming boiled lobsters and clams—

"That hardly seems…" She trailed off, wondering if these two old fellows, who'd probably been putting out their paper before such a thing as the minimum wage even existed, would laugh at her if she finished.

"*Fair* might be the word you're lookin for," Dave said dryly, and picked up a roll. It was the last one in the basket.

Fair came out *fay-yuh*, which more or less rhymed with *ayuh*, the Yankee word which seemed to mean both *yes* and *is that so*. Stephanie was from Cincinnati, Ohio, and when she had first come to Moose-Lookit Island to do an internship on *The Weekly Islander*, she had nearly despaired…which, in downeast lingo, also rhymed with *ayuh*. How could she learn anything when she could only understand one word in every seven? And if she kept asking them to repeat themselves, how long would it be before they decided she was a congenital idiot (which on Moose-Look was pronounced *ijit*, of course)?

She had been on the verge of quitting four days into a four-month University of Ohio postgrad program when Dave took her aside one afternoon and said, "Don't you

quit on it, Steffi, it'll come to ya." And it had. Almost overnight, it seemed, the accent had clarified. It was as if she'd had a bubble in her ear which had suddenly, miraculously popped. She thought she could live here the rest of her life and never talk like them, but understand them? Ayuh, that much she could do, deah.

"Fair was the word," she agreed.

"One that hasn't ever been in Jack Moody's vocabulary, except in how it applies to the weather," Vince said, and then, with no change of tone, "Put that roll down, David Bowie, ain't you gettin fat, I swan, soo-ee, pig-pig-pig."

"Last time I looked, we wa'ant married," Dave said, and took another bite of his roll. "Can't you tell her what's on what passes for your mind without scoldin me?"

"Ain't he pert?" Vince said. "No one ever taught him not to talk with his mouth full, either." He hooked an arm over the back of his chair, and the breeze from the bright ocean blew his fine white hair back from his brow. "Steffi, Helen's got three kids from twelve to six and a husband that run off and left her. She don't want to leave the island, and she can make a go of it—just—waitressin at the Grey Gull because summers are a little fatter than the winters are lean. Do you follow that?"

"Yes, absolutely," Stephanie said, and just then the lady in question approached. Stephanie noticed that she was wearing heavy support hose that did not entirely conceal varicose veins, and that there were dark circles under her eyes.

"Vince, Dave," she said, and contented herself with just

a nod at the pretty third, whose name she did not know. "See your friend dashed off. For the ferry?"

"Yep," Dave said. "Discovered he had to get back down-Boston."

"Ayuh? All done here?"

"Oh, leave on a bit," Vince said, "but bring us a check when you like, Helen. Kids okay?"

Helen Hafner grimaced. "Jude fell out of his treehouse and broke his arm last week. Didn't he holler! Scared me bout to death!"

The two old men looked at each other…then laughed. They sobered quickly, looking ashamed, and Vince offered his sympathies, but it wouldn't do for Helen.

"Men can laugh," she told Stephanie with a tired, sardonic smile. "They *all* fell out of treehouses and broke their arms when they were boys, and they all remember what little pirates they were. What they don't remember is Ma gettin up in the middle of the night to give em their aspirin tablets. I'll bring you the check." She shuffled off in a pair of sneakers with rundown backs.

"She's a good soul," Dave said, having the grace to look slightly shamefaced.

"Yes, she is," Vince said, "and if we got the rough side of her tongue we probably deserved it. Meanwhile, here's the deal on this lunch, Steffi. I dunno what three lobster rolls, one lobster dinner with steamers, and four iced teas cost down there in Boston, but that feature writer must have forgot that up here we're livin at what an economist might call 'the source of supply' and so he dropped a hundred

bucks on the table. If Helen brings us a check that says any more than fifty-five, I'll smile and kiss a pig. With me so far?"

"Yes, sure," Stephanie said.

"Now the way this works for that fella from the *Globe* is that he scratches *Lunch, Gray Gull, Moose-Lookit Island* and *Unexplained Mysteries Series* in his little Boston *Globe* expense book while he's ridin back to the mainland on the ferry, and if he's honest he writes one hundred bucks and if he's got a smidge of larceny in his soul, he writes a hundred and twenty and takes his girl to the movies on the extra. Got that?"

"Yes," Stephanie said, and looked at him with reproachful eyes as she drank the rest of her iced tea. "I think you're very cynical."

"No, if I was very cynical, I would have said a hundred and *thirty*, and for sure." This made Dave snort laughter. "In any case, he left a hundred, and that's at least thirty-five dollars too much, even with a twenty percent tip added in. So I took his money. When Helen brings the check, I'll sign it, because the *Islander* runs a tab here."

"And you'll tip more than twenty percent, I hope," Stephanie said, "given her situation at home."

"That's just where you're wrong," Vince said.

"I am? *Why* am I?"

He looked at her patiently. "Why do you think? Because I'm cheap? Yankee-tight?"

"No. I don't believe that any more than I think black men are lazy or Frenchmen think about sex all day long."

"Then put your brain to work. God gave you a good one."

Stephanie tried, and the two men watched her do it, interested.

"She'd see it as charity," Stephanie finally said.

Vince and Dave exchanged an amused glance.

"What?" Stephanie asked.

"Gettin a little close to lazy black men and sexy Frenchmen, ain'tcha, dear?" Dave asked, deliberately broadening his downeast accent into what was nearly a burlesque drawl. "Only now it's the proud Yankee woman that won't take charity."

Feeling that she was straying ever deeper into the sociological thickets, Stephanie said, "You mean she would take it. For her kids, if not for herself."

"The man who bought our lunch was from away," Vince said. "As far as Helen Hafner's concerned, folks from away just about got money fallin out of their…their wallets."

Amused at his sudden detour into delicacy on her account, Stephanie looked around, first at the patio area where they were sitting, then through the glass at the indoor seating area. And she saw an interesting thing. Many—perhaps even most—of the patrons out here in the breeze were locals, and so were most of the waitresses serving them. Inside were the summer people, the so-called "off-islanders," and the waitresses serving *them* were younger. Prettier, too, and also from away. Summer help. And all at once she understood. She had been wrong to put on her sociologist's hat. It was far simpler than that.

"The Grey Gull waitresses share tips, don't they?" she asked. "That's what it is."

Vince pointed a finger at her like a gun and said, "Bingo."

"So what do you do?"

"What I do," he said, "is tip fifteen percent when I sign the check and put forty dollars of that *Globe* fella's cash in Helen's pocket. She gets all of that, the paper doesn't get hurt, and what Uncle Sam don't know don't bother him."

"It's the way America does business," Dave said solemnly.

"And do you know what I like?" Vince Teague said, turning his face up into the sun. When he squinted his eyes closed against its brilliance, what seemed like a thousand wrinkles sprang into existence on his skin. They did not make him look his age, but they *did* make him look eighty.

"No, what?" Stephanie asked, amused.

"I like the way the money goes around and around, like clothes in a drier. I like watching it. And this time when the machine finally stops turning, the money finishes up here on Moosie where folks actually need it. Also, just to make it perfect, that city fellow *did* pay for our lunch, and he walked away with *nones*."

"Ran, actually," Dave said. "Had to make that boat, don'tcha know. Made me think of that Edna St. Vincent Millay poem. 'We were very tired, we were very merry, we went back and forth all night on the ferry.' That's not exactly it, but it's close."

"He wasn't very merry, but he'll be good and tired by the time he gets to his next stop," Vince said. "I think he mentioned Madawaska. Maybe he'll find some unexplained

mysteries there. Why anyone'd want to live in such a place, for instance. Dave, help me out."

Stephanie believed there was a kind of telepathy between the two old men, rough but real. She'd seen several examples of it since coming to Moose-Lookit Island almost three months ago, and she saw another example of it now. Their waitress was returning, check in hand. Dave's back was to her, but Vince saw her coming and the younger man knew exactly what the *Islander*'s editor wanted. Dave reached into his back pocket, removed his wallet, removed two bills, folded them between his fingers, and passed them across the table. Helen arrived a moment later. Vince took the check from her with one gnarled hand. With the other he slipped the bills into the skirt pocket of her uniform.

"Thank you, darlin," he said.

"You sure you don't want dessert?" she asked. "There's Mac's chocolate cherry cake. It's not on the menu, but we've still got some."

"I'll pass. Steffi?"

She shook her head. So—with some regret—did Dave Bowie.

Helen favored (if that was the word) Vincent Teague with a look of dour judgment. "You could use fattening up, Vince."

"Jack Sprat and his wife, that's me n Dave," Vince said brightly.

"Ayuh." Helen glanced at Stephanie, and one of her tired eyes closed in a brief wink of surprising good humor. "You picked a pair, Missy," she said.

"They're all right," Stephanie said.

"Sure, and after this you'll probably go straight to the *New York Times*," Helen said. She picked up the plates, added, "I'll be back for the rest of the ridding-up," and sailed away.

"When she finds that forty dollars in her pocket," Stephanie said, "will she know who put it there?" She looked again at the patio, where perhaps two dozen customers were drinking coffee, iced tea, afternoon beers, or eating off-the-menu chocolate cherry cake. Not all looked capable of slipping forty dollars in cash into a waitress's pocket, but some of them did.

"Probably she will," Vince said, "but tell me something, Steffi."

"I will if I can."

"If she didn't know, would that make it illegal tender?"

"I don't know what you—"

"I think you do," he said. "Come on, let's get back to the paper. News won't wait."

2

Here was the thing Stephanie loved best about *The Weekly Islander*, the thing that still charmed her after three months spent mostly writing ads: on a clear afternoon you could walk six steps from your desk and have a gorgeous view of the Maine coast. All you had to do was walk onto the shaded deck that overlooked the reach and ran the length of the newspaper's barnlike building. It was true that the air smelled of fish and seaweed, but everything on Moose-Look smelled that way. You got used to it, Stephanie had discovered, and then a beautiful thing happened—after your nose dismissed that smell, it went and found it all over again, and the second time around, you fell in love with it.

On clear afternoons (like this one near the end of August), every house and dock and fishing-boat over there on the Tinnock side of the reach stood out brilliantly; she could read the SUNOCO on the side of a diesel pump and the *LeeLee Bett* on the hull of some haddock-jockey's bread-winner, beached for its turn-of-the-season scraping and painting. She could see a boy in shorts and a cut-off Patriots jersey fishing from the trash-littered shingle below Preston's Bar, and a thousand winks of sun glittering off the tin flashing of a hundred village roofs. And, between Tinnock

Village (which was actually a good-sized town) and Moose-Lookit Island, the sun shone on the bluest water she had ever seen. On days like this, she wondered how she would ever go back to the Midwest, or if she even could. And on days when the fog rolled in and the entire mainland world seemed to be cancelled and the rueful cry of the foghorn came and went like the voice of some ancient beast…why, then she wondered the same thing.

You want to be careful, Steffi, Dave had told her one day when he came on her, sitting out there on the deck with her yellow pad on her lap and a half-finished Arts 'N Things column scrawled there in her big backhand strokes. *Island living has a way of creeping into your blood, and once it gets there it's like malaria. It doesn't leave easily.*

Now, after turning on the lights (the sun had begun going the other way and the long room had begun to darken), she sat down at her desk and found her trusty legal pad with a new Arts 'N Things column on the top page. This one was pretty much interchangeable with any of half a dozen others she had so far turned in, but she looked at it with undeniable affection just the same. It was hers, after all, her work, writing she was getting paid for, and she had no doubt that people all over the *Islander*'s circulation area—which was quite large—actually read it.

Vince sat down behind his own desk with a small but audible grunt. It was followed by a crackling sound as he twisted first to the left and then to the right. He called this "settling his spine." Dave told him that he would someday paralyze himself from the neck down while "settling his

spine," but Vince seemed singularly unworried by the possibility. Now he turned on his computer while his managing editor sat on the corner of his desk, produced a toothpick, and began using it to rummage in his upper plate.

"What's it going to be?" Dave asked while Vince waited for his computer to boot up. "Fire? Flood? Earthquake? Or the revolt of the multitudes?"

"I thought I'd start with Ellen Dunwoodie snapping off the fire hydrant on Beach Lane when the parking brake on her car let go. Then, once I'm properly warmed up, I thought I'd move on to a rewrite of my library editorial," Vince said, and cracked his knuckles.

Dave glanced over at Stephanie from his perch on the corner of Vince's desk. "First the back, then the knuckles," he said. "If he could learn how to play 'Dry Bones' on his ribcage, we could get him on *American Idol*."

"Always a critic," Vince said amiably, still waiting for his machine to boot up. "You know, Steff, there's something perverse about this. Here am I, ninety years old and ready for the cooling board, using a brand new Macintosh computer, and there you sit, twenty-two and gorgeous, fresh as a new peach, yet scrawling on a yellow legal pad like an old maid in a Victorian romance."

"I don't believe yellow legal pads had been invented in Victorian times," Stephanie said. She shuffled through the papers on her desk. When she had come to Moose-Look and *The Weekly Islander* in June, they had given her the smallest desk in the place—little more than a grade-schooler's desk,

really—away in the corner. In mid-July she had been promoted to a bigger one in the middle of the room. This pleased her, but the increased desk-space also afforded more area for things to get lost in. Now she hunted around until she found a bright pink circular. "Do either of you know what organization profits from the Annual End-Of-Summer Gernerd Farms Hayride, Picnic, and Dance, this year featuring Little Jonna Jaye and the Straw Hill Boys?"

"That organization would be Sam Gernerd, his wife, their five kids, and their various creditors," Vince said, and his machine beeped. "I've been meaning to tell you, Steff, you've done a swell job on that little column of yours."

"Yes, you have," Dave agreed. "We've gotten two dozen letters, I guess, and the only bad one was from Mrs. Edina Steen the Downeast Grammar Queen, and she's completely mad."

"Nuttier than a fruitcake," Vince agreed.

Stephanie smiled, wondering at how rare it was once you graduated from childhood—this feeling of perfect and uncomplicated happiness. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you both." And then: "Can I ask you something? Straight up?"

Vince swiveled his chair around and looked at her. "Anything under the sun, if it'll keep me away from Mrs. Dunwoodie and the fire hydrant," he said.

"And me away from doing invoices," Dave said. "Although I can't go home until they're finished."

"Don't you make that paperwork your boss!" Vince said. "How many times have I told you?"

"Easy for you to say," Dave returned. "You haven't looked inside the *Islander* checkbook in ten years, I don't think, let alone carried it around."

Stephanie was determined not to let them be sidetracked —or to let them sidetrack her—into this old squabble. "Quit it, both of you."

They looked at her, surprised into silence.

"Dave, you pretty much told that Mr. Hanratty from the *Globe* that you and Vince have been working together on the *Islander* for forty years—"

"Ayuh—"

"—and you started it up in 1948, Vince."

"That's true," he said. "'Twas *The Weekly Shopper and Trading Post* until the summer of '48, just a free handout in the various island markets and the bigger stores on the mainland. I was young and bullheaded and awful lucky. That was when they had the big fires over in Tinnock and Hancock. Those fires…they didn't *make* the paper, I won't say that—although there were those who did at the time—but they give it a good runnin start, sure. It wasn't until 1956 that I had as many ads as I did in the summer of '48."

"So you guys have been on the job for over fifty years, and in all that time you've *never* come across a real unexplained mystery? Can that be true?"

Dave Bowie looked shocked. "We never said that!"

"Gorry, you were *there*!" Vince declared, equally scandalized.

For a moment they managed to hold these expressions, but when Stephanie McCann only continued to look from

one to the other, prim as the schoolmarm in a John Ford Western, they couldn't go on. First Vince Teague's mouth began to quiver at one corner, and then Dave Bowie's eye began to twitch. They might still have been all right, but then they made the mistake of looking right at each other and a moment later they were laughing like the world's oldest pair of kids.

3

"You were the one who told him about the *Pretty Lisa*," Dave said to Vince when he had gotten hold of himself again. The *Pretty Lisa Cabot* was a fishing boat that had washed up on the shore of neighboring Smack Island in the nineteen-twenties with one dead crewman sprawled over the forward hold and the other five men gone. "How many times do you think Hanratty heard that one, up n down this part of the coast?"

"Oh, I dunno, how many places do you judge he stopped before he got here, dear?" Vince countered, and a moment later the two men were off again, bellowing laughter, Vince slapping has bony knee while Dave whacked the side of one plump thigh.

Stephanie watched them, frowning—not angry, not amused herself (well…a little), just trying to understand the source of their howling good humor. She herself had thought the story of the *Pretty Lisa Cabot* good enough for at least one in a series of eight articles on, ta-da, Unexplained Mysteries of New England, but she was neither stupid nor insensitive; she'd been perfectly aware that Mr. *Hanratty* hadn't thought it was good enough. And yes, she'd known from his face that he'd heard it before in his

Globe-funded wanderings up and down the coast between Boston and Moose-Look, and probably more than once.

Vince and Dave nodded when she advanced this idea. "Ayup," Dave said. "Hanratty may be from away, but that doesn't make him lazy or stupid. The mystery of the *Pretty Lisa*—the solution to which almost certainly has to do with gun-happy bootleggers running hooch down from Canada, although no one will ever know for sure—has been around for years. It's been written up in half a dozen books, not to mention both *Yankee* and *Downeast* magazines. And, say, Vince, didn't the *Globe*—?"

Vince was nodding. "Maybe. Seven, maybe nine years ago. Sunday supplement piece. Although it might have been the Providence *Journal*. I'm sure it was the Portland Sunday *Telegram* that did the piece on the Mormons that showed up over in Freeport and tried to sink a mine in the Desert of Maine…"

"And the 1951 Coast Lights get a big play in the newspapers almost every Halloween," Dave added cheerfully. "Not to mention the UFO websites."

"And a woman wrote a book last year on the poisonin's at that church picnic in Tashmore," Vince finished up. This was the last 'unexplained mystery' they had hauled out for the *Globe* reporter over lunch. This was just before Hanratty had decided he could make the one-thirty ferry, and in a way Stephanie guessed she now didn't blame him.

"So you were having him on," she said. "Teasing him with old stories."

"No, dear!" Vince said, this time sounding shocked for

real. (*Well, maybe,* Stephanie thought.) "Every one of those is a *bona fide* unsolved mystery of the New England coast —our part of it, even."

"We couldn't be sure he knew all those stories until we trotted em out," Dave said reasonably. "Not that it surprised us any that he did."

"Nope," Vince agreed. His eyes were bright. "Pretty old chestnuts, I would have to agree. But we got a nice lunch out of it, didn't we? And we got to watch the money go around and come out right where it should…partly in Helen Hafner's pocket."

"And those stories are really the only ones you know? Stories that have been chewed to a pulp in books and the big newspapers?"

Vince looked at Dave, his long-time cohort. "Did I say that?"

"Nope," Dave said. "And I don't believe I did, either."

"Well, what other unexplained mysteries *do* you know about? And why didn't you tell him?"

The two old men glanced at each other, and once again Stephanie McCann felt that telepathy at work. Vince gave a slight nod toward the door. Dave got up, crossed the brightly lit half of the long room (in the darker half hulked the big old-fashioned offset printing press that hadn't run in over seven years), and turned the sign hanging in the door from OPEN to CLOSED. Then he came back.

"Closed? In the middle of the day?" Stephanie asked, with the slightest touch of unease in her mind, if not in her voice.

"If someone comes by with news, they'll knock," Vince said, reasonably enough. "If it's big news, they'll hammer."

"And if downtown catches afire, we'll hear the whistle," Dave put in. "Come on out on the deck, Steffi. August sun's not to be missed—it doesn't last long."

She looked at Dave, then at Vince Teague, who was as mentally quick at ninety as he'd been at forty-five. She was convinced of it. "School's in?" she asked.

"That's right," Vince said, and although he was still smiling, she sensed he was serious. "And do you know what's nice for old guys like us?"

"You only have to teach people who want to learn."

"Ayuh. Do *you* want to learn, Steffi?"

"Yes." She spoke with no hesitation in spite of that odd inner unease.

"Then come out and sit," he said. "Come out and sit a little."

So she did…

JOYLAND

♥

I had a car, but on most days in that fall of 1973 I walked to Joyland from Mrs. Shoplaw's Beachside Accommodations in the town of Heaven's Bay. It seemed like the right thing to do. The only thing, actually. By early September, Heaven Beach was almost completely deserted, which suited my mood. That fall was the most beautiful of my life. Even forty years later I can say that. And I was never so unhappy, I can say that, too. People think first love is sweet, and never sweeter than when that first bond snaps. You've heard a thousand pop and country songs that prove the point; some fool got his heart broke. Yet that first broken heart is always the most painful, the slowest to mend, and leaves the most visible scar. What's so sweet about that?

♥

Through September and right into October, the North Carolina skies were clear and the air was warm even at seven in the morning, when I left my second-floor apartment by

the outside stairs. If I started with a light jacket on, I was wearing it tied around my waist before I'd finished half of the three miles between the town and the amusement park.

I'd make Betty's Bakery my first stop, grabbing a couple of still-warm croissants. My shadow would walk with me on the sand, at least twenty feet long. Hopeful gulls, smelling the croissants in their waxed paper, would circle overhead. And when I walked back, usually around five (although sometimes I stayed later—there was nothing waiting for me in Heaven's Bay, a town that mostly went sleepybye when summer was over), my shadow walked with me on the water. If the tide was in, it would waver on the surface, seeming to do a slow hula.

Although I can't be completely sure, I think the boy and the woman and their dog were there from the first time I took that walk. The shore between the town and the cheerful, blinking gimcrackery of Joyland was lined with summer homes, many of them expensive, most of them clapped shut after Labor Day. But not the biggest of them, the one that looked like a green wooden castle. A boardwalk led from its wide back patio down to where the seagrass gave way to fine white sand. At the end of the boardwalk was a picnic table shaded by a bright green beach umbrella. In its shade, the boy sat in his wheelchair, wearing a baseball cap and covered from the waist down by a blanket even in the late afternoons, when the temperature lingered in the seventies. I thought he was five or so, surely no older than seven. The dog, a Jack Russell terrier,

either lay beside him or sat at his feet. The woman sat on one of the picnic table benches, sometimes reading a book, mostly just staring out at the water. She was very beautiful.

Going or coming, I always waved to them, and the boy waved back. She didn't, not at first. 1973 was the year of the OPEC oil embargo, the year Richard Nixon announced he was not a crook, the year Edward G. Robinson and Noel Coward died. It was Devin Jones's lost year. I was a twenty-one year-old virgin with literary aspirations. I possessed three pairs of bluejeans, four pairs of Jockey shorts, a clunker Ford (with a good radio), occasional suicidal ideations, and a broken heart.

Sweet, huh?

♥

The heartbreaker was Wendy Keegan, and she didn't deserve me. It's taken me most of my life to come to that conclusion, but you know the old saw; better late than never. She was from Portsmouth, New Hampshire; I was from South Berwick, Maine. That made her practically the girl next door. We had begun "going together" (as we used to say) during our freshman year at UNH—we actually met at the Freshman Mixer, and how sweet is that? Just like one of those pop songs.

We were inseparable for two years, went everywhere together and did everything together. Everything, that is, but "it." We were both work-study kids with University jobs. Hers was in the library; mine was in the Commons cafeteria. We were offered the chance to hold onto those jobs

during the summer of 1972, and of course we did. The money wasn't great, but the togetherness was priceless. I assumed that would also be the deal during the summer of 1973, until Wendy announced that her friend Renee had gotten them jobs working at Filene's, in Boston.

"Where does that leave me?" I asked.

"You can always come down," she said. "I'll miss you like mad, but really, Dev, we could probably use some time apart."

A phrase that is very often a death-knell. She may have seen that idea on my face, because she stood on tiptoe and kissed me. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," she said. "Besides, with my own place, maybe you can stay over." But she didn't quite look at me when she said that, and I never did stay over. Too many roommates, she said. Too little time. Of course such problems can be overcome, but somehow we never did, which should have told me something; in retrospect, it tells me a lot. Several times we had been very close to "it," but "it" just never quite happened. She always drew back, and I never pressed her. God help me, I was being gallant. I have wondered often since what would have changed (for good or for ill) had I not been. What I know now is that gallant young men rarely get pussy. Put it on a sampler and hang it in your kitchen.

♥

The prospect of another summer mopping cafeteria floors and loading elderly Commons dishwashers with dirty plates didn't hold much charm for me, not with Wendy seventy

miles south, enjoying the bright lights of Boston, but it was steady work, which I needed, and I didn't have any other prospects. Then, in late February, one literally came down the dish-line to me on the conveyor belt.

Someone had been reading *Carolina Living* while he or she snarfed up that day's blue plate luncheon special, which happened to be Mexicali Burgers and Caramba Fries. He or she had left the magazine on the tray, and I picked it up along with the dishes. I almost tossed it in the trash, then didn't. Free reading material was, after all, free reading material. (I was a work-study kid, remember.) I stuck it in my back pocket and forgot about it until I got back to my dorm room. There it flopped onto the floor, open to the classified section at the back, while I was changing my pants.

Whoever had been reading the magazine had circled several job possibilities…although in the end, he or she must have decided none of them was quite right; otherwise *Carolina Living* wouldn't have come riding down the conveyor belt. Near the bottom of the page was an ad that caught my eye even though it hadn't been circled. In boldface type, the first line read: WORK CLOSE TO HEAVEN! What English major could read that and not hang in for the pitch? And what glum twenty-one-year-old, beset with the growing fear that he might be losing his girlfriend, would not be attracted by the idea of working in a place called Joyland?

There was a telephone number, and on a whim, I called it. A week later, a job application landed in my dormitory

mailbox. The attached letter stated that if I wanted full-time summer employment (which I did), I'd be doing many different jobs, most but not all custodial. I would have to possess a valid driver's license, and I would need to interview. I could do that on the upcoming spring break instead of going home to Maine for the week. Only I'd been planning to spend at least some of that week with Wendy. We might even get around to "it."

"Go for the interview," Wendy said when I told her. She didn't even hesitate. "It'll be an adventure."

"Being with you would be an adventure," I said.

"There'll be plenty of time for that next year." She stood on tiptoe and kissed me (she always stood on tiptoe). Was she seeing the other guy, even then? Probably not, but I'll bet she'd noticed him, because he was in her Advanced Sociology course. Renee St. Claire would have known, and probably would have told me if I'd asked—telling stuff was Renee's specialty, I bet she wore the priest out when she did the old confession bit—but some things you don't want to know. Like why the girl you loved with all your heart kept saying no to you, but tumbled into bed with the new guy at almost the first opportunity. I'm not sure anybody ever gets completely over their first love, and that still rankles. Part of me still wants to know what was *wrong* with me. What I was lacking. I'm in my sixties now, my hair is gray and I'm a prostate cancer survivor, but I still want to know why I wasn't good enough for Wendy Keegan.

♥

I took a train called the Southerner from Boston to North Carolina (not much of an adventure, but cheap), and a bus from Wilmington to Heaven's Bay. My interview was with Fred Dean, who was—among many other functions—Joyland's employment officer. After fifteen minutes of Q-and-A, plus a look at my driver's license and my Red Cross life-saving certificate, he handed me a plastic badge on a lanyard. It bore the word VISITOR, that day's date, and a cartoon picture of a grinning, blue-eyed German Shepherd who bore a passing resemblance to the famous cartoon sleuth, Scooby-Doo.

"Take a walk around," Dean said. "Ride the Carolina Spin, if you like. Most of the rides aren't up and running yet, but that one is. Tell Lane I said okay. What I gave you is a day-pass, but I want you back here by…" He looked at his watch. "Let's say one o'clock. Tell me then if you want the job. I've got five spots left, but they're all basically the same—as Happy Helpers."

"Thank you, sir."

He nodded, smiling. "Don't know how you'll feel about this place, but it suits me fine. It's a little old and a little rickety, but I find that charming. I tried Disney for a while; didn't like it. It's too…I don't know…"

"Too corporate?" I ventured.

"Exactly. Too corporate. Too buffed and shiny. So I came back to Joyland a few years ago. Haven't regretted it. We fly a bit more by the seat of our pants here—the place has a little of the old-time carny flavor. Go on, look around. See what you think. More important, see how you *feel*."

"Can I ask one question first?"

"Of course."

I fingered my day pass. "Who's the dog?"

His smile became a grin. "That's Howie the Happy Hound, Joyland's mascot. Bradley Easterbrook built Joyland, and the original Howie was his dog. Long dead now, but you'll still see a lot of him, if you work here this summer."

I did…and I didn't. An easy riddle, but the explanation will have to wait awhile.

♥

Joyland was an indie, not as big as a Six Flags park, and nowhere near as big as Disney World, but it was large enough to be impressive, especially with Joyland Avenue, the main drag, and Hound Dog Way, the secondary drag, almost empty and looking eight lanes wide. I heard the whine of power-saws and saw plenty of workmen—the largest crew swarming over the Thunderball, one of Joyland's two coasters—but there were no customers, because the park didn't open until June fifteenth. A few of the food concessions were doing business to take care of the workers' lunch needs, though, and an old lady in front of a star-studded tell-your-fortune kiosk was staring at me suspiciously. With one exception, everything else was shut up tight.

The exception of the Carolina Spin. It was a hundred and seventy feet tall (this I found out later), and turning very slowly. Out in front stood a tightly muscled guy in

faded jeans, balding suede boots splotched with grease, and a strap-style tee shirt. He wore a derby hat tilted on his coal-black hair. A filterless cigarette was parked behind one ear. He looked like a cartoon carnival barker from an old-time newspaper strip. There was an open toolbox and a big portable radio on an orange crate beside him. The Faces were singing "Stay with Me." The guy was bopping to the beat, hands in his back pockets, hips moving side to side. I had a thought, absurd but perfectly clear: *When I grow up, I want to look just like this guy*.

He pointed to the pass. "Freddy Dean sent you, right? Told you everything else was closed, but you could take a ride on the big wheel."

"Yes, sir."

"A ride on the Spin means you're in. He likes the chosen few to get the aerial view. You gonna take the job?"

"I think so."

He stuck out his hand. "I'm Lane Hardy. Welcome aboard, kid."

I shook with him. "Devin Jones."

"Pleased to meet you."

He started up the inclined walk leading to the gently turning ride, grabbed a long lever that looked like a stick shift, and edged it back. The wheel came to a slow stop with one of the gaily painted cabins (the image of Howie the Happy Hound on each) swaying at the passenger loading dock.

"Climb aboard, Jonesy. I'm going to send you up where the air is rare and the view is much more than fair."

I climbed into the cabin and closed the door. Lane gave it a shake to make sure it was latched, dropped the safety bar, then returned to his rudimentary controls. "Ready for takeoff, cap'n?"

"I guess so."

"Amazement awaits." He gave me a wink and advanced the control stick. The wheel began to turn again and all at once he was looking up at me. So was the old lady by the fortune-telling booth. Her neck was craned and she was shading her eyes. I waved to her. She didn't wave back.

Then I was above everything but the convoluted dips and twists of the Thunderball, rising into the chilly early spring air, and feeling—stupid but true—that I was leaving all my cares and worries down below.

Joyland wasn't a theme park, which allowed it to have a little bit of everything. There was a secondary roller coaster called the Delirium Shaker and a water slide (Captain Nemo's Splash & Crash). On the far western side of the park was a special annex for the little ones called the Wiggle-Waggle Village. There was also a concert hall where most of the acts—this I also learned later—were either B-list C&W or the kind of rockers who peaked in the fifties or sixties. I remember that Johnny Otis and Big Joe Turner did a show there together. I had to ask Brenda Rafferty, the head accountant who was also a kind of den mother to the Hollywood Girls, who they were. Bren thought I was dense; I thought she was old; we were both probably right.

Lane Hardy took me all the way to the top and then stopped the wheel. I sat in the swaying car, gripping the

safety bar, and looking out at a brand-new world. To the west was the North Carolina flatland, looking incredibly green to a New England kid who was used to thinking of March as nothing but true spring's cold and muddy precursor. To the east was the ocean, a deep metallic blue until it broke in creamy-white pulses on the beach where I would tote my abused heart up and down a few months hence. Directly below me was the good-natured jumble of Joyland—the big rides and small ones, the concert hall and concessions, the souvenir shops and the Happy Hound Shuttle, which took customers to the adjacent motels and, of course, the beach. To the north was Heaven's Bay. From high above the park (upstairs, where the air is rare), the town looked like a nestle of children's blocks from which four church steeples rose at the major points of the compass.

The wheel began to move again. I came down feeling like a kid in a Rudyard Kipling story, riding on the nose of an elephant. Lane Hardy brought me to a stop, but didn't bother to unlatch the car's door for me; I was, after all, almost an employee.

"How'd you like it?"

"Great," I said.

"Yeah, it ain't bad for a grandma ride." He reset his derby so it slanted the other way and cast an appraising eye over me. "How tall are you? Six-three?"

"Six-four."

"Uh-huh. Let's see how you like ridin all six-four of you on the Spin in the middle of July, wearin the fur and singin 'Happy Birthday' to some spoiled-rotten little snothole with

cotton candy in one hand and a meltin Kollie Kone in the other."

"Wearing what fur?"

But he was headed back to his machinery and didn't answer. Maybe he couldn't hear me over his radio, which was now blasting "Crocodile Rock." Or maybe he just wanted my future occupation as one of Joyland's cadre of Happy Hounds to come as a surprise.

♥

I had over an hour to kill before meeting with Fred Dean again, so I strolled up Hound Dog Way toward a lunch-wagon that looked like it was doing a pretty good business. Not everything at Joyland was canine-themed, but plenty of stuff was, including this particular eatery, which was called Pup-A-Licious. I was on a ridiculously tight budget for this little job-hunting expedition, but I thought I could afford a couple of bucks for a chili-dog and a paper cup of French fries.

When I reached the palm-reading concession, Madame Fortuna planted herself in my path. Except that's not quite right, because she was only Fortuna between May fifteenth and Labor Day. During those sixteen weeks, she dressed in long skirts, gauzy, layered blouses, and shawls decorated with various cabalistic symbols. Gold hoops hung from her ears, so heavy they dragged the lobes down, and she talked in a thick Romany accent that made her sound like a character from a 1930s fright-flick, the kind featuring mist-shrouded castles and howling wolves.

During the rest of the year she was a widow from Brooklyn who collected Hummel figures and liked movies (especially the weepy-ass kind where some chick gets cancer and dies beautifully). Today she was smartly put together in a black pantsuit and low heels. A rose-pink scarf around her throat added a touch of color. As Fortuna, she sported masses of wild gray locks, but that was a wig, and still stored under its own glass dome in her little Heaven's Bay house. Her actual hair was a cropped cap of dyed black. The *Love Story* fan from Brooklyn and Fortuna the Seer only came together in one respect: both fancied themselves psychic.

"There is a shadow over you, young man," she announced.

I looked down and saw she was absolutely right. I was standing in the shadow of the Carolina Spin. We both were.

"Not that, stupidnik. Over your future. You will have a hunger."

I had a bad one already, but a Pup-A-Licious footlong would soon take care of it. "That's very interesting, Mrs… um…"

"Rosalind Gold," she said, holding out her hand. "But you can call me Rozzie. Everyone does. But during the season…" She fell into character, which meant she sounded like Bela Lugosi with breasts. "Doorink the season, I am… *Fortuna*!"

I shook with her. If she'd been in costume as well as in character, half a dozen gold bangles would have clattered on her wrist. "Very nice to meet you." And, trying on the same accent: "I am…*Devin*!"

She wasn't amused. "An Irish name?"

"Right."

"The Irish are full of sorrow, and many have the sight. I don't know if you do, but you will meet someone who does."

Actually, I was full of happiness…along with that surpassing desire to put a Pup-A-Licious pup, preferably loaded with chili, down my throat. This was feeling like an adventure. I told myself I'd probably feel less that way when I was swabbing out toilets at the end of a busy day, or cleaning puke from the seats of the Whirly Cups, but just then everything seemed perfect.

"Are you practicing your act?"

She drew herself up to her full height, which might have been five-two. "Is no act, my lad." She said *ect* for *act*. "Jews are the most psychically sensitive race on earth. This is a thing everyone knows." She dropped the accent. "Also, Joyland beats hanging out a palmistry shingle on Second Avenue. Sorrowful or not, I like you. You give off good vibrations."

"One of my very favorite Beach Boys songs."

"But you are on the edge of great sorrow." She paused, doing the old emphasis thing. "And, perhaps, danger."

"Do you see a beautiful woman with dark hair in my future?" Wendy was a beautiful woman with dark hair.

"No," Rozzie said, and what came next stopped me dead. "She is in your past."

Ohh-kay.

I walked around her in the direction of Pup-A-Licious, being careful not to touch her. She was a charlatan, I didn't

have a single doubt about that, but touching her just then still seemed like a lousy idea.

No good. She walked with me. "In your future is a little girl and a little boy. The boy has a dog."

"A Happy Hound, I bet. Probably named Howie."

She ignored this latest attempt at levity. "The girl wears a red hat and carries a doll. One of these children has the sight. I don't know which. It is hidden from me."

I hardly heard that part of her spiel. I was thinking of the previous pronouncement, made in a flat Brooklyn accent: *She is in your past*.

Madame Fortuna got a lot of stuff wrong, I found out, but she *did* seem to have a genuine psychic touch, and on the day I interviewed for a summer at Joyland, she was hitting on all cylinders…

LATER

I

I was coming home from school with my mother. She was holding my hand. In the other hand I clutched my turkey, the ones we made in first grade the week before Thanksgiving. I was so proud of mine I was practically shitting nickels. What you did, see, was put your hand on a piece of construction paper and then trace around it with a crayon. That made the tail and body. When it came to the head, you were on your own.

I showed mine to Mom and she's all yeah yeah yeah, right right right, totally great, but I don't think she ever really saw it. She was probably thinking about one of the books she was trying to sell. "Flogging the product," she called it. Mom was a literary agent, see. It used to be her brother, my Uncle Harry, but Mom took over his business a year before the time I'm telling you about. It's a long story and kind of a bummer.

I said, "I used Forest Green because it's my favorite color. You knew that, right?" We were almost to our building by then. It was only three blocks from my school.

She's all yeah yeah yeah. Also, "You play or watch *Barney* and *The Magic Schoolbus* when we get home, kiddo, I've got like a zillion calls to make."

So *I* go yeah yeah yeah, which earned me a poke and a grin. I loved it when I could make my mother grin because

even at six I knew that she took the world very serious. Later on I found out part of the reason was me. She thought she might be raising a crazy kid. The day I'm telling you about was the one when she decided for sure I wasn't crazy after all. Which must have been sort of a relief and sort of not.

"You don't talk to anybody about this," she said to me later that day. "Except to me. And maybe not even me, kiddo. Okay?"

I said okay. When you're little and it's your mom, you say okay to everything. Unless she says it's bedtime, of course. Or to finish your broccoli.

We got to our building and the elevator was still broken. You could say things might have been different if it had been working, but I don't think so. I think that people who say life is all about the choices we make and the roads we go down are full of shit. Because check it, stairs or elevator, we still would have come out on the third floor. When the fickle finger of fate points at you, all roads lead to the same place, that's what I think. I may change my mind when I'm older, but I really don't think so.

"Fuck this elevator," Mom said. Then, "You didn't hear that, kiddo."

"Hear what?" I said, which got me another grin. Last grin for her that afternoon, I can tell you. I asked her if she wanted me to carry her bag, which had a manuscript in it like always, that day a big one, looked like a five-hundred-pager (Mom always sat on a bench reading while she waited for me to get out of school, if the weather was

nice). She said, "Sweet offer, but what do I always tell you?"

"You have to tote your own burden in life," I said.

"Correctamundo."

"Is it Regis Thomas?" I asked.

"Yes indeed. Good old Regis, who pays our rent."

"Is it about Roanoke?"

"Do you even have to ask, Jamie?" Which made me snicker. *Everything* good old Regis wrote was about Roanoke. That was the burden he toted in life.

We went up the stairs to the third floor, where there were two other apartments plus ours at the end of the hall. Ours was the fanciest one. Mr. and Mrs. Burkett were standing outside 3A, and I knew right away something was wrong because Mr. Burkett was smoking a cigarette, which I hadn't seen him do before and was illegal in our building anyway. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was all crazied up in gray spikes. I always called him mister, but he was actually Professor Burkett, and taught something smart at NYU. English and European Literature, I later found out. Mrs. Burkett was dressed in a nightgown and her feet were bare. That nightgown was pretty thin. I could see most of her stuff right through it.

My mother said, "Marty, what's wrong?"

Before he could say anything back, I showed him my turkey. Because he looked sad and I wanted to cheer him up, but also because I was so proud of it. "Look, Mr. Burkett! I made a turkey! Look, Mrs. Burkett!" I held it up for her in front of my face because I didn't want her to think I was looking at her stuff.

Mr. Burkett paid no attention. I don't think he even heard me. "Tia, I have some awful news. Mona died this morning."

My mother dropped her bag with the manuscript inside it between her feet and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, no! Tell me that's not true!"

He began to cry. "She got up in the night and said she wanted a drink of water. I went back to sleep and she was on the couch this morning with a comforter pulled up to her chin and so I tiptoed to the kitchen and put on the coffee because I thought the pleasant smell would w-w-wake… would wake…"

He really broke down then. Mom took him in her arms the way she did me when I hurt myself, even though Mr. Burkett was about a hundred (seventy-four, I found out later).

That was when Mrs. Burkett spoke to me. She was hard to hear, but not as hard as some of them because she was still pretty fresh. She said, "Turkeys aren't green, James."

"Well mine is," I said.

My mother was still holding Mr. Burkett and kind of rocking him. They didn't hear her because they couldn't, and they didn't hear me because they were doing adult things: comforting for Mom, blubbering for Mr. Burkett.

Mr. Burkett said, "I called Dr. Allen and he came and said she probably had a soak." At least that's what I thought he said. He was crying so much it was hard to tell. "He called the funeral parlor. They took her away. I don't know what I'll do without her."

Mrs. Burkett said, "My husband is going to burn your mother's hair with his cigarette if he doesn't look out."

And sure enough, he did. I could smell the singeing hair, a kind of beauty shop smell. Mom was too polite to say anything about it, but she made him let go of her, and then she took the cigarette from him and dropped it on the floor and stepped on it. I thought that was a groady thing to do, extreme litterbugging, but I didn't say anything. I got that it was a special situation.

I also knew that talking to Mrs. Burkett any more would freak him out. Mom, too. Even a little kid knows certain basic things if he's not soft in the attic. You said please, you said thank you, you didn't flap your weenie around in public or chew with your mouth open, and you didn't talk to dead folks when they were standing next to living folks who were just starting to miss them. I only want to say, in my own defense, that when I saw her I didn't know she was dead. Later on I got better at telling the difference, but back then I was just learning. It was her nightgown I could see through, not her. Dead people look just like living people, except they're always wearing the clothes they died in.

Meanwhile, Mr. Burkett was rehashing the whole thing. He told my mother how he sat on the floor beside the couch and held his wife's hand till that doctor guy came and again till the mortician guy came to take her away. "Conveyed her hence" was what he actually said, which I didn't understand until Mom explained it to me. And at first I thought he said *beautician*, maybe because of the

smell when he burned Mom's hair. His crying had tapered off, but now it ramped up again. "Her rings are gone," he said through his tears. "Both her wedding ring and her engagement ring, that big diamond. I looked on the night table by her side of the bed, where she puts them when she rubs that awful-smelling arthritis cream into her hands—"

"It does smell bad," Mrs. Burkett admitted. "Lanolin is basically sheep dip, but it really helps."

I nodded to show I understood but didn't say anything.

"—and on the bathroom sink, because sometimes she leaves them there…I've looked *everywhere*."

"They'll turn up," my mother soothed, and now that her hair was safe, she took Mr. Burkett in her arms again. "They'll turn up, Marty, don't you worry about that."

"*I miss her so much! I miss her already!*"

Mrs. Burkett flapped a hand in front of her face. "I give him six weeks before he's asking Dolores Magowan out to lunch."

Mr. Burkett was blubbing, and my mother was doing her soothing thing like she did to me whenever I scraped my knee or this one time when I tried to make her a cup of tea and slopped hot water on my hand. Lots of noise, in other words, so I took a chance but kept my voice low.

"Where are your rings, Mrs. Burkett? Do you know?"

They have to tell you the truth when they're dead. I didn't know that at the age of six; I just assumed all grownups told the truth, living *or* dead. Of course back then I also believed Goldilocks was a real girl. Call me

stupid if you want to. At least I didn't believe the three bears actually talked.

"Top shelf of the hall closet," she said. "Way in the back, behind the scrapbooks."

"Why there?" I asked, and my mother gave me a strange look. As far as she could see, I was talking to the empty doorway…although by then she knew I wasn't quite the same as other kids. After a thing that happened in Central Park, not a nice thing—I'll get to it—I overheard her telling one of her editor friends on the phone that I was "fey." That scared the shit out of me, because I thought she meant she was changing my name to Fay, which is a girl's name.

"I don't have the slightest idea," Mrs. Burkett said. "By then I suppose I was having the stroke. My thoughts would have been drowning in blood."

Thoughts drowning in blood. I never forgot that.

Mom asked Mr. Burkett if he wanted to come down to our apartment for a cup of tea ("or something stronger"), but he said no, he was going to have another hunt for his wife's missing rings. She asked him if he would like us to bring him some Chinese take-out, which my mother was planning for dinner, and he said that would be good, thank you Tia.

My mother said de nada (which she used almost as much as yeah yeah yeah and right right right), then said we'd bring it to his apartment around six, unless he wanted to eat with us in ours, which he was welcome to do. He said no, he'd like to eat in his place but he would like us to eat with him. Except what he actually said was *our* place,

like Mrs. Burkett was still alive. Which she wasn't, even though she was there.

"By then you'll have found her rings," Mom said. She took my hand. "Come on, Jamie. We'll see Mr. Burkett later, but for now let's leave him alone."

Mrs. Burkett said, "Turkeys aren't green, Jamie, and that doesn't look like a turkey anyway. It looks like a blob with fingers sticking out of it. You're no Rembrandt."

Dead people have to tell the truth, which is okay when you want to know the answer to a question, but as I said, the truth can really suck. I started to be mad at her, but just then she started to cry and I couldn't be. She turned to Mr. Burkett and said, "Who'll make sure you don't miss the belt loop in the back of your pants now? Dolores Magowan? I should smile and kiss a pig." She kissed his cheek…or kissed *at* it, I couldn't really tell which. "I loved you, Marty. Still do."

Mr. Burkett raised his hand and scratched the spot where her lips had touched him, as if he had an itch. I suppose that's what he thought it was.

2

So yeah, I see dead people. As far as I can remember, I always have. But it's not like in that movie with Bruce Willis. It can be interesting, it can be scary sometimes (the Central Park dude), it can be a pain in the ass, but mostly it just *is*. Like being left-handed, or being able to play

classical music when you're like three years old, or getting early-onset Alzheimer's, which is what happened to Uncle Harry when he was only forty-two. At age six, forty-two seemed old to me, but even then I understood it's young to wind up not knowing who you are. Or what the names of things are—for some reason that's what always scared me the most when we went to see Uncle Harry. His thoughts didn't drown in blood from a busted brain vessel, but they drowned, just the same.

Mom and me trucked on down to 3C, and Mom let us in. Which took some time, because there are three locks on the door. She said that's the price you pay for living in style. We had a six-room apartment with a view of the avenue. Mom called it the Palace on Park. We had a cleaning woman who came in twice a week. Mom had a Range Rover in the parking garage on Second Avenue, and sometimes we went up to Uncle Harry's place in Speonk. Thanks to Regis Thomas and a few other writers (but mostly good old Regis), we were living high on the hog. It didn't last, a depressing development I will discuss all too soon. Looking back on it, I sometimes think my life was like a Dickens novel, only with swearing.

Mom tossed her manuscript bag and purse on the sofa and sat down. The sofa made a farting noise that usually made us laugh, but not that day. "Jesus-fuck," Mom said, then raised a hand in a stop gesture. "You—"

"I didn't hear it, nope," I said.

"Good. I need to have an electric shock collar or something that buzzes every time I swear around you. That'd

teach me." She stuck out her lower lip and blew back her bangs. "I've got another two hundred pages of Regis's latest to read—"

"What's this one called?" I asked, knowing the title would have *of Roanoke* in it. They always did.

"*Ghost Maiden of Roanoke*," she said. "It's one of his better ones, lots of se…lots of kissing and hugging."

I wrinkled my nose.

"Sorry, kiddo, but the ladies love those pounding hearts and torrid thighs." She looked at the bag with *Ghost Maiden of Roanoke* inside, secured with the usual six or eight rubber bands, one of which always snapped and made Mom give out some of her best swears. Many of which I still use. "Now I feel like I don't want to do anything but have a glass of wine. Maybe the whole bottle. Mona Burkett was a prize pain in the ass, he might actually be better off without her, but right now he's gutted. I hope to God he's got relatives, because I don't relish the idea of being Comforter in Chief."

"She loved him, too," I said.

Mom gave me a strange look. "Yeah? You think?"

"I know. She said something mean about my turkey, but then she cried and kissed him on the cheek."

"You imagined that, James," she said, but half-heartedly. She knew better by then, I'm sure she did, but grownups have a tough time believing, and I'll tell you why. When they find out as kids that Santa Claus is a fake and Goldilocks isn't a real girl and the Easter Bunny is bullshit—just three examples, I could give more—it makes a complex

and they stop believing anything they can't see for themselves.

"Nope, didn't imagine it. She said I'd never be Rembrandt. Who is that?"

"An artist," she said, and blew her bangs back again. I don't know why she didn't just cut them or wear her hair a different way. Which she could, because she was really pretty.

"When we go down there to eat, don't you dare say anything to Mr. Burkett about what you think you saw."

"I won't," I said, "but she was right. My turkey sucks." I felt bad about that.

I guess it showed, because she held out her arms. "Come here, kiddo."

I came and hugged her.

"Your turkey is beautiful. It's the most beautiful turkey I ever saw. I'm going to put it up on the refrigerator and it will stay there forever."

I hugged as tight as I could and put my face in the hollow of her shoulder so I could smell her perfume. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Jamie, a million bunches. Now go play or watch TV. I need to roll some calls before ordering the Chinese."

"Okay." I started for my room, then stopped. "She put her rings on the top shelf of the hall closet, behind some scrapbooks."

My mother stared at me with her mouth open. "Why would she do that?"

"I asked her and she said she didn't know. She said by then her thoughts were drownding in blood."

"Oh my God," Mom whispered, and put her hand to her neck.

"You should figure out a way to tell him when we have the Chinese. Then he won't worry about it. Can I have General Tso's?"

"Yes," she said. "And brown rice, not white."

"Right right right," I said, and went to play with my Legos. I was making a robot.

3

The Burketts' apartment was smaller than ours, but nice. After dinner, while we were having our fortune cookies (mine said *A feather in the hand is better than a bird in the air*, which makes no sense at all), Mom said, "Have you checked the closets, Marty? For her rings, I mean?"

"Why would she put her rings in a closet?" A sensible enough question.

"Well, if she was having a stroke, she might not have been thinking too clearly."

We were eating at the little round table in the kitchen nook. Mrs. Burkett was sitting on one of the stools at the counter and nodded vigorously when Mom said that.

"Maybe I'll check," Mr. Burkett said. He sounded pretty vague. "Right now I'm too tired and upset."

"You check the bedroom closet when you get around to

it," Mom said. "I'll check the one in the hall right now. A little stretching will do me good after all that sweet and sour pork."

Mrs. Burkett said, "Did she think that up all by herself? I didn't know she was that smart." Already she was getting hard to hear. After awhile I wouldn't be able to hear her at all, just see her mouth moving, like she was behind a thick pane of glass. Pretty soon after that she'd be gone.

"My mom's plenty smart," I said.

"Never said she wasn't," Mr. Burkett said, "but if she finds those rings in the front hall closet, I'll eat my hat."

Just then my mother said "Bingo!" and came in with the rings on the palm of one outstretched hand. The wedding ring was pretty ordinary, but the engagement ring was as big as an eyeball. A real sparkler.

"Oh my God!" Mr. Burkett cried. "How in God's name…?"

"I prayed to St. Anthony," Mom said, but cast a quick glance my way. And a smile. " 'Tony, Tony, come around! Something's lost that must be found!' And as you see, it worked."

I thought about asking Mr. Burkett if he wanted salt and pepper on his hat, but didn't. It wasn't the right time to be funny, and besides, it's like my mother always says—nobody loves a smartass.

4

The funeral was three days later. It was my first one, and interesting, but not what you'd call fun. At least my mother didn't have to be Comforter in Chief. Mr. Burkett had a sister and brother to take care of that. They were old, but not as old as he was. Mr. Burkett cried all the way through the service and the sister kept handing him Kleenex. Her purse seemed to be full of them. I'm surprised she had room for anything else.

That night mom and I had pizza from Domino's. She had wine and I had Kool-Aid as a special treat for being good at the funeral. When we were down to the last piece of the pie, she asked me if I thought Mrs. Burkett had been there.

"Yeah. She was sitting on the steps leading up to the place where the minister and her friends talked."

"The pulpit. Could you…" She picked up the last slice, looked at it, then put it down and looked at me. "Could you see through her?"

"Like a movie ghost, you mean?"

"Yes. I suppose that is what I mean."

"Nope. She was all there, but still in her nightgown. I was surprised to see her, because she died three days ago. They don't usually last that long."

"They just disappear?" Like she was trying to get it

straight in her mind. I could tell she didn't like talking about it, but I was glad she was. It was a relief.

"Yeah."

"What was she doing, Jamie?"

"Just sitting there. Once or twice she looked at her coffin, but mostly she looked at him."

"At Mr. Burkett. Marty."

"Right. She said something once, but I couldn't hear. Pretty soon after they die, their voices start to fade away, like turning down the music on the car radio. After awhile you can't hear them at all."

"And then they're gone."

"Yes," I said. There was a lump in my throat, so I drank the rest of my Kool-Aid to make it go away. "Gone."

"Help me clean up," she said. "Then we can watch an episode of *Torchwood*, if you want."

"Yeah, cool!" In my opinion *Torchwood* wasn't really cool, but getting to stay up an hour after my usual bedtime was way cool.

"Fine. Just as long as you understand we're not going to make a practice of it. But I need to tell you something first, and it's very serious, so I want you to pay attention. *Close* attention."

"Okay."

She got down on one knee, so our faces were more or less level and took hold of me by the shoulders, gently but firmly. "Never tell anyone about seeing dead people, James. *Never*."

"They wouldn't believe me anyway. You never used to."

"I believed *something*," she said. "Ever since that day in Central Park. Do you remember that?" She blew back her bangs. "Of course you do. How could you forget?"

"I remember." I only wished I didn't.

She was still on her knee, looking into my eyes. "So here it is. People not believing is a good thing. But someday somebody might. And that might get the wrong kind of talk going, or put you in actual danger."

"Why?"

"There's an old saying that dead men tell no tales, Jamie. But they *can* talk to you, can't they? Dead men *and* women. You say they have to answer questions, and give truthful answers. As if dying is like a dose of sodium pentothal."

I had no clue what that was and she must have seen it on my face because she said to never mind that, but to remember what Mrs. Burkett had told me when I asked about her rings.

"So?" I said. I liked being close to my mom, but I didn't like her looking at me in that intense way.

"Those rings were valuable, especially the engagement ring. People die with secrets, Jamie, and there are always people who want to know those secrets. I don't mean to scare you, but sometimes a scare is the only lesson that works."

Like the man in Central Park was a lesson about being careful in traffic and always wearing your helmet when you were on your bike, I thought…but didn't say.

"I won't talk about it," I said.

"Not ever. Except to me. If you need to."

"Okay."

"Good. We have an understanding."

She got up and we went in the living room and watched TV. When the show was over, I brushed my teeth and peed and washed my hands. Mom tucked me in and kissed me and said what she always said: "Sweet dreams, pleasant repose, all the bed and all the clothes."

Most nights that was the last time I saw her until morning. I'd hear the clink of glass as she poured herself a second glass of wine (or a third), then jazz turned way down low as she started reading some manuscript. Only I guess moms must have an extra sense, because that night she came back in and sat on my bed. Or maybe she just heard me crying, although I was trying my best to keep it on the down-low. Because, as she also always said, it's better to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

"What's wrong, Jamie?" she asked, brushing back my hair. "Are you thinking about the funeral? Or Mrs. Burkett being there?"

"What would happen to me if you died, Mom? Would I have to go live in an orphanage home?" Because it sure as shit wouldn't be with Uncle Harry.

"Of course not," Mom said, still brushing my hair. "And it's what we call a moot point, Jamie, because I'm not going to die for a long time. I'm thirty-five years old, and that means I still have over half my life ahead of me."

"What if you get what Uncle Harry's got, and have to

live in that place with him?" The tears were streaming down my face. Having her stroke my forehead made me feel better, but it also made me cry more, who knows why. "That place smells bad. It smells like *pee!*"

"The chance of that happening is so teensy that if you put it next to an ant, the ant would look like Godzilla," she said. That made me smile and feel better. Now that I'm older I know she was either lying or misinformed, but the gene that triggers what Uncle Harry had—early-onset Alzheimer's—swerved around her, thank God.

"I'm not going to die, *you're* not going to die, and I think there's a good chance that this peculiar ability of yours will fade when you get older. So…are we good?"

"We're good."

"No more tears, Jamie. Just sweet dreams and—"

"Pleasant repose, all the bed and all the clothes," I finished.

"Yeah yeah yeah." She kissed my forehead and left. Leaving the door open a little bit, as she always did.

I didn't want to tell her it wasn't the funeral that had made me cry, and it wasn't Mrs. Burkett, either, because she wasn't scary. Most of them aren't. But the bicycle man in Central Park scared the shit out of me. He was *gooshy*…

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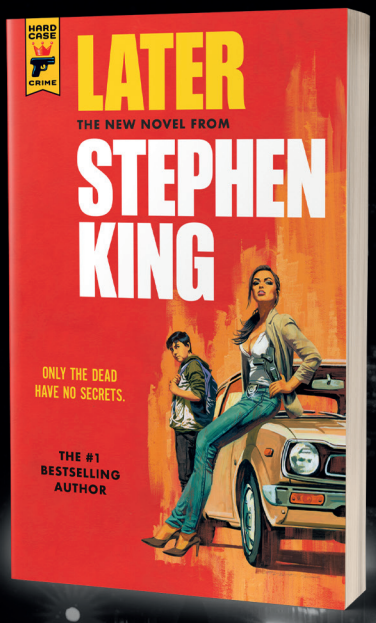

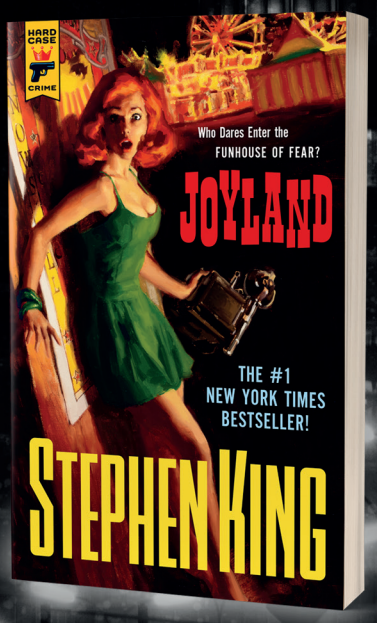

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