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ALL THE WESTERN STARS: STORIES FROM A STRANGE TOWN

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This thesis tells the stories of several disparate characters, the important people in their lives, and the otherworldly town which binds them together. Written from the perspectives of three unique individuals and the strange and ridiculous situations they find themselves encountering, these short tales delve into themes of absurdity and longing, of nature and the supernatural, of heroes and the people who know them, and the question of whether there is still a place for magic and mystery in modern life, a dark and quiet place hidden from the world.
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Chapter 1

Reflective Essay: Aspirations and Inspirations

For my thesis, I tried something different with my creative writing. I wanted to write a set of linked stories centered around a single setting, an American town, that has an aspect of the magical to it. Not exactly high fantasy magic or anything of the kind, but a more subtle, naturalist kind of magic, one that blends into the background, imbues itself into the landscape. Before this, my stories mostly existed somewhat in the mundane reality of the everyday, and while there isn’t anything wrong with writing stories like that, I felt it personally shackled me as a writer. The pressure to be “realistic” can be a stifling thing for somebody who just wants to sit down and see what happens when imagination is let loose. I was always unsure if I was being factually correct in my stories, always second-guessing myself and questioning whether any of what I wrote could actually happen. I probably threw away a few good story ideas simply because I shook my head and assured myself nothing like that could ever happen in the real world.

With Hidden Rivers, I think I found a way around that constrictive mindset. There is a flicker of magic to this town that allows me to write more interesting stories than I have before. By creating a setting where it is normal for unusual or unlikely things to happen, I feel somewhat freer to write the kinds of stories that compel me. Because even if I get a fact or two wrong, I can confidently assure the reader that maybe in the rest of the world that may be the case, but in Hidden Rivers, most anything can happen. It’s given me more confidence to write the crazy characters and situations I want to, maintaining its mostly-normal nature while still holding a
connection to the vibrant fantasy works I enjoy reading the most. Along the way, I discovered my own interest for writing absurdity into my plots. There is something about ridiculous circumstances that appeal to me, that I feel says a lot about the world itself, and so the stories should be taken with a sense of humor.

The focus of this thesis isn’t necessarily on the magic within the town. I wanted to make the stories more about the characters themselves, their encounters and their relationships, with the magic playing second fiddle. The answers as to what’s going on within the town don’t necessarily lie hidden in these pages, and there really isn’t a simple explanation. All the reader needs to do going in is know that the supernatural is present, is playing a part, and to accept that and see how the stories play out. It is less about the reason for the magic and more about how the characters respond to it, how they characterize it, or even how they synchronize with it, in different ways.

The shared setting was something I think I needed to explore, as well. None of my other stories have ever been linked together like this, by their settings or their characters, and so the practice I got writing this thesis was valuable to me. It was a stepping stone to a new kind of writing: longer stories that double back on one another and connect in novel and interesting ways. I have ambitions to write much larger works, and so I knew going in to this I couldn’t just make the works completely unrelated to each other, I would have to have a few common threads that bound them all.

I think, going off that, in many ways Hidden Rivers really represents a kind of bridge. Both within the setting itself, and in a more meta sense for me, and my further development as a writer. My original title for the thesis was something like “Borderland”, because I think the town exists in a kind of interstice, with liminality being a fairly prominent theme in each of the
individual short stories. I am currently writing more reality-based pieces, but I plan on eventually writing fantasy in the future, and so Hidden Rivers is the connection point between them, a place where the mundane meets the magical.

To that end, I focused my reading in preparation for the thesis on magical-realist works. *The Street of Crocodiles*, by Bruno Schulz, is one such collection Hidden Rivers ended up sharing several commonalities with. In *The Street of Crocodiles*, most of the stories focus on the same narrator and his family, with an ambiguity to many of the supernatural happenings within the setting. The implication is often that the setting isn’t truly magical, but simply that the child-narrator’s youthful perception of it is what makes things so fantastic. I think those ideas of perception and perspective, and the magic they contain, are a huge part of my thesis. Hidden Rivers is always the same, but each narrator, and even each central character, tends to view the magic in a different light depending on their point of view: Suze sees it through the lens of Greek myth, Charlie through science, Peter and his gang through adventure and driving, Douglas through music, and Carter Reid perhaps through escape. By doing this, they often connect to the magic in some way, make something real out of it, breathe life into it.

Images of nature and of astral and celestial bodies also play prominent parts. My favorite story from *The Street of Crocodiles*, “Cinnamon Shops”, gives us the narrator’s experience of exploring his town in the magical light of nighttime, when things come alive with an ethereal kind of beauty, and the day’s reality is left behind. Of particular note are the narrator’s wondrous descriptions of the night sky, and the stars that he personifies. That natural beauty, the power of the universe, was something I felt compelled to tap into with this collection. The night is important to these stories, as I think it often represents a world asleep and dreaming and in transition. Storms, as well, as they exist as a primal, wrathful force wielded by nature.
Another magical-realist work I read was *The Kingdom of This World*, a novel by Alejo Carpentier depicting the various slave uprisings in Haiti against French Colonial rule, mostly from the perspective of Ti Noel, a slave himself. A theme I connected with in this work was the conception of the hero, and of heroism in general. From Macandal to Henri Christophe, heroes rise and fall on the Plaine, or disappear forever, without leaving a trace. I think the concept of heroism is readily present in Hidden Rivers, which is something it took me a while to realize in the process of my writing. The three protagonists center themselves around their heroes: Peter with Walter, Douglas with Carter Reid, and Suze, in many ways, with Charlie. Their stories intertwine with these heroes, their admiration is expressed either outwardly or subtly. Each of them is trying to help their hero in some way, even without realizing it. It could even be said it is the heroes, not the narrators, who are the true main characters in each story.

Just as well, *The Kingdom of This World* emphasizes the vague magic of the Plaine as something location-bound. The colonial rulers never access the magic, but instead it is the domain of the slaves who know where to look, know how to maroon themselves to make contact with it. Carpentier was even evidently inspired to write the book upon visiting the ruins of Sans-Souci, the palace of Henri Christophe. The origins of the book itself lie in location, the power that location possesses. Hidden Rivers is much the same as a *place* that is powerful. A place and a present moment.

It’s probably no surprise that I also drew on the works of Stephen King, like *IT*, *The Dark Tower*, and “The Body”. A magical small town is all King, as well as unlikely happenings and groups of young people moving about and making waves, experiencing danger and adventure. Just as well, King has something of an obsession with Americana that has always fascinated me. His magic doesn’t lie in the fields of Western Europe, but in the forests and towns of Maine, or
the desert roads of Arizona, or the cornfields of Nebraska. Even King’s fantasy magnum opus, *The Dark Tower*, is more of a Western with magical elements, where the world is somewhat dimming and moving between states, and where fantastic things happen with seemingly little explanation. Aspects of that are definitely present in Hidden Rivers, I think, the world shifting states, the prominence of the past and of American history.

Ultimately, I’m proud of how the three stories turned out. I think this town was something I needed to figure out, and though I’m not done with it yet, the parts of it I have discovered interest me greatly. I can think of a few more stories that might take place in this weird little town somewhere in the forests of America, and how they might connect to the ones I have written here. Like I said, Hidden Rivers, to me, is a bridge, and I wonder what else I might find walking along it, and where else it might take me.
Chapter 2
Oceanus

The town lay on the border of three or so states, tucked back into the forest just enough to straddle the line between suburban and rural. Suze’s journey felt vaguely long, a winding pathway through back-roads and woods.

Suze hated driving, and would have done just about anything to avoid merging onto a highway. Her car was a battered silver Honda Civic who had seen her own fair share of the country in her time. Secretly, in the back of her mind, Suze named the Civic Eleanor, a name she had never shared with anyone. She thought of the pair of them as old friends: Suze the up-and-coming, talented young professional and Eleanor her old and grizzled partner, who had to be kicked every now and then to get going and always grumbled that she’d been too long on the job, but who at the end of the day valued her relationship to her driver.

Eleanor had been getting up there, though; she coughed and sputtered and complained more often these days. She creaked with arthritis whenever you popped open the driver’s side door; the back windows were both jammed and couldn’t be opened save with a claw hammer; her antenna hung limply and what radio Suze could hear she had to strain to over a thick layer of static. Her engine occasionally made an alarming Bang! like the sound of gunfire whenever she was pushed too hard. This was so reliable that Suze had begun to measure out the lengths of journeys by how many Bangs she got out of Eleanor. Usually she got no more than one, but the drive to Hidden Rivers was about eight Bangs, and Suze had been uncertain if the old girl could make it. That had just meant she would have to waste no time in getting there.

Off the forest paths, the only landmark of true civilization was a county hospital she passed, a building made more of glass than anything else and with a long and significant-
looking, heavily-trafficked road going past it. That was the scariest part of the trip, for Suze. She would take getting lost any day over the intense pressure that drivers on important roads subjected each other to. She could almost feel the heat of their glares as she tried to keep to the speed limit, almost hear the exasperated sighs they must have given as they silently urged her to hurry up, their hands hovering over the centers of their wheels.

Eventually, she found her way in the right direction. She retreated again to the forest and went past meadows where revolutionary houses stood rebelliously, past gnarled trees that brought to mind crafty witches conspiring in nighted woods.

She looked for the pub she and Charlie were to meet. Hidden Rivers had clustered storefronts and cobblestone streets, and several of the houses she’d passed had appeared colonial, the stuff of pilgrims and muskets and tea parties. There was also an old fifties diner, and a movie theater that looked like the one John Dillinger was shot outside of.

“I’m driving through a time machine,” she muttered. Eleanor hiccuped.

It was amazing, to Suze, how all it took was a bit of imagination to put you square into the past. A flight of fancy, an image of an old theater, or a rickety red bridge. And as if on cue, just as she was having that thought, she passed what must have been the town square, where stood a Back to the Future clocktower stricken out of time. For a moment she half-imagined Doc Brown standing around with his cables all set up and the DeLorean revved to go, waiting to ride the lightning. It sat on a green lawn speckled with rich trees, which reached up to it imploringly, their branches snug and shrouded green. An archway ran under it, a castle-like walkway of grey stone and brick, which whispered of cool air and shade. The neighborhood kids probably hung around underneath it to take brief respites from the summer heat. Not that day, though, with the sky greying and the storm clouds gathering.
She felt the charge in the air of the place, the buzz and the murmured excitement that belonged only to places in the path of a coming storm. The weatherman on the static radio had said this one would be bad, a supercell, one of those ones that rotated like cyclones and struck down homes and collapsed infrastructure. They were rarer in temperate areas, and that had apparently convinced the townsfolk to take no chances. The county authorities were on high alert, and the governor’s office was on the verge of declaring a state of emergency. Everywhere Suze looked she saw people moving with a quickness in their gait, quietly rushing to collect last-minute groceries and supplies before the roads were inevitably knocked out.

The Black Cat, her destination, was a pub and hotel with a vaguely Old English look to it. It was apparently owned by a woman named Miss Eleanora, who took little interest in running it. Images of a mysterious, wealthy witch keeping to her hut ran through Suze’s mind. The place was bartended and managed by Mr. Caulders, who had smiled at Suze as he took her order. He seemed nice, with a wrinkly face and a crown of thin, brown hair on his balding head. His eyes were large and hazel and somehow friendly and knowing. Suze appreciated his smile, because you could never know in small towns like these. Some isolated places just didn’t like strangers, or others.

She sat in a dark-wood booth and sipped her Chai, wondering why she had come.

Charlie came in wearing a white lab coat over a wrinkly red polo, looking for all the world the part of a mad scientist. His eyes found her immediately, in that damnably intuitive method they always had of spotting her out from the background. She wasn’t sure how to greet him, but quickly it didn’t matter, he sat down across from her and instantly began chattering, as if it had not been more than two days since he had seen her last. Warm lights hung from the
ceiling, bathing the row of booths in an orange glow that contrasted sharply against the blue, gathering storm clouds outside the window.

Charlie was lost in one of his obsessions, Suze could tell. His face---too handsome perhaps for him, with his oblivious intelligence and his childhood arrogance---looked tired, ill. His eyes bore the hundred-yard stare of a grad student to whom sleep had not come easy or willing, yet underneath that an ecstatic fire resonated. He was jittery and excited in the way he only ever was when working on an experiment.

She wondered how much sleep he had gotten lately. On their childhood escapades, he would sometimes go whole weekends without slowing for so much as a nap. His chestnut hair lay disheveled and ratty about his head, but maybe that was nothing new. He never had much time for grooming, for the ins and outs of learning to look presentable for those slower than he. But he was pale. No, that wasn’t the right word. What was that word her father used to say? A major in English but Suze found herself forgetting her words more and more lately, like those years spent under the tutelage of Shakespeare and Milton had done more to drain her mind dry than enrich it in the clear and distant waters of literature like they were supposed to.

She knew why he looked like this. He was wrestling with a question the answer to which he did not understand.

She knew one of the words her father would have called him. He would have said wan. But that was what he called all white people.

Charlie was looking away, ordering a black coffee from Mr. Caulders, whom he seemed to know fairly well, before sipping the dregs of his mug and continuing.

“It’s real exciting, Suze. But this town . . . this town. There’s something about it. I mean, I’ve never been a proponent of sentimentalism.”
“Sentimentalism, Charlie?”

“All of that fluff you always preferred. But it’s been amazing! And I’ve made friends!

One of the fellows around took me to a farm whose owner was a childhood friend of his family. We went shooting, Suze! Shooting. We stood out in a field and took shots at clay pigeons with a twelve-gauge shotgun, and as we kept going we noticed this foul smell in the air, and we looked around and not ten meters from us was the rotting body of a possum.”

Suze sipped her tea. “Sounds meaningful.”

“Precisely! Now what am I supposed to make of that?”

“That something is rotten in the state of Denmark?”

“Yes, exactly! A subtle condemnation of the destructive inventions of mankind? The brutal and rotten undercurrent of male-dominated martial hobby? Perhaps a reminder of the inevitability of death and decomposition despite human attempts to forestall it, to fight it off? But you haven’t heard the best part. Fifteen minutes after that, right after I’d loaded the shotgun to take my turn on the pigeons, I started to aim it down range---that’s what they call it, ‘down range’,---I started to aim it down range, and an adult monarch butterfly fluttered down right onto the barrel, and from there wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard I shook.”

“Oof.”

“‘Oof’ is right! I’ve been seeing things here, Suze, things I can’t yet begin to understand because I don’t have the right base of knowledge. I’ve just always been STEM, and that’s why I think I need you, why I wrote you here. All of your fluff may be just what we need to start to get a handle on things. I mean, it’s not like you have a lot else to do. Job offers probably aren’t lining themselves up at your front door . . .”
He kept talking, with all the enthusiasm and energy and sheer childlike blindness he’d somehow retained over all the years she had known him. As he did so, Suze retreated further into herself and watched him from the confines of her tired and patient eyes. She remembered when they first met, on the chalked asphalt of an elementary school playground, filled with the cautious and curious and confident sounds of a hundred children all testing the waters to make new friends, to form battle lines, in the dim early days of their education. She remembered how he’d appeared from the crowd like a brown-haired leech and reached out and grabbed her arm and asked her if her dark skin made it harder for the sun to burn her in the summer. He’d examined it like a specimen under a glass—Charlie always had to see—informing her she had higher amounts of melanin in her epidermis and that’s why she was the way she was. Then he had asked her for her name.

She tried to feel nothing about that now. She just listened to him speak with the same hyper overbearance and smiled at him as she did so, and in her eyes and her head she held back the enduring weight of the things which he did not understand.

A few days ago, she had received a letter from him asking her to come here, to this place. A letter, of all things. Especially from Charlie. She had read it in the screened-in back porch of her apartment, not a five-minute walk from her former college, on a morning when the newfound oppressive heat had made her fingers dampen the white parchment with sweaty fingerprints.

She had been looking out over the sweltering greenery behind her home, clutching one of her final batches of mail. It would be her last half-month in that building. Her undergraduate days had come to a close, and an endless summer seemed to stretch before her, hot and dense and humid enough to drown her, like Milton’s chaos in its torrential undefined. The real world
awaited, howling, making Suze feel like she was on the edge of a vast and great ocean, and victim to its winds, its cresting waves.

There had always been the promise, in education, of earning a better fate for oneself. When she was in school, it had been easy to pretend that her entire future would be as ordered and as sane as all her class times had been. That the world would somehow appreciate her perspective and keep her safe for it. That was a lie, she had finally realized. Tomorrow always came, and now it was there, insisting upon her, and Suze had no idea what she could do but submit to its unyielding currents.

How absurd in that moment for her to open a handwritten letter from Charlie, whom she had not seen nor heard from in two years, who had been off in other schools, stirring trouble with his brilliance in other departments. It had read:

Suze,

Hey Suze, your semester is probably over. Meet me in a pub called The Black Cat in the town of Hidden Rivers on the date marked below, at noon. I like this town. I’m about to crack open something quite special! 😊

Charlie

What an idiot. To reappear again in her life after so long! And what had he meant? She had long lived under the idea that there were some things in life you could leave behind, that somehow, certain annoyances could be made to vanish if they were ignored for long enough.

She had been foolish in thinking that could happen with Charlie. It was her own overestimation of the power of imagination, perhaps. He had a habit for persistence, and for
invulnerability, and for velocity, when he got himself going. Magnitude and direction. Wouldn’t he be the first to put it in those physicist’s terms for her? He would say something like *Well it’s impossible for energy to ever be destroyed, Suze, it just goes against Newton’s fourth law.* He would speak it quickly and obviously, after taking a sip from a mug, and his eyes would bear just the slightest hint of smugness, but it would not be smugness directed toward her or anyone else, but perhaps outwardly, perhaps toward the universe itself. She would not be an opponent to him, after all, maybe instead just a pleasant pawn on the chess game he was playing with God or the other great powers. It would be a conspiratorial smugness, and she would get the sense that Charlie was letting her in on some tremendous secret he had discovered about the nature of reality. He would lean in and suck her in that way, suck her in like a black hole, an accessory to his own mass, his own dense matter. She thought for a moment. She could not remember. Was energy the thing that could not be destroyed, or was it matter? Did it matter?

She had frightened herself by suddenly giggling loudly at her own pun. She widened her eyes and put a hand in her hair. Oh, Charlie . . .

Suze had known Charlie all her life. The two of them had grown up together, side-by-side through all of elementary school, middle school, high school. They were probably best friends, she realized, though she didn’t think *friendship* was quite exactly the right word for it. Other girls growing up had spent their weekends doing each other’s makeup and hair, whispering secrets to each other in the dark of their rooms and talking about the boys they liked. Suze had instead been on wrench duty in Charlie’s garage, helping him build a generator powered by vegetable oil so that he could win the county science fair. And trying to ascertain the revolutions of Jupiter using nothing but a stolen school telescope and some “minor trigonometry.” And constructing a working lightning rod out of copper tubing and bits of metal wire, and then helping him up onto
his roof with a ladder during a thunderstorm so he could properly test it out. She had been eleven for that last one. Charlie’s interests had been myriad and dangerous and intensely passionate. It had seemed every weekend of her childhood he had some new experiment or idea he needed to confirm, some wild plan he would invariably drag her in to.

Charlie did things out of a forceful curiosity, a questioning calculation, but not really out of anger, or to get attention. Attention was just being square and clear in the minds of others, and Charlie, she thought, was not at all interested in the minds of others. He wanted his own answers, always, and if he could satisfy that insipid curiosity within himself even for a moment, it didn’t matter to him what all else the world thought. He broke toys to see how their insides worked. He stuck bits of metal into electrical sockets. There was a desire within Charlie to prove to himself the world—*not* the other way around—to know its insides to verify, to Charlie, that it all made sense as part of a logical and viable system. Otherwise he would not have it. It would not be his, a world of mists and interpretations and half-truths.

But what did it say about the pair of them that they always wound up caught in *his* games? How often, growing up, had they done the things *she* had wanted to do?

Charlie had never cared about what others felt, so why should she care what he wanted? Why should she go at all?

She had thought that to herself, standing on her porch, with that letter in her hand.

But a vision of his body hidden under a giant hunk of plated metal had appeared to her, just like in the good old days, working on another amazing piece of technology, his hand reached out toward her, palm flat and open. He was expecting a socket wrench, surely. But what if . . . what if instead he had needed her? What if that hand was a hand held out in offering?

Did she have it in her to deny him?
God help her. She had come.

“It’s a good set up I have going,” Charlie was saying, “A meteorological station just outside of town. It should have everything we need to take our measurements.”

“Our measurements?”

“Oh, you know, atmospheric and maybe magnetic, for starters, though I expect with time that’ll change, as we learn more. You see, this all started when I put together a pattern. I was researching ball lightning, which you’ve heard of, of course. Of the seven reputable sightings of it in the last five years in America, did you know four were in a ten-mile radius of this town? All those involved focused on the atmospheric conditions behind the events, but not the location. I examined the maps, pinpointed the epicenter, and found out about this little place. Hidden Rivers. And as soon as I got here I knew I’d found something special. The things I’ve seen here, Suze . . .”

She looked around. The coming thunderstorm had done much to clear the place out, as besides her and Charlie, there were only two other customers in the bar, a middle-aged man sipping a mug across from a young girl who was face-deep in a burger. A father and a daughter. Suze sighed.

Charlie munched loudly on the french fries she ordered, stuffing three or four into his mouth at once with his fingers. Suze had to resist the urge to tell him to sit up and chew with his mouth closed.

Instead she said, “I don’t understand, why can’t you get other scientists to help you do experiments?”
“Those idiots at the lab, Suze, they have no idea of what questions you need to ask! It’s soul-crushing working with them. Just . . . so . . . slow! I swear half of them wouldn’t know how to build a microwave if you handed them a cavity magnetron! They couldn’t understand this town, not like the two of us could. Just you and me, like in the good old days.

“I tell you, weird things have been happening here, Suze. I’m staying upstairs. It’s a big feather bed in a wooden room, white sheets and pitch-black pillows. I think for the Salem Witch aesthetic.”

Suze raised an eyebrow. Her father had told her the story of the Salem Witch Hunts when she was younger, focusing on black Tituba, who was one of the first among the accused. He had probably intended the lesson to demonstrate to her the hypocrisy and the corruption of the Puritan roots from which modern white America had descended, but instead it had ignited in her an obsession with witchcraft and with history. The witchcraft she has somewhat given up on when she’d turned eleven. The history, however, she’d kept with her. Especially Greek history.

Nothing had fascinated her more in high school than reading the accounts of Herodotus, of the valiant stand of the Lacedemonians at Thermopylae, or the Athenians at Marathon. Greek history inhabited an interstice where myth somehow met reality, and she thought that was why it appealed to her. But she loved all history. Probably too closely for her own good, at that, because she took that love with her to college, and got half a degree out of it. For all that was worth. Well, at least now when her father started to get into his rants and brought it back to Tituba, she could claim historians considered it more likely that the old witch was of South American Indian descent and didn’t have a drop of African blood in her. That didn’t shut him up for very long, of course, but she liked to think her double-major was in some way significant, at the end of the day.
She spoke, “What weird things? Are chocolates appearing every day on your comforter? You know some people have to pay extra for that.” She had an image in her head of a child eating too much chocolate cake at his own birthday party and nearly vomiting.

“Nonsense, I don’t eat chocolate. But I tell you,” he leaned in eagerly, his hand trembling on his coffee mug, his eyes flickering around like he was being watched, “Suze, I’ve been having dreams.”

“Oh, Charlie. . .”

“You know me, Suze. I never dream. Every time my head hits the pillow it’s lights out ‘til morning.”

Suze reluctantly sighed, because she knew this to be true. This went back to the time they were kids. Whenever she’d stayed over at Charlie’s house, after he’d worked the both of them well into the night on his projects, his head would hit the pillow and he would boot off like a computer. Just a black screen, a look of complete innocence and serenity upon his child’s face. It was somewhat fascinating to her, even then. She would sometimes watch him for what felt like hours—she was aware of how creepy that sounded—until her own eyelids began to lull under the weight of her fatigue. Suze herself had always been plagued by nightmares, through her whole life. Feelings of terror, of being trampled upon by giants, or of being hunted by a white-faced monster with clawed hands who would delicately shush her as he advanced, and of the ocean, of the ocean most of all. Nothing quite frightened Suze like the idea of being surrounded by pressured darkness, floating, gasping, unable to breathe, on the ocean floor. And of the swimming titans that undoubtedly sensed her fear, and would float into her vision softly, patiently, knowing there was nothing she could do to escape. These nightmares were likely a
result of all the books she read and all the movies she watched, fertilizers for that part of the brain that controls the imagination.

But never for Charlie. He slept soundly and awoke refreshed. Always. A part of her felt this was because the serpentine consumption of Charlie’s mind ate the dreams before they could grow. Not purposefully. Dreams simply didn’t make sense, and so Charlie destroyed them when he touched them. The Greeks had personified dreams in a god named Morpheus who would visit sleepers in the night. She thought Morpheus must have tried visiting Charlie when he was young, but after a ten-minute conversation with the boy’s unconscious mind, he probably checked out and decided never to return. And so Charlie had no dreams, and therefore no nightmares.

It was one of the ways she considered him to be invulnerable. A Terminator. Made of metal. Suze believed perhaps that Charlie didn’t have it in him to get hurt, not really. Their escapades as children were often fraught with danger, yet every accident she’d ever seen him get into left him with little more than a scratch or two. He’d always managed to twist himself in such a way, at the last moment, that all damage was mitigated. It was something instinctual that he possessed. She supposed Charlie was like a cat, that way. The worst she’d ever seen was him scrape his arm badly on gravel when they were running the timed fifty-yard dash in the fourth grade. He’d gone too fast and tripped on his own feet and the fall happened so quickly that not even his considerable reflexes could have done him much good. The wound did not bleed, but as Charlie was being taken away by the school nurse, Suze had seen only the excited, energetic look he’d always had when he discovered something new. He seemed fascinated by the look of his injured arm, by the new layers of himself that he was being shown, no doubt.

She sipped her tea. Charlie had never had a tendon pulled, never rolled an ankle, never had a bone broken, nor a heart, and she knew he certainly never, ever had it within him to cry.
“What kind of dreams?” She asked him.

His eyes furrowed, as if he had not been expecting this question, “Well, now that you ask, it’s always the same one. It’s like I’m floating, or flying, or fly-floating, like the air is thick, like a really thick cloud. A cumulonimbus, it must be, but thicker. Because there’s lightning, almost like static electricity, but there’s no thunder. Which is impossible. Thunder is caused by the expansion of pressure and temperature in the air when the intense heat of the bolt discharges. So I don’t know what kind of sense that makes, there being lightning and no thunder. And I’m up there, flying-floating, and I begin to hear singing. It’s a woman’s voice, and it’s coming from all around me, in the blue air and the clouds. It’s like it’s not a woman at the same time, though, like it isn’t a human, exactly. It feels like . . .” He shook his head, “Well I don’t know what it feels like. But it sounds like the Earth, Suze, like I would say Mother Nature is singing to me. But that’s not quite right, either. That’s just, like, a single interpretation. Like I’m only looking at it with a microscope zoomed all the way in, and all the other lenses on it are broken, and I can’t quite see.” There was excited frustration in his voice. “There’s a barrier up, like I’m hearing her from under water.”

“Oh, Charlie.”

“Sentimentalism, like I said. And that’s why I need your sentimentalism. Because,” and he leaned in close once more, dropping his voice to a whisper, “She’s trying to tell me something.”

“Who is?”

He indicated all around him, “She is. The town.”

Suze’s face gained a slightly amused expression, “Do you think this town is magical, Charlie?”
“What’s magic, Suze? Penicillin is magic. Before that, electricity was magic. Gunpowder. Metallurgy. Fire. Magic’s just what we call anything we miss along the way, and after we sort it out, we realize it’s been there all along. We just couldn’t see it. So the question should be: Why can’t I see it? This place . . . It’s like memories have been assaulting me, here. But too many, so that I can’t sort through them. I know I can see, but I just don’t have the right perspective. I need another. I have,” he looked up at her, “Tunnel vision.”

Suze thought for a moment, remembering.

As she had passed the seventh and eighth Bangs on her journey to the town, suddenly looming before her was the shadow of a large red bridge. She had stopped her car, slowly, making sure no one was coming up behind her. No one was. The road lay empty and quiet. The bridge was made of wood, and enclosed, like a tunnel. It was old. . . or at least looked it. Only the road signs set up on either side of it, urging her up, let her know Eleanor was even allowed inside the thing. Most townships probably would have shut it down and made it some kind of exhibit.

Standing at the mouth of that bridge filled Suze with trepidation. She didn’t know why, but she recalled her studies in history and myth. Hercules had once travelled far and wide to bring back magical cows from a three-headed monster. Legend had it he’d marked the extent of his travels with a pair of mountains at the Strait of Gibraltar, at the edge of the Mediterranean. These mountains were called the Pillars of Hercules, and some traditions had it that they were marked with words in Latin: non plus ultra—nothing further beyond. To the peoples of the Mediterranean, the Pillars had marked the end of the world. What had they imagined lay beyond it, in the terrifying ancient waters of the Atlantic? How must they have felt, knowing their own great Sea, the one they had spent their entire lives within, the one they had fought countless wars
over, the one they believed to be the center of the world, how must they have felt standing on the edge of that ocean and looking out, realizing the sheltered nature of their own existence? There must have been the beginning of the understanding that the world had not been made for them. Their cloistered sea, surrounded by land, was the exception. This was a world of water.

A rapid-swelling stream ran under the red bridge, and Suze had wondered idly if it was one of the titular rivers-in-hiding. It hadn’t looked to be doing a good job of it. She had raised her gaze. The sky had grumbled and looked overcast, and she considered it worriedly. The storm would be there, soon. She had cursed at Charlie and prayed he hadn’t gone and joined some cult. Then she accelerated up and over the shadowed safety of the bridge and into the town, and as she passed through it, she recalled seeing the light on the far side.

Tunnel vision, she had thought, and she had smiled.

Now, sitting across from him, she realized suddenly Charlie had never been the kind of person to join a cult. No, instead it appeared he had just gone insane.

Worse, he was taking her with him.

Charlie suddenly began nodding vigorously, “You see, Suze, I never would have thought about what that dream meant without you asking me. That’s why you’re here! That’s the kind of thinking I need! It’s eluded me this far. I came at it hard and heavy, expecting to bust it open right away. I treated it like a coconut, where all you really need is a bit of arm strength to get at what’s inside. But I realize now that was the wrong approach. Really, this place is like a giant combination safe deep inside the vault of a bank. It doesn’t matter how big the rock you have is, if the right tool’s a lockpick. I have to be smart about this. Subtle. And I need somebody else, somebody different from me. While I work the tumblers, I need somebody listening for the clicks. That’s you, Suze, you’ve always listened.”
She looked at him sadly, and she cowered inside her knowledge, as she always did when the real world in front of her seemed to overflow with disappointment. Alexander the Great, it was said, had taken personal scribes with him during his invasion of Asia, his battles within the Achaemenid Persian Empire and with India further along. The job of the scribes was to sit there and write down everything Alexander did, help him to record and perfect his story as he went out and made it. That had always struck her as a terribly thankless choice of career. Most people probably knew the name of Alexander, but fewer knew of Callisthenes, nephew to Aristotle. Was it the fate of most people to define themselves only by their radius to the great among humanity? Did their lives revolve around the chosen few, the true suns, who shook the world wherever they walked?

Because that summed up what Charlie wanted her to do. Be his assistant, be his scribe.

She shook her head. What a fool she had been! At best she was a pleasant distraction for him in between his grand ideas. A lesser mind he could intermingle with in order to relax his own and thereby grant it some fresh perspective. She was a punching bag, or a dart board. At worst she was just an automated wrench-hand. Charlie had never needed her before, what had made her think he would need her now?

The little girl behind her was playing tic-tac-toe with her father using crayons and napkins. Their plates were empty and their bellies full. The pair of them giggled as they took turns winning.

She wondered what her father would think about her coming out here for Charlie. Somehow, she doubted he would approve. He’d never liked Charlie. That ridiculous boy who seemed to have no conception of himself or his place in the world. Who had taken some strange
and foreboding liking to his daughter. He must have felt vaguely threatened by Charlie, she thought.

Her father was an educated man, an oncologist, in fact, but that didn’t stop him from being absurd. He couldn’t help but to scoff at white people, after all, *walking with King* as he had. Those had been the sacred words of her childhood, hadn’t they? There had been a time Suze had taken them for Scripture. Her father would surface, tall and furious and implacable, after she had done some wrong, painted the tiles of the hall bathroom with her mother’s red lipstick, dropped and broken a hairdryer after trying to use it as a makeshift revolver in her battles with imaginary banditos. He would flatly ask her what it was she had done, whether she considered it appropriate, and what little respect she must have had for he, her father, who had *walked with King* all those years ago in order to grant her a better life. His spectacles would flash whitely with heat as he said it, and he put such emphasis on the words that Suze could never bear to meet his gaze when he spoke them.

There was an image of him burned in her mind, standing in the doorway of their home when she was just a child. Rain poured in hot droplets outside, singeing the ground until it boiled. He stood there soaked and furious, his lenses burning, warm air seeping into their house from without while Suze had been busy reading a book on the grey tile floor by the staircase. He looked down at her like a goliath, and Suze suddenly realized the terrible mistake she had made. Earlier that day, before the rainstorm, she had ridden her bike back home from Charlie’s and left it out on the front lawn, right in front of the walkway leading up to their front door. She knew not to leave it there, as it was a foolish place for a bicycle to sit because anybody could come by and steal it, but she was so tired from helping Charlie with a science experiment that she promised herself she would go back and pick it up after having a quick lunch. Then hours past, and the rain...
had started, and she had forgotten it. That tremendous slam she had taken for thunder had been her father’s foot catching in the bicycle’s chain and then his body landing hard upon tan stone, squinting as he was and rushing toward the door to escape the darkness and the rain. He appeared in that doorframe and pointed accusingly at her and he didn’t even have to say the words for her to hear them.

Years later, when she was studying the history of antiquity in college, she read much about the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the wonders of the ancient world. It wasn’t until she finally saw a picture of what the Colossus must have looked like that she realized she’d always imagined it as her father, with his eyes able to turn to stone, his head smooth and round and perfect. She wondered now if the words *ambulans cum Rex* weren’t once engraved on the Colossus’ feet. Of course, they wouldn’t be. That was Latin.

Lucky for child Suze those words weren’t reserved only for ire directed toward her. Any time the larger world did anything foolish and her father heard talk of it on the radio, saw it on the TV, read it in the newspaper, he would make those same grunts of disapproval and mutter to himself that he hadn’t *walked with King* in order for the white man to go and make such a mess of things. And Suze had believed him in everything he said, for how could you question someone so clearly superior that they were able to make it through all those years of training: college, medical school, internship, fellowship? To her at the time high school had seemed a daunting and horrifying prospect. The question of how Suze could hold a candle to that kind of competence was one that had haunted her.

Her mother, ultimately, had been the one to shatter that monster of her childhood. They had been making cakes for the neighborhood bake sale on a spring day in Suze’s sophomore year
of high school, an act her father had disapproved of. They had got to talking about her father and his grouchiness.

“I will never understand that man,” Suze’s mother had said, “Surrounds himself with white folks. Moves to a neighborhood full of them. Yet he doesn’t want his family baking a few cakes to help the soccer team. No, that’s just pushing the line. And whenever you try to argue with him, he just huffs and puffs about walking with King and storms off like a child. Well it’s a good way of never having to argue, I suppose.”

Suze had been horrified at her mother’s blasphemy. “But he did walk with King, didn’t he, Mom?” She had asked, “Doesn’t that mean something?”

And then her mother had given Suze a look like lightning, one that simultaneously shocked and revitalized all in an expression.

And she said, “Honey, when was your father born? What year?”

Suze told her.

“And when did King do most of his walking?”

Suze gave her a timeframe.

“Good, now add the two together.”

Suze did so. Realization dawned on her face and she heard that old Colossus crumbling.

Her mother smiled devilishly, “Yes, that’s right. Your father never quite lied about it, he just left out the bit that it was his mother doing the bulk of the walking. Oh he was there, alright. It’s just unlikely he contributed much to the cause, considering he was strapped to her chest in a baby carrier.”

Suze’s face must have been funny, because her mother had started giggling like mad. In a second, Suze herself had followed suit, and the cakes lay amidst their laughter.
When it finally died down, Suze had felt a warm glow in her heart. Her mother eyed her and eyed the mess in front of them.

“You see,” her mother removed a knife from a piece of cake and showed it to her. Both edges, the front and the back, “Some people are just sharp on the wrong edge, baby.” She touched both sides of the knife, turned it upside down, “Sure, they’re still sharp, and that can be scary, and sometimes it can make them useful at some things, but at the end of the day it makes them damn useless for cutting a cake.” And she smiled and twisted the knife back around and went back to dividing the cakes.

Yeah, sharp on the wrong edge. She had said it once more, grasping her daughter’s face with weak, wiry limbs as sterile white lights shone down atop her hospital bed: “Some people are just sharp on the wrong edge, baby.” She had always liked how her mother had phrased things; she had a way of speaking that most writers Suze knew would undoubtedly be jealous of, a way of cutting right to the heart of a matter and chopping it up and laying it out on the table. Some people were just sharp on the wrong edge. Her father was sharp on the wrong edge. Charlie was sharp on the wrong edge, or, at least, not as sharp as he could be on the right ones.

She palmed her hands. She had not spoken to her father since her mother’s death. Their relationship had never been easy. Her father saw the world as something he needed to defend and entrench himself against. He had very strong ideas about society, and about his place as a black man within it. To him, the fight was not yet done. There was still anger to be felt and battles to be won. But to her? Well, the issue of her own race was just something else she thought she could ignore. She loved her books and her myths and her poetry and her history. She wanted to observe. She wanted escape into them, and to do that it was necessary for her to leave herself, her identity, behind. Their arguments had become fiercer and more spiteful as time went on. She
could never stand his absurdity, and he could never stand her complacency, perhaps what he might have perceived as her shame. The two of them had just been too different, she supposed. By the time her mother left him, they had already begun to talk less and less. After her death, their fracturing had been more of a formality than anything else. It was like a chasm between them that had widened. Been filled to the brim with frothing water when the last tenuous rope connecting them had finally been cut.

Yet still, she wondered if more couldn’t have been done on either one of their sides. More effort put in, to mend the rift. How stupid all their arguments had been. How idiotic. How childish, when called back through the lens of time.

Charlie still looked at her from across the booth, his eyes so helpless and believing. He was like a little puppy, she thought pitifully, so eager and happy and single-minded. The universe always seemed to be fresh for Charlie, never for him did it lose its wonder and its youth. She admired something in that.

She had sometimes daydreamed of what Charlie might be up to after the pair of them had parted ways at the end of high school. Colleges had been scrambling to give him academic scholarships, offers of internships at places like NASA and CERN. He had been accepted into a physics program at Harvard but had instead chosen a smaller school, one he had weighed the benefits of and decided upon with clear vision. He wasn’t the type to care about the prestige of the school he went to, the rigors of job applications or the values of an impeccable resume. Not like most his age. Not like her. That was the great calling of the genius, she supposed, to venture forth into the breach like a battering ram and to leave all matters of the worldly domain behind. Charlie, she knew, would hit the world like a lightning bolt, and after the trees were cleared and
the dust had settled, it would be on the world to deal with the aftershock. The lightning, after all, was just doing what was in its nature.

Yes, he was like a puppy. But he was also an unstoppable force, and as she had known would happen, she felt herself being subsumed by him, and by their history.

She sighed, defeated, “Alright, Charlie. I’ll help you. To figure out this town.”

“That’s terrific,” he said, distractedly, through another mouthful of french fries. He wasn’t even looking at her, his mind had already moved on, his gaze was resting on the family finishing another game of tic-tac-toe. He pointed, “Hey, did you know that right there’s the town sheriff and his daughter?”

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They drove in Eleanor. Rain came down at them like waves of an invading force. The destination was the meteorological lab on the outskirts of the town, one Charlie had obtained the facilities of through the use of a partnership with his university. Images of Frankenstein’s castle on a stormy mountain, of the Doctor himself—in this case, Gene Wilder—shouting “Live, live!” as he imbued his creation with electrical energy. Charlie told her it wasn’t nearly so dramatic.

Suze observed the town as they drove. She hadn’t expected Charlie to ever come to a place like this. What was here? It was just a town. Images of *E.T.* scientists dressed up like astronauts and black vans coursing through Roswell, New Mexico. He should have been off in Switzerland trying to discover the God particle, or synthesizing the formula for faster-than-light travel, or something, not idling on a cozy retreat in quiet Americana. Those frontiers had been found and conquered a long time ago.

And yet, for all her thoughts of quietude, Hidden Rivers was anything but that at the moment. The storm had moved in while she and Charlie had been reminiscing in The Black Cat.
Whereas before she had seen quickness in the movements of the townspeople, now there were the fringes of panic. She saw a mother hurriedly urging her young daughter forward, the little girl stomping around in what were apparently newly-bought blue-grey rain boots. The girl wanted to stop and examine herself in a shop window, striking different poses, and her mother tugged on her arm and whispered something to her to get the both of them moving. She was afraid, Suze realized, but in a primal way, a kind of fear that dared not betray the fact of its own existence. It was the fear of a prey animal trying to appear larger than it was in front of a predator, or of a child laying wrapped in blankets in the dark, knowing if she reacted to the sounds of creaking under her bed, it would be an invitation for the monster to make its appearance. To begin the chase. This was a shelter day, and all the people who had earlier been cautious to poke their heads out of their holes were now scurrying back into them, back to the comfort of their blankets, their families, their cozy fireplaces and their thick walls.

And what was she doing? Out in this, so far from home?

If Charlie noticed the ferocity of the storm, he didn’t show it. He was busy explaining the ins and outs of all the tech he was going to use to study Hidden Rivers, everything from meteorological equipment to Geiger counters to flux-capacitors and antimatter hyperdrives, or so it sounded. They drove for several minutes with only Charlie talking. Suze tried to listen, but half the words coming out of his mouth seemed to her nonsense and the other half were simply directions, what turns she should take and when.

They had begun to pass by that same red bridge Suze had crossed to get into town. Suddenly Charlie told her to stop. His eyes were fixated on it. Nervous to draw her eyes from the road, especially in such a storm, Suze cautiously pulled the car onto the grass embankment to the
side of the tunnel’s entrance. She squinted hard to make sure nobody coming up behind her was angered by her sudden apparent interest in the bridge.

Charlie’s eyes were still hooked on the thing, and now she turned, and what she saw confused her. It was light, a blue light coming from the entrance of the bridge, almost within it. From the heavy rain pouring onto her driver’s side window, whatever it was must have been refracted, for to her it looked like an aurora borealis. She dared not go out. The rain was beating on Eleanor’s windshield offensively, sounding like rioters trying to break in. The roar of it almost covered the sound of Charlie’s car door suddenly popping open. Transfixed as she was, Suze only halfheartedly turned to see he was not there, but that her passenger seat was now being thoroughly soaked by bullets of rain.

“Charlie?” She asked. No answer. She reached over and shut the door he’d left open.

She saw his figure disappear behind the back of her car, obviously heading for the bridge. She rolled down her window, saw him approaching the tunnel with all the veneration of a priest. What she saw in the tunnel she didn’t understand. It seemed to be alighted with blue fire, which swirled along the edges of its interior. Even holding her head out for those mere moments were akin to dunking her head in the sea, though. She could barely clear the water from her eyes fast enough to see Charlie.

“Charlie?!” She shouted. He quickly looked at her, then motioned her with his hand to come. She did. Eleanor groaned in response to her partner leaving, but it was something Suze felt rather than heard over the thunderous pounding of the rain, the squelching of her boots on the grass. Instantly she was submerged in the wet and cold. But she had a bad feeling, besides them. She crept up to Charlie’s side, who had paused to observe the strange light-show in the entrance to the tunnel. He didn’t turn to her, but he shouted.
“It’s Saint Elmo’s fire! Beautiful, isn’t it?!” He grinned at her so madly that she thought he would suddenly sprout horns and wings and fly off into the tornado. Instead he turned back to the archway and began walking toward it again, “Do you know how rare this is?! I told you the town was special, didn’t I?!”

“Charlie, you shouldn’t!” Suze shouted, “We should go back to Eleanor!” Suze was aware the sentence wouldn’t make any sense to him, but he didn’t seem to be listening in the first place, and she was too struck by what was suddenly happening that she felt she simply needed to get a word in, that it was absolutely imperative, the end of the line, non plus ultra that she speak.

“It’s caused by coronal discharge, Suze!” Charlie was shouting, still walking, “Just a bit of plasma. The electric field here is strong from the thunderstorm! That’s what’s causing it!” His feet had carried him almost to the end of the grass. Suze stood frozen in place, unable to move forward and grab him, stop him, slap him on the nose and drag him back. She could not see Charlie’s face, but she knew that look he would have in his eyes. Nothing would stop him from the course he had set for himself. So she just stood, and then she turned back to Eleanor, either to get in and drive away or get in and run Charlie over. She opened her mouth to shout his name one last time, and in that moment, as Charlie was reaching out his hand toward the blue, he turned back to her and gave her that ever-present, assured smile, and then the world exploded.

Suze dropped her car keys in shock as a bolt of light, like an angry, bursting insect freed from the confines of a jar, appeared in her vision in the span of a split second and struck Charlie square in the nape of his neck. A vision of him was fried into her retinas, Charlie being touched as with a tendril of a lightning cloud, still smiling at her.

Then the flash of heat. The burst of thunder.
Suze collapsed backwards on the ground, shouting “CHARLIE!” The sheer force of the lightning bolt was enough to send her sprawling, meters away though she was. Images, black images in her head of him standing there, a silhouette, its smile erased and absorbed into the dark mass.

Her vision clouded, she looked up. Charlie was still standing. There was a moment. He seemed in shock, like he was unable, for the first time in his life, to process what had just happened to him. The rain stopped. Smoke and vapor clouded the ground around him, where in a perfect circle, with he at the epicenter, green grass had been fried opaque and wisps rose from them like candles. Charlie took a stunted step forward, his limbs shaking, and breathed in deeply the vapors of the Earth. The act was drawn out, seeming to take minutes and precious hours to Suze, and then after Charlie had breathed in all there was to take, his eyelids shuttered like windows, and he collapsed.

“No. No. Nonononononononono.” Suze sprinted toward his prostrate form. His eyes opened at her and didn’t see. His hair was sticking on end ridiculously. He now really looked like Doc Brown, and she had the absurd thought that he must have gotten the 1.21 gigawatts he needed to travel back in time. She checked his pulse, she felt the pounding of a heart but she thought that might have been her own. She thought about giving him CPR. She just lifted his body up with Herculean strength instead.

Suze threw his limp form into the back of Eleanor and slammed the door shut. Water still poured from the sky like an ocean draining. She spat out an obscene amount of liquid and yanked open the driver side door, kickstarting her old friend into ignition. Eleanor sputtered awake and complained, but Suze would have none of it. She eyed the tunnel of the red bridge with sudden clarity. The tunnel’s blue corona had vanished and been replaced by expanding orange. The
lightning bolt had lit it aflame, and not even all the water in the world could put that out. Suze gritted her teeth and floored it through the burning bridge. The world became hot and bright for a few precious moments and then the trio were out the other side, slamming back down onto asphalt, and racing toward the hospital Suze had recalled lay on the other side, so far out of the town. There was no way emergency services would be able to reach them through the storm, and by the time they did, it might have been too late.

She raced long the empty back roads, pushing the accelerator harder than she had in a long time. Eleanor, for her part, seemed to understand the gravity of the situation and took off faster than she had probably ever gone, though Suze could feel foreboding rumblings coming from the depths of her car.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’moooooon,” Suze pleaded, and loyal Eleanor pushed herself further.

She tried to ignore the sizzled smell coming from her back seat. Bits of black smoke and what looked like floating bits of burnt hair crowded the right side of her vision like dust particles. Suze dared not look directly at them. She tasted bits of ozone on her tongue, and spat rubber. Charlie was still unconscious, but he was rolling around and groaning, like a child having a nightmare. A part of her questioned what was he seeing, but the rest of her mind slapped herself in the face and told her to get driving.

All of her usual curiosities, her wonderings, her intrusive memories, were quickly being wiped away. She’d never realized how much of it really was all fluff, and how easily it collapsed when she was faced with something real. Under the pressure of the moment, her mind sharpened into a diamond. Her foot worked the accelerator like a violin, her arms twisted the wheel back and forth like she was wrestling with a giant. Her grip was a white knuckle of death. Her vision tunneled and she focused on the asphalt and moved around it fearlessly, entering the main roads
and flying past other cars retreating to their home garages, dancing around them so illegally that
the cowardly part of her soul wanted to halt Eleanor and go back and apologize to them and then
crawl in a hole and die. She gripped that part of herself and began to strangle it. She caught a
look of her face in the mirror and was stunned by the truth she saw there. How weak she had
been, how passive in her life! She, who had cared about things far too much to ever act upon
them!

She felt out the hospital like instinct. The wind seemed to guide her, the wind and the
lightning and the freezing water parting before her like currents that she controlled with her
velocity. Her eyes burned like twin coals. She could have found it from a thousand miles away, a
hundred thousand.

Eleanor Banged and Suze asked her for just a bit more of her strength.
The hospital appeared out of the rain like the shadow of a gargantuan beast. The rain
pattered so hard against it she heard the sound of each individual droplet making landfall. Not
close enough, though. A mile away, maybe a mile and a half. Other cars tried to match her speed.
She scared them away with her eyes.

Eleanor Banged again, then again. Suze gave up trying to convince her. Instead she
pressed the accelerator as hard as she could until it felt like her foot and knee and her thigh and
the metal were breaking from the strain. She could see the lights on in the hospital, see shadowy
figures moving in against the brightness. Only about a half-mile to ago . . .

Charlie groaned loudly in the back seat. Thunder roared.

Eleanor Banged once more. Suze told her to shut up.

Finally, with a whisper, the engine of her Civic died, coughing up its last breath and
cutting out. Suze didn’t care. The exit was upon her. Still going sixty-plus, she sailed through the
parking lot of the place, past streetlights, parked cars, through puddles that threatened to consume Eleanor’s carcass like batches of quicksand. She skidded the car to a halt by the entrance to the emergency room, and after that the blur.

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The rain had died down to a quiet pitter-patter that made Suze want to curl up on a blanket and read a book. The world hung in light mists outside, and she stood against the iron railing of the hospital’s handicap ramp, taking in the smell of damp. She had always liked the rain. It had always had the ability to make her feel less alone in the world. She thought of her first college roommate, a blonde white girl with a party streak named Lana, who had taken one look at Suze, exchanged pleasantries with her, and spent the remainder of their Freshman year trying her best to pretend that she did not exist. Her eyes had run over Suze like droplets on the outside of a fogged window and seemed not to take her in at all. She couldn’t say she felt anything about that, now.

A black Lincoln Continental prowled forward on the wet asphalt, making barely a sound. It suddenly spotted her and stopped, its headlights perking up. Then they shut off. Out of it stepped an imposing man in a tweed trench coat and a matching fedora, looking for all the world like a noir detective stepping out of the black-and-white screen and in to real life.

“Susan,” the figure said, “Susan, I—”

“Hey, Dad,” she said, and smiled, “Thanks for coming to get us.”

He stopped. For a moment he didn’t know what to say. That long-unspoken gap that existed between the two of them hovered in the air. Each thought of all the things they had said to the other, the pain they had caused. Then his face collapsed into relief. “Of course,” he said, and latched onto those words like they were incantations, “Of course, of course.”
They wheeled Charlie out on a chair, though he didn’t need it. His hair was a bit singed, but he had recovered from his shock. They had examined him, run tests on him, treated him for his light burns, decided to keep in the hospital for a few nights to make sure he really was fine. They had told her to go home, but when Suze told them she had no way to leave, Eleanor having died to bring Charlie there, they had let her sleep in the waiting area on a stuffed red chair. Suze was fine with that. She just wanted to know whether Charlie would be okay.

Aside from a scar on the nape of his neck that branched down into his lower back like a pair of sweeping Renaissance vines, the doctors said the lightning bolt had left Charlie physically fairly alright. As fairly alright as one could be when they were struck by lightning. Mentally may have been a different story. He was as quiet as she’d ever seen him. His face, previously knowing and energetic, seemed instead ponderous and uncertain. His eyes were like deep pools of water, gentle and kindly shimmering and reflecting back the light of the sky. He was still the same old Charlie at heart; he had taken her around the hospital pointing out the names for all the medical machines, giving her the rundown on the kinds of radiation they used in their cancer treatments, and other such nonsense. And yet he was more subdued about it. Humbler. Now he seemed to listen when she spoke, took her words in as she told him of the stories she had read and loved during the long intermission of their friendship.

For they were friends, weren’t they? She realized now she had wanted to shoo Charlie away like a little sibling or an unwanted dog. To leave him behind. She had come to this town uncertain of their relationship, perhaps wishing even to end it, to put a stop to the absurdity and ridiculousness he always brought to her life. She had come here desiring to break herself free from her past, to take her first true, wavering steps into adulthood with a meaningful, assertive act. To make a statement to the world of her confidence in herself, of her fearlessness.
But that wasn’t true, was it? No. She had been afraid, terribly afraid, of the world and the abyss it seemed to hold for her. Of the winds and the rushes she feared would soon tear her to pieces. Hadn’t she come here, truly, because whenever Charlie called her, in a way, it always felt like she was being called back home? Didn’t she trust the judgement of her younger self, who had stood by him for years and years, through all his dangerous experiments, his biting mannerisms? Didn’t that little girl know that, despite everything about him, he had always loved her in his own blunted and foolish way? That he was the one person with whom she felt that kindred connection of childhood? Pure, unhindered, innocent?

She worried for him. What it was he had seen in his visions in the back seat of Eleanor, that had caused such a change inside of him?

She and Charlie walked to the Lincoln, where she embraced her father in a quick hug before entering into the passenger side.

As they drove off, Charlie sat quietly in the back seat, and Suze looked out at the drizzle. She liked the rain. She supposed that was because it made the world seem smaller, somehow more manageable. It was easy to feel overwhelmed by the vastness of things, sometimes, and the sense of not knowing one’s place within that vastness. But, every once in a while, the world did something that seemed to make some kind of sense. Two completely separate things could somehow be secretly bonded once more, in a way which you never expected. It felt to her like the quiet whispers of the universe telling her that, Yes. At last. There really was a logic to it.

She thought those links between things were the reason literature and history had always been so fascinating to her. Those reflections that all things held in one another. They made her feel connected in a way she never felt with anything else in her life. And she was thankful for
that. Thankful every day. For how could she give up, if the world was still sowing its seeds, linking its roots, creating new branches of threads? Completing old ones?

She wanted to be there for that. To see it. She wanted one day to add her own strands to the story. Grateful, she was, then, for those wild places still their own. Those dark and quiet places hidden from the world.

Her father began, the silence still making him insecure, “I would still like to—”

“We can.”

“I mean, more than—”

“I know.” She offered him a smile, tired but hoping, “Dad, I know.”

His eyes softened and that great stone face seemed to crack with contentment, Suze thought. He turned his gaze back to the road, chuckling softly, “Well, alright, then.”

She chuckled, too, and relaxed her head back. As she did so, she heard an impossible sound coming from the back seat. She glanced in the rearview mirror. What she saw there shook her.

“You know,” her father said, still smiling, “I never really—”

“Hold on, Dad,” Suze turned her head to the back seat to see with her own eyes, her face quivering with warmth, “Oh, Charlie.”

The wind hummed lightly overhead. Her Dad was trying to say something.

“Oh, Charlie. You’re crying.”
Chapter 3

Jamesy’s and the Jack of Rock

I knew Carter Reid. First time I saw him, though, I doubt he saw me. Was in Richmond, a coupla hours’ drive from Hidden Rivers, ‘cause he was playin’ a show and Ronnie got ahold of a few golden tickets, so I called off my shift at Jamesy’s and we all hopped into the truck and went to see. It was a long drive, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t think nothin’ woulda stopped us from making it.

Oh I knew all about Syrinx. I had each of their albums within three days of them comin’ out. All of ‘em: Searching FOR Arcadia (which everyone just calls “FOR” because it’s written in such big letters on the front, which always struck me as kind of silly ‘cause “Searching” and “Arcadia” were written so tiny), Coinflip, and Jezeby Downer, of course. I listened to “Thyrsis” every day on the drive to work for three months straight, I even got a set of them Sam Eyrie drum sticks, and I will get ‘round to buying that drum set, I swear. Though, if you ask me, and don’t tell ‘nybody, I’m still not completely sure what a “syrinx” is. Some kind of rainforest thing, I think, I don’t know. While the band was Syrinx, people always just took to callin’ the members the Flutes. I do not know why. Maybe ‘twas just ‘cause nobody knew what the plural of “syrinx” was just like they din’t know what it meant. Syrinxei? Syringes? Anyway, don’t let the name confuse you, they were the hardest rockers this side of the millennium, nobody doubts. I heard somebody say once they had the riffs of Young (not Neil) and the voice of Plant, and I thought that fit just fine.
So we went to this show and of course it was lousy with folks, most of ‘em young, like us. Everybody was there for the Flutes, and their leader, ‘cause sure, Sam Eyrie was good and Jimmy Bryan underrated, but everyone knew Carter Reid was somethin’ else. I was never much good in school, but one thing I do recall was them models of the solar system we did made out of styrofoam balls, and when some kids would get it wrong the teachers always said, “The sun is at the center, that’s heliocentric, that’s gravity” and we’d all nod and go about our business, but that’s what this was. The solar system may have been heliocentric but all of us in that stadium and even the Flutes ‘emselves, they were Carterocentric. That’s gravity.

And he came shinin’ out onto the stage and the girls screamed so loud you’d’a thought you’d never be able to hear the music but then he started singin’ and everybody started gettin’ in line. He went from “Thyrsis” to “River Red” to “Smokefall”, and at the height of it he whipped out his guitar and began to shred like nothin’ I’d ever seen. Young (not Neil) didn’t have anything on him, and when you thought the music and the cheers couldn’t get any louder, the slow guitar strings of “Where is the Prince?” began, and that hall just about exploded with noise. I swear, I was in the center of it and my ears hurt for days afterwards. I went into work and the head chef had to tell me something three or four times ‘fore I heard, or poke me on the shoulder, or half-yell.

Carter played and as it picked up you could see it happen, the shout becoming louder, and more and more singular, like it was the planets alignin’ around something, around the sun, and Carter vanished. Of course his body was still there, but his eyes seem to disappear as he thumbed the strings, faster and faster and faster, louder and louder, and you could just tell he was gone. Disappeared into Rock they called it.

And they shouted, “Where is the Prince?”
And they answered, “He’s gone, he’s gone!”

“WHERE is the PRINCE?!”

“He’s GONE! He’s GONE!”

“WHERE IS THE PRINCE?”

“HE’S GONE! HE’S GONE!”

“PRINCE?!

“GONE! GONE! GONE!”

He was too young to be King, and Queen and Prince were taken, so they settled on somethin’ else. That’s what they called him: The Jack of Rock.

And the Jack of Rock sang.

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That was when I first saw him in person, that show in Richmond, but how I got to know him was another matter ‘ntirely. It was a year or two later that he was doin’ a show maybe an hour or two outside of Hidden Rivers, and I’ll be damned if I wasn’t as sick as I’d ever been that afternoon, else I woul’da gone. Well, else I woul’da called off work and then gone, and I nearly cursed my luck that night, because who would show up at Jamesy’s at nine-thirty in the p.m. but . . . well.

Jamesy’s was a good restaurant, an old Irish place on a hill overlooking Bluemoor Lake. Sure, it wan’t in the center of town like The Black Cat was, and we din’t get ‘s many customers as Mr. Caulders there, but we had the forest, the atmosphere. I mean, it was always quite a sight, walkin’ out from a night of washin’ dishes to see that view of the lake, feelin’ it before you like some great empty thing that you weren’t sure din’t go on forever. The breeze of it, the coolness of it. There was somethin’ about that lake, somethin’ special, legends and such, but I’ll not get
ahead of myself. Inside the pub was a long wooden bar that cocked itself on an angle out from the kitchen, and across from it were rows of lighter-wood booths. It was an old place, full of all sorts of problems: the water heater seemed to be broken more often than fixed, some of the ovens prob’ly hadn’t been moved in decades, and there was always the threat of big ol’ spiders creepin’ around the corner of your vision. It was an old place, and you coulda felt the age in it, but it was a good place, and I always thought that was matterin’ more.

The people there, too, were some of my close friends, even if they didn’t know it all yet. There was Lauren, a young blonde waitress, and Benji, a cook straight outta Mexico who had a laugh like a hyena but was kind as a rabbit. There was the owner Dean, quiet as a mouse, his bartender and manager at the time Jasper Ayle (I always laughed that a pub manager would have a last name said like “Ale”). There was red-haired Susan Allman, a cook in the back more often dirty than not, with a tired sort of look to her and a little girl and an older boy back home. There was Christina, who coulda passed for a supermodel in any day and age, and she hadda smile that could sink most men where they stood.

Well as it was that very same Friday night that Carter Reid and the other Flutes played their show somewhere outsid’a the county, they showed up at Jamesy’s for a drink afterwards. I wan’t there. Hell, had I known, I woulda forced myself outta my bed, vomit and all, and dragged myself over to work, but I wan’t, and din’t. I heard how it went, though, from my damn replacement Gare, and I know enough to put the best together.

Apparently they got a call that Carter’d be showin’ up, and it flew half the waitresses into a frenzy. Some shouted, some started dancing. It was Christina who picked up the phone and she just about started crying upon putting it down. An hour later, they all came floodin’ in, the Flutes themselves, and all their fans and groupies, their managers, their security. Jasper was havin’ the
time of his life bartendin’ a bunch of rockstars, the Jack himself included, who sat quiet at the center as I’ve heard it, with a swarm of girls around him. First thing he did when he sat down was order a round for everyone in the pub, and there were ravenous cheers at that, I’m sure. Way I heard, after it died a bit Carter handed Jasper a hunner as a tip and asked about a rock star discount.

    Jasper chuckled, or so I heard, and (probably pattin’ himself on the back, the bastard) shot back, “No, but employees get ten percent off and a free beer at the end of the night.”

    And Carter just smiled and said, “Then can I have a job?” And everybody started laughin’ then, and drinkin’, and the waitresses darted in and out and tried to get a look at Eyrie or the Jack. Even the cooks in the back spent more time out front than anythin’. Not every night you saw somebody famous, or saw the sun.

    Jasper was the last one there at closing time, they say around midnight it was. Later than usual, but I’m sure he din’t mind. The whole band tipped well, and he alone was walkin’ out with more than two grand in his pocket and a smile on his face as he turned the key and locked the door and made for his car. Syrinx showin’ up at Jamesy’s, and enjoyin’ their time there, mind you, would probably drive some extra business for the next few days, and Jasper was probably still high in the clouds when he heard footsteps comin’ from the darkness to his right. Now Jasper was a big fella, a Marine, and he knew nobody could be doin’ any good outside his restaurant at that timea night. His hand was halfway to his belt pouch, and the Buck locking knife he kept there, when none other than dark-haired, copper-skinned Carter Reid put a hand on his shoulder and asked, “So how about that job?” And three days later, he had a uniform on and was workin’ in the dish pit, to the befuddlement of absolutely everybody.

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They took it as a joke, as they was wont to.

Shy Dean, the owner, was fair uncertain whether it was a good idea to make a busser from a rocker, and a famous rocker, at that. Nevermind what they all said, there was such a thing as bad publicity, and for a place doing fairly well in a small town as Jamesy’s had always done, that kind of gravity was like to knock ‘em off equili-brium. It might attract the young crowd, sure, but it was just as sure to drive out the old crowd, and of the two the old were always more loyal. In two weeks, once the Jack had had his fun and went on his way, who’s to say the regulars like Thomas Drake or Miss Eleanora woulda come back? Old folks were stubborn, and more vengeful than you’d know.

I shuddered at the thought of ending up on Miss Eleanora’s bad side. She had a way in her eye, a way of lookin’ at you that crackled like electricity. Most of the time that crackle was pleasant, but just like that she could turn it to lightning and burn you with it. Folks around town called her a witch like that, and two weeks was a long time to go without her stouts and her sours, or the bottles of wine Jamesy’s kept hidden in the back just for her. She actually secretly owned The Black Cat in town, the pub everyone else went to. She came from somewhere a long time ago with enough money to buy the place, and she did, and made Mr. Caulders the manager. Everybody thought they musta been married in some way, the two of them. But Miss Eleanora din’t often go to The Cat. She mostly kept to herself, and every drink she had, she had at Jamesy’s. It had always been like that, she comin’ in and orderin’ her wine and leavin’ great big tips, and I s’pose Dean was afraid of killin’ that Grey Goose, drivin’ her away with a younger crowd, all hollerin’ for Carter Reid.

When it came to’t, Jasper had to sit Dean down and let him know you couldn’t say no to a rockstar, and that the fame alone would drive business for years. And when the Jack had gone
and left them for his music, after a week or two, and even when the publicity had died down, their regulars would come back. Old folks might be stubborn and vengeful, but they also had loyalty, and Jamesy’s had always been good to them.

Well Jasper was right about the publicity, and that was about the only thing he was right about, because Carter Reid didn’t leave after two weeks, or two months, or six. Obviously a story like that just explodes, and people poured in droves to Hidden Rivers to see the Jack of Rock washin’ their dishes, cleanin’ their tables, keepin’ his head low and runnin’ around like some peon, like one of us. I’d say Jamesy’s did about five times their usual business in those early days, what with all them reporters, journalists, them fans turnin’ out in the hundreds. They all wanted to see him, see Carter Reid goin’ about his filthy work. They were fascinated by it, like bugs buzzin’ around a bright light.

Of course the questions came in, too, and all them conjectures, people talkin’ about how it was a publicity stunt, how Carter Reid was tryin’ to change his *self-image*, tryin’ to sell more records, but anyone with sense knew that was a loada nonsense. Syrinx ain’t never needed to sell more records, and I imagine Carter Reid didn’t think one lick about his *self-image*. But still they talked, of course, just like people always gotta point out the flaws in things, try to bring ‘em down. You had magazines plastered with Carter’s face, callin’ ‘im the “Jack of Dishes,” you had people stickin’ out their legs to trip ‘im when he was balancin’ a stack of glasses on the dining side, you had that skit on *Saturday Night Live* where they got that fat comedian to play Carter, playin’ him all smug-like, like he was a savior, pettin’ kittens and rescuing orphans on the way through the line durin’ the dinner rush. Hell, you even had a few protestors outside and across the street, mostly older ladies, chantin’ about who-knows-what and Carter bein’ the devil.
They weren’t all bad, though. Some outsiders came and did pieces on Jamesy’s and Hidden Rivers itself, saying the town had *rusty charm*, sayin’ it was a picture of small-town *America-na*. Even those good ones din’t do Carter a bit’a good, though. I only came to Hidden Rivers later in my life, so I *know* what it meant to be an outsider there. That wan’t to say folks were suspicious, or unwelcoming, no, God knows this town half raised me and I learned to read it, the normal stuff and the *other* stuff. The folks, well, they just didn’t much appreciate outside trouble. They enjoyed their peace, and Carter was like to destroy it, and they turned a lot of that around on Jamesy’s, and on Carter.

He handled it well, though, like someone with fame should, I believe. He mostly kept to ‘imself, at first, though everybody and their mother tried to crack ‘im open. The cooks in the back all battered him with questions ‘bout his life, what it was to be a rockstar, how he wrote this song or that song. The waitresses gave ‘im hell, of course, too, with Lauren and the rest bumpin’ into ‘im constantly and makin’ ‘pologies, askin’ ‘im out every night, cornering ‘im when he left the bathroom or went outside to eat his lunch. That’s not to mention the position of Jamesy’s waitress perhaps became the most coveted in the country at the time, what with the number of girls sendin’ in applications and comin’ in, tryin’ to get interviews. Got to the point Dean couln’t handle it, and Jasper had to pepper the front of the building with signs sayin’ “NO HELP REQUIRED THANK YOU”.

And this isn’t to say I was any better, either. First shift I came in, after I’d heard who our newest employee was, I was like to faint as any other. I already told you I got every Syrinx album as soon as it came out, and them Sam Eyrie drum sticks, and I swear I will buy that drum set for them. Hell Jimmy Bryan watched me fall asleep every night, hangin’ over my bed, and *he* was the worst member of the band. One of them interviewers caught Jimmy leavin’ church in
Kansas City and asked him what he thought about the Jack washin’ dishes, how this might affect their tour schedule, and what he thanked God for the most, of course. Jimmy just laughed at them and said one thing, “Thank God for Carter Reid,” ‘cause Jimmy knew what was up; he knew if it weren’t for Carter, he’d still be livin’ with his parents and playin’ roadside bars in the Sunflower State. That was just heliocentric.

But all I’m sayin’ is that the first few shifts I worked with the Jack, I damn near said nothin’. My tongue woulda dried up and run off if I tried. Just a few “Heyas” and “Yesses” and “I got the bar-sides” and not much else. Carter was as quiet with me then as he was with everybody, and for that early time, we did most of our shifts in silence. There was a lot I wanted to say, but my brain just kinda shudoff, and, too, I guessa parta me knew he was already bein’ bothered so much it woulda been poor taste to push the mail. We went on like that for a while, and after work I cursed myself for bein’ a coward, for not talkin’ to ’im, ‘cause I knew he wouldn’t say forever. Carp damn and all that.

Things were bad for a bit, then. I was never the smartest or the fastest worker, and you could just tell things were heatin’ up at Jamesy’s, and I guess people there felt that, and started takin’ it out a bit on me. Five times the business meant five times the money, but it also meant five times the work, and Dean had to bring in two more cooks just to keep us goin’, keep all them onlookers satisfied. For a time he brought in a third disher, too, but then he kept talkin’ ‘bout how it was too expensive and he cut it back down to two, often me, and so when things got backed up, nobody would blame the rockstar, of course, but the big blonde fella whose hands were too clumsy, whose feet moved too slow to keep up? Him you could blame all day, and that’s just gravity.
So one day I dropped a stack of three plates in the rush and Jasper just loses it, callin’ me 
dumb, sayin’ I was too stupid to stack plates, and after it my face was red like an onion and I 
went down the hill to the dock that went out onto Bluemoor and thought to myself how stupid I 
was, gettin’ yelled at like a child in front of those folks, in front of the Jack of Rock, and how I 
was a coward, and how I just ran away. I was thinkin’ real hard ‘bout quittin’ that night and 
probably runnin’ away, starin’ deep into the water and the tears are comin’ now, and whaddaya 
know somebody starts talkin’.

“It wasn’t your fault.” And I look up and there’s the Jack himself, Carter Reid, and he’s 
starin’ at me with a sad look, with his arms crossed on his chest, like he was shiverin’ with 
somethin’.

All I could gulp out was a “What?” and I just about fell over tryin’ to stand up straight 
and wipe my tears away.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said again, “Jasper spilled grease on the ground when he helped 
Benji move that pot to the trap, and didn’t clean it. He put it on you because he knew he could; 
that’s what he is.”

I tell ya at the time I just didn’t get it, and I musta just been gulping like a fish, not 
knowin’ what to say, when Carter spoke again.

“How long have you been working here, Douglas?”

I fumbled a bit, “I guess m-most of my life, n-now.”

He nodded, “What else have you done?”

“Pardon?”

“Where else have you worked, I mean.”

I shook my head, “Nowhere, Mr-Mr. Reid, this is my first and only job.”
He nodded again, and I musta froze when he moved, but he moved, and walked past me and started starin’ out over the lake, over Bluemoor.

“I like it here,” he said, “I come here sometimes, before work, and I play. There’s usually mist over the water, and no people around. The bugs aren’t bad, either. They only come out later.” He seemed to blend in with the blackness on the lake, and for a second I thought it lost him, that he disappeared into it, stepped out onto the water and vanished he stood so still, but then I heard him again, “There’s something about this place.” He breathed it.

And for a time, we both just stood there, on that dock.

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Well things got a lot better between myself and the Jack – and Carter. I near couln’t believe it, it was like I stepped off into a fairytale. First he stops by my work, then he gets a job there, and then he takes an interest in me and becomes my friend. I don’t think anybody ever took an interest in me before, so I wasn’t sure exactly what to do. So I just came into work like I always did, ‘cept every time I did my hero, Carter Reid himself, would smile at me, talk to me, ask me questions about myself. A few times he took me for rides in his car, showed me his guitars, pictures with all the famous people he met. He din’t like to, though, only ever did it when I asked, and I din’t ask too often. Wouln’t be fittin, I remember thinkin’, usin’ somebody for who they were like that.

The ruckus begun to die down, too. Seemed the world had gon’t used to the idea of Carter Reid workin’ the dish-pit in a small town. Interviewers stopped showin’ up so often, them few protests died out. Fans still came, of course, and gave Jamesy’s business, but they looked at Carter Reid more like a bug in a glass box now thana rockstar. He’d been workin’ at Jamesy’s for four months at that point, outlasted Jasper Ayle, who left for somethin’ or other (I am not
prone to gossip). ‘Course some did still come, some reporters, like from *Time* and the like, and whenever they asked about Carter the waitresses would just fair point to me, said I was his best friend, and they should ask me the questions, and they din’t do it without some *vitriol*. I remember thinkin’ a girl who looks like Christina probly wan’t used to being ignored, not like she was bein’. Them interviewers would come to me then, and at first I’d stumble a few words out, but then they’d frown or get a weird manikin look on their face and nod real fast and I wan’t sure how much they got down, ‘cause they never seemed to use them pencils and tiny notebooks.

Sometimes Susan’s son Peter would come in with his friends and they would stop me, too, ask me if I knew Carter, and I’d tell them I did. Peter and his gang, we always just took to callin’ ‘em The Boys, well, because they was boys, and because they came so much, bikin’ through the woods to get here. Susan always snuck them out free food whenever they showed up, burgers and fries and the like. It was usually just the four of them, but every now ‘n then they’d bring Susan’s daughter Melody and her friend along. They was all too shy to approach Carter, I reckon, but they all knew me, and they thought it was the coolest thing in the world, me knowin’ the Jack like that.

For all my new fame, though, my favorite part of the day was talkin’ to Carter, tellin’ ‘im about the things I did on the weekends, or just my thoughts, and sometime he’d go about his work but you could tell he was listenin’, and sometime he’d stare at me and get a deep sorta look in his eye, and I felt I’d have to snap my fingers to get ‘im outta it, and then he’d smile and we’d go back to talkin’. And every night when I left I’d see him, down there by the dock on the Bluemoor, strumming his guitar, singin’. “Myrtleflower”, “Sinking Spring”, sometimes them famous idle chords of “Where is the Prince?” and sometimes he’d nod his head slightly, like he were waiting for a response. Him bein’ there, and I am not sure why, always struck me as sad.
I s’pose Carter musta had a reason for comin’ to Hidden Rivers. People din’t come here for no reason. The town was a lot like Carter in some ways, *heliocentric*. It drew folks in like gravity, but usually only when they was lookin’ for it. I’spose it drew me in. I din’t have very many prospects down where I grew up, so with the money my ma left me, I made my way out and kinda just ended up here, and got to work. I cannot very well explain how. But I think that’s how it goes for a lot of the folks ’round town. Sheriff Lewis, Mr. Caulders, Miss Eleanora, Susan Allman and her dad and her two kids, and a lot of others.

So what was drawin’ Carter here? He seemed like a baby bird, standin’ on the lake there, tryin’ different pitches and different tunes, like he was callin’ for his mother to come and take him back to the nest, where he belonged. I s’pose that’s what was so sad, ’bout him standin’ there, all forlorn. Carter was playin’ his piece, and nobody was comin’ to take him home.

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Me and Carter were hangin’ out more and more. I stopped askin’ him ‘bout his rockstar life altogether. It was weird, but I think I just came to realize that was another half of Carter Reid, the Jack was, and it was there, certainly, but just as easily it could go away and be ignored. Carter seemed more comfortable that way, I think, when I just treated him like one of my friends. He seemed happier, too, than when he first came. He din’t smile often, but you could see it in his eyes, a sort of energy, a lightness. Whatever it was he had come for, Hidden Rivers was doin’ ‘im good.

Carter come up to me durin’ our shift and asked me what I knew about the lake, about Bluemoor, and I told him. Not all Hidden Rivers folk called it Bluemoor, most just called it the Cobes. When he asked me why I said I had no idea, but maybe it was because they sank a place called Cobeltown when they flooded the valley, and if you dived down deep enough, you’d
probably come across a building or two, under there. That was what some folks said, anyway.

Besides that, I told him what else I knew.

“They say there’s a Fat Igna down there.”

“A Fat Igna?”

“Yeah, one of those swamp-lights.”

He stared at me for a second ‘fore somethin’ came to his eyes and he nodded, “An ignis fatuus. Kind of an archaic term, Douglas.”

“That’s what I said. They say she shows up on the water some nights, just kind of drifts along the surface. They say she sings.”

“She sings?”

“Ya. I never seen it. I mean I seen Fat Ignas before, but none that could sing.”

“Well, she can’t be that fat.”

I grimaced, “Oh, don’t call her that. That’s not . . . that’s just what they’re called.”

Carter smiled, “Do you think she’d take offense?”

“Listen, Carter Reid,” and I almost can’t believe I had the balls to say all this to Carter Reid the Jack himself, but I s’pose we’d gotten to know each other well by that point, and I did, I said, “Listen, Carter Reid. I’ve never taken myself to be particularly super-sticeous, and I’m not originally even from here, but I know no good can come from insulting the spirits of a place, whatever those spirits may be.”

“So you think it’s a spirit.”

And that question took me by some surprise, because I wan’t sure what else it could be, blue light shinin’ on a blue lake and singin’. Some ancient lady cryin’ ‘cause they flooded her old home, disturbed her resting place. What else could it be? I guess to some folks, sometimes,
things just kinda click together in a certain way and it’s a right-eous hard time to get them unclicked, and I guess that’s what I was doin’ there, and it was the same thing all those folks were doin’ to Carter, with their trippin’ ‘im and their mockin’ ‘im, just clickin’ themselves on the wrong thing.

In any case, I think Carter liked to hear me talk about the lake, and Hidden Rivers. Now I love this town ‘cause it took me in, but I couldn’t deny that strange things happened there, things I never could quite explain. Lights in the woods, and songs comin’ over lakes and strangers comin’ into town with them white doctor’s lab coats sayin’ they was conductin’ tests in the atmosphere. They were usually nice people, though some of the locals din’t take ‘credibly kindly to ‘em. Outsiders always found their way to Hidden Rivers, hell there’s even a Japanese businessman who likes the town so much he comes once a year! Flies all the way over just to take a company car down and spend a couple hours at Jamesy’s. He’d always come in with a long brown coat on and say a few nice words and pay more’an he had to. Mr. Saito is a good man, was always kind to me.

Well Carter Reid just loved hearin’ about all this, about the history of the town, and the strangers who come in, and I told ‘im he shoun’t be askin’ me, he should be askin’ some of the older folks, they got the stories, even if they din’t much like talkin’ ‘bout ‘em, but Carter said he liked talkin’ to me, and I wan’t quite sure what to say to that. If your hero said he liked talkin’ to you, what would you say? So I just shut up and went back to workin’.

A coupla more months passed this way, and Carter had been dishin’ at Jamesy’s for almost a year, now, even though he had his millions. I always did wonder what he did with his paychecks, if he donated ‘em or gave ‘em away or just threw ‘em off cliffs. I din’t see much of a point in him addin’ a coupla hundred dollars a week to his pile of cash; it’d be like shovelin’
rocks onto Mount Ever-est. But then I wan’t completely sure why a guy like Carter Reid would work a dishin’ job at Jamesy’s anyway, though I guess I had some thought, at the time.

Then that night came. We’d just about hit the ten-month mark since Carter’s arrival, and it was a rough shift, with morea his fans than usual showin’ up, and we got done late, and when I was packin’ up my stuff to leave I thought I’d stop by him down on the dock playin’ his guitar, which he always did. Well I walked, but he wan’t playin’ his guitar, he was busy on his flip-phone. It was a fancy lookin’ piece of tech, somethin’ I couln’t had afforded, probly, but Carter was lookin’ at it like it was junk and I heard somebody screamin’ from the other end, about this and that and commitments and get off your horse and after a bit Carter just hung up. He turned, holdin’ the phone out like it was a dead thing.

“My manager,” he said, “There’s a show in Baltimore next Sunday, but I told him I had a shift that night and wouldn’t be able to make it.”

You see, at first Carter had worked it out with Dean that he’d have to take off to go play his shows in all them big stadiums, and so early on he only worked two or three shifts a week. That stopped, though, and the news said the band was takin’ a hi-atus and not schedulin’ any more tours, and so Carter took on a few more shifts at Jamesy’s and stopped really leavin’ altogether. And here I felt I had to ask, ask him the same thing everybody else did, ‘cause if I din’t, and if I din’t do it then and there, then he just woulda slipped away, disappeared, even if he stayed, and I never woulda really seen ‘im. So I sighed and asked, I asked.

“Why you here, Carter?”

And we stood there together for a bit, just starin’ out over the lake, with the moon shinin’ down and everythin’, and I knew he heard me, even if he was takin’ his time to answer, and we just stood and maybe waited for that Blue Lady to start singin’. I remember his eyes bein’ far
away, out there over the horizon, up with the moon and in the sky. I thought for a second that maybe I pushed him too far, maybe I’d broken that shared silence between the two of us, the silence Carter seemed to relish so much. But then he spoke, his voice was soft and quaverin’, and I wan’t sure if I heard him right at first, ‘cause what he asked was this:

“You remember Jackson, right?”

I did, of course. Jackson was a busser for a good bit a while back. A small fella with thin-rimmed glasses and wide blue eyes. His voice was nasally, and that matters ‘cause Jackson liked to talk, and talk he did. I’d have to go deliver some plates and the glass-wooden door would slam behind me and still he’d be jabberin’, and when I’d get back he’d be on some new topic as’f I never left, as’f he never noticed I was even gone. Jackson was twenty-five or so years old, but that din’t matter, ‘cause he’d done more in those twenty-five-or-so years than I think I would ever do. You asked him, he was a firefighter in New Orleans, a trained chef in Chicago, that he climbed the Matterhorn, and lived in Japan for a while. He’d say he signed up for the army at twenty and did two tours over there in Iraq, working as an officer or some kind of combat medic or something.

“Two tours,” he used to say, Jackson used to say, “And I would’ve done a third if they’d let me, but the IED tore up half my shoulder and killed my best friend when we went over it, and that’s the kind of stuff they send you home for.”

You ask him, he’d’a said there was a lump, just a lump, on the side of the road. No bag or cart, exactly nothin’ you’d expect to explode. But that’s what it did. Flipped over their Humvee and turned the world to dust and fire and killed a man. Shrapnel cut up Jackson bad in the back, but he was on the right side and his friend wan’t so lucky, took a chestful of that and Humvee, dead ‘fore he hit the ground.
“Ol’ Saddam left a present for us that day,” Jackson used to say, if you’d ask him, and give you a look like he knew it. He knew what openin’ that present felt like, and it wasn’t no Christmas.

“Oh I remember Jackson,” I said, and grinned.

“You know he had a wife, right?”

I did. In between all of his adventures, he’d somehow found the time to be spoken for, and that thoroughly impressed me. He showed me his ring, once, a golden thing with a fine-lookin’ white jewel in the center. Jackson had called it cubed-diamond and said that was because it was three times as expensive at normal diamond. I’d met the lucky lady herself a few times. She was small, just as small as Jackson, with a short bit of black hair and small eyes. I remembered her bein’ maybe not a whole lot to look at, if lookin’ was what you were in to. But she was real nice, and when she smiled at you she’d get these big dimples on the corners of her mouth and I remember them bein’ adorable, like somethin’ a puppy might have.

“Yeah, I do,” I said.

“You remember what she looked like?”

“Oh,” and I thoughtta that smile, and smiled myself.

Carter din’t smile, no. There was somethin’ dark in his eyes when he spoke, “You know she came in one day to drop Jackson off his lunch, because he always said he was allergic to gluten and couldn’t eat Jamesy’s food. She came on in and dropped the bag off, and he kissed her. I was crouched low in the deli, scrubbing down the cooler unit where we keep the lettuce, when I heard Lauren and Christina giggling, and I listened. ‘Woof woof,’ Lauren whispered, and Christina did that high-pitched laugh she does and just mouthed ‘DOG’ as I watched.
“They didn’t know I was there, or else they would have acted how they always do around me. But that’s not what’s getting me, what’s getting me is that both of them were as nice as ever to Jackson’s wife when she came in. They smiled at her, and said her hair was nice, and asked her to show them her ring, and they talked for the three minutes it took Jackson to come out. I mean, how could you say all those things, talk to someone like that, and not mean it?

“And you know Christina won’t have any problems, not with how she looks, but what about that girl? Christina already won, didn’t she? Guys will be lining up the block to lock her down, so then why’d she have to say that? Why’d they both? And what could I do? If I went out there and told her what they said . . .”

He shook his head, “Three days later I was playing a show in Memphis, and standing up there, with all those people looking at me, all I could think about the entire time, couldn’t get it out of my head . . . it’s insane to say, but I didn’t think anything in the world could make up for that damn ‘DOG’.”

Carter stopped, and there was somethin’ like disgust, and somethin’ like horror in his voice. And he sounded tired. Deeply tired. I din’t quite know what to say, which is soundin’ like my blanket motto, I’m aware. But Carter had that way with him, where you din’t know what to say a lotta the time, when he talked. I thought about tellin’ ‘im that that was just Christina, that she din’t know any better, but I thought it woulda been kinda wrong to talk then, so I just kept quiet, standin’ slightly behind him. It was like he wan’t even talkin’ to me, besides. He was facin’ out into the lake for his confession, and maybe only the moon heard him, and he kept goin’.

“I am twenty-seven years old. Four months ago I was twenty-six, and for the first twenty years of my life, nobody knew my name. Now my face is plastered on every bus stop from here
to LA. *Jezeby* was always there, and I first wrote ‘Where is the Prince?’ in the seventh grade. I held onto it for nine years before I sang it. It went platinum in three weeks, and three days after it hit the radio, they say people were humming it in the streets, and they knew what kind of hit they had. Three days. Nine years I carried that song around in me, because I knew I wasn’t ready for it yet.

“You know they call me the ‘Jack of Rock’? You know what they think it means? They think it means ‘Prince’, because the Jack comes under the King and the Queen, right? It doesn’t, though, it means ‘knave’ or ‘servant’. But you know what, Douglas, that’s alright,” and he turned to me and there was such a look on his face I couldn’t read it. It looked like pain and sadness and happiness and tiredness and relief all rolled up into one, and such a smile spread across him that it seemed like God musta reached down from heaven and got ‘im in a bear hug, and he picked up his guitar and turned back and started playin’, playin’ like mad.

“That’s alright, Douglas,” he slowed when he spoke, and he spoke gently over the chords comin’ from his six string, “I forgive them. I think I can let it go.” And he played some song I’d never heard before, but it sounded like the air rustlin’ through the trees and water runnin’ down a stream and it sounded wise, and not darin’ to stop, he said to me, “Thank you, Douglas. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And I left him there, ‘cause I din’t think there was much more I could do, and I turned back at the top of the hill, and he was down there, still playin’ to the lake, and I fancied I mighta seen a *Fat Igna* down there floating, but then it mighta just been the full moon reflectin’ down off the water, and so I got in my car and drove home and went to bed.

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I guessa parta me knew that’d be the last time I saw him.
Carter’s car was in the parking lot the next day, just where it’d been left, but he was late for that morning shift, and that in itself was a surprise ‘cause Carter was never late. Ten minutes, a half hour, an hour, then two, and Dean gave ‘im a call, but the little voice told him that number couldn’t be reached, and I had to take the morning on by myself. Which I din’t mind, of course, worried ‘bout my friend as I was. Well as it was Dean got a line in with Carter’s manager, and he sent a message to the family Carter was stayin’ with, to see if maybe he’d got to drinkin’ last night and called a ride to take him home, but the family, they said he’d never gotten home last night, they weren’t sure where he’d gone, and besides that, Carter din’t drink.

From there Carter’s manager took it, called everyone, got Sheriff Lewis involved and they checked out the car, the restaurant, the house. They had officers waitin’ at all three in case he stumbled home or went to work. They lit up his fancy phone with calls, none of which made it through, so they called the phone company and they said the phone was either off or broken. Some of the cops then tried to find it usin’ trian-gu-lation, but what they got back apparently din’t help them. For all intensive purposes, the phone had just disappeared, same as Carter.

And then things started really explodin’, ‘cause the cops came and started questionin’ everybody, Dean and Benji and Susan and the waitresses. They even hunted down Jasper Ayle who was workin’ in a bank a coupla counties over.

They started askin’ me things, too, like what my relationship with Carter was like, whether he’d been actin’ strange lately, if I had any convictions and I just told them one of my convictions was that I din’t talk ill of anyone if they weren’t there to defend themselves, and they just looked at each other and took that, they did. I did tell ‘em I saw ‘im last down by Bluemoor, and they tore the lake apart searchin’ for him. They had dogs sniffin’ ‘round the edges, volunteers wadin’ in, teams of divers swimmin’ down, but they din’t find nothin’ except for a
few sunken buildings. They looked everywhere, put posters up, offered rewards, but there weren’t no sign of Carter, nor his phone, nor that guitar that he was playin’ so well to that lake the night he vanished.

Eventually Sheriff Lewis had enough of their tearing apart the town looking for him and called off the search. He got into some heat over that, of course, but the Sheriff always knew what was best, in the end. He understood Hidden Rivers, and what it needed, and that weren’t a whole world tearing it open to take a peek inside. Not for one rockstar who just checked out.

Of course after the place was clear of cops, all those reporters and fans and camera-people started pourin’ back in now that the Jack, now that Carter, was gone. The Sheriff let them go, for the most part, ‘cause he knew it would all die down in enough time. They started holdin’ vigils across the street, Jimmy Bryan and Sam Eyrie went on TV and talked about the kinda person Carter was, how they’d love to have him back, and there were documentaries and magazine articles done. You probably remember Carter’s face blown-up and lookin’ sad, starin’ outward from the cover of *Time* with that famous title written big and loud across the bottom, *Where is the Prince?* I could just imagine the big grin some writer came up with when he thought of *that*.

It was a while before it all began to die down, almost two years, and even then the last of the reporters came, started askin’ us, his former workmates, all sorts of questions about him, about what we thought happened. Lauren thought he’d drugged himself out and was splayed out the woods somewhere. Dean just guessed he fled the country and went into hiding with his money, and was on some beach in Tahiti. Christina was sure he’d had a secret girlfriend in town who’d killed him and hid the body, ‘cause why else would he have stayed here? They were all bawlin’ and hollerin’ during it.
As for me, I took it like some of the older folks ‘round town. Wasn’t that they weren’t concerned, just that they understood better than most, and I was with ‘em. Them interviewers asked Thomas Drake where he thought Carter’d gone, and Thomas just shook his head in that way he does, like the answer was obvious, and said, “Don’t you think if he wanted to be here, he’d be here?” and I’m not sure any of the interviewers knew what to make of that. Oh there were conspiracies, alright: the secret girlfriend, the drug smugglers, that he was abducted by aliens or eaten by Bigfoot, but whenever they asked me I always told ‘em the same thing, because I knew Carter Reid, and from the first time I saw ‘im I thought I knew where he was most happy, and so I told ‘em the truth, how I saw it.

Hendrix was dead. Elvis just went home. The Lizard King could be found on any desert road west of the Rockies, but Carter Reid?

Carter Reid disappeared into rock.
Chapter 4

Plus Ultra

Peter Allman was always going to be a criminal. They said it back in his old town. Old folks whispered it to teach other on the way to church and shook their heads. Parents cast stares at him as he walked on the side of the road and said it to themselves as they drove to work. Their children shouted it to each other across the cool smooth pavement of the playgrounds where they pelted rubber balls at each other’s faces. With a family like Peter’s, with his clothes always a size too big, with his mess of dirty blond hair, with the perpetual dirt smeared on his brow and the sides of his cheeks. With those eyes that stared hard and angry out at people like little pools of rippling, disturbed water, how could he be anything but?

He thought that to himself as he prepared to commit a crime. Hidden Rivers was quiet and warm, a summer night full of stars like he’d never seen back where he had once come from. His Grandpa had once told him the town was special, that it had a way of forgetting, and he would grow to love it there in a way he couldn’t have loved anywhere else. That seemed like a long time ago, now. He turned to the three others and went over the plan once more.

“Security?” He asked.

“Fairly light,” Tomas said, “One guard on the first floor and another on the second.”

“Cameras?”

“Won’t be a problem, they’re mostly around the outside entrances and low-res, besides. Parking lot recording, none where we’re going in. The place is old, too, so the alarm systems are at all the main entrances on the first floor and some of the windows on the second, only.”
“Which will be a problem,” Jason said, “If the room we’re looking for is on the second floor. You’ll have to get up through one of the windows at the south entrance of the first floor, and from there get to the south staircase and make your way up. Once you get to the room, you sure you can get in, Peter?”

Peter pulled his kit toward him once more and idled through it. After a moment, he nodded, “I have everything I need. What about interference on the guards? The south staircase goes right by the security station.”

“Never fear quarrels, but seek hazardous adventures,” Bigby said, “Jason’s got it, right? I mean I’d love to, but Jason’s the specialist, isn’t he? The man with the plan? I’m with you, Pete, and Tomas has support, so let’s go in there and do this fuckin’ thing.”

“Not yet. Extraction?”

“I’ll keep eyes open,” Tomas said, “And when you’ve radioed you’re coming we’ll break off. The rest is on you.”

“Hell, Tomas, I didn’t know you could be so cold-hearted,” Bigby said.

“Have you been paying attention to the plan at all?”

“Alright, if we each know our places, let’s go,” Peter stood.

Jason looked to him, “Once you’re in position Tomas will radio me and I’ll start running interference. Until then, try to stay out of the main hallways.” Peter and he shared a solemn nod. The team all stood and began to scatter to their positions: Jason on his own to the north side of the building, Tomas toward the west, and Bigby fell in behind Peter as they skirted their way to the south end. As they got closer, the two slowed, sticking to the shadows of the lawn, trying to stay beneath the trees and behind the shrubs. They moved silently, methodically, Peter motioning for Bigby to wait or go after cautiously searching the air for signs of light or movement, for signs
they had been spotted. There were few cars out at this time of night, but it was better to be slow and steady when you needed to avoid being caught.

Bigby started whispering to him when they got up to the windows, “Hey, Pete,” he said, “We should have done Plus Ultra.”

Peter’s voice was disbelief, “What?”

“We should’ve done it. Just sayin’.”

The windows were as old-fashioned as the rest of the building, the creaky kind that you could open all the way. Peter couldn’t see much through the dark panes of glass. A grey carpet floor, a few papers atop a cabinet, the outline of a large wooden desk and the computer atop it. He knew this room to be an office, but all the lights were off within. It seemed nobody was home. That was good. He turned and handed his kit to Bigby and climbed up onto the brick windowsill. The twisted metal hairpins he’d shoved into the inside hinges of the window during the day would have prevented it from being completely closed, and after a moment, he grinned as it popped open.

“Holy damn, Peter, you really are good at this,” Bigby said behind him. Peter shushed him and motioned for his bag before carefully pulling the window back as far he dared. It made a cursing creak as he did so, but he doubted anyone would have been able to hear unless they were standing right outside the office. The two slipped in and left the window cracked behind them, little enough so that nobody would be able to tell it was open if they happened to glance into the room. From there, they kept low and Peter opened the door lightly, peering out into the hallway. They were at the end of it, only solid wall to their left while to the right dull blue carpet snaked its way down to the other end of the building. The white walls were broken by frequent doors on either side and the occasional crossroads of an intersecting hall. Clinical lights flickered above,
and Peter knew about halfway down the strip was the first-floor security desk by the main entrance.

He eyed the nearby doors on the opposite wall and spotted the entrance to the south staircase. He stepped back and fiddled with his radio, calling up Tomas, “We’re in position just opposite the staircase. Standing by for interference. Over.”

It took a few seconds, but the radio crackled, and Tomas’ voice came through, “Roger, radioing Jason to begin. Give it three-to-four minutes. I’ll signal when your path is clear. Over.”

“Oh shit,” Bigby said, and grinned, “This is gonna be good.”

“You sure you’re ready?”

Bigby made an insulted face and shook his head, “I do not cling to life sufficiently to fear death.”

Peter paused to take that in, and said, “Alright, man.” He looked back to the hallway and was calm. That had been something else they’d been afraid of, all throughout his life. When others cried, Peter had dry eyes. When they shouted, he remained quiet. When they trembled with fear or anxiety, he remained unshaken. There was a stillness to him, a kind of grey-eyed steady. There must’ve always been something wrong in him, something they could pick up like a dog sniffing out a sickness. Maybe it wasn’t in his clothes, or his family, or his rundown, ramshackle home, but in his eyes and his walk and the way he tied his shoes. Maybe some people were just born without a chance.

He remembered what his grandfather had once told him after he’d been suspended from school for the first time. He’d taken Peter out on a trip in his old Buick Gran Sport, a dying thing the color of tar and gold which he’d once used to race along the backroads of Appalachian forests and isolated mountain towns. He told Peter stories of his days running moonshine across
counties, and how, of course, the local cops knew who the rum-runners were, and when anything bad happened, maybe a spot of arson or someone getting shot, the rum-runners were the first folks they rounded up.

So it was, one night, Walter Allman was filling up the tank of his Gran Sport at Tom Linden’s gas station when Tom gets off the phone and tells Walter he better get lost and lay low, because the cavalry was all riled up and coming, and so Walter hopped into the Buick and started racing down Cumberland Road toward the county line. Fairly soon he saw their lights and heard their sirens as they were coming up behind him, blaring at him to pull over. He floored the gas pedal, in sight of the border, when something exploded in his Buick’s engine, the pedal died, the lights went out, and he came to a halt not forty feet from freedom. The kicker, his Grandpa told it, was that he was only in town to go to the funeral of a very dear friend of his. That didn’t matter to the sheriff, and he was tossed in a cell for the weekend and forgotten about.

“Some people are just damned,” his Grandpa said to him, “Damned if you are, damned if you aren’t. Damned just about everywhere in between, too.” Peter wondered if he was one of those people, the kind who had the lights turned out on them, the kind who got forgotten.

A loud sound echoed down the hallway from their right, and Peter heard cursing and speech. Tomas’ voice on the radio, “Hold, he’s calling for backup. Over.” Peter closed the door even further until only the tiniest crack of light and vision came through, and within seconds he heard the sound of an opening door above him, the swift and loud descent of feet on stairs, and he pulled back just as the door to the south staircase opened and out came a large man in a security guard’s uniform. He didn’t even stop to look Peter’s way, instead hastily turning left and walking fast toward the sound of the noise.
“Alright, we’re clear,” Peter whispered into the radio, “We’re moving up. Try to give us a five-minute window, at least. Over.” He gestured to Bigby to move out, and the two silently opened the door and crept out into the hallway, keeping low for the ten or so steps it took to reach the entrance to the staircase. They opened it and quietly ascended the cushioned stairs. On the second floor, Peter cracked the heavy door a tad and peered out. The security desk was directly across from him, unoccupied. The hallway was dimly lit, but silent and empty, and, standing up now, he moved as quickly as he dared to the room he was looking for. And then there it was, the door, and Peter knew it was locked so he took out his kit and got to working to open it up.

“I’ll keep an eye out in the hallway,” Bigby said, “If anyone comes, I’ll follow you inside.”

Peter thought about that as he lifted the last tumbler. If the guard came back right then, what would he have done? Would he have run? Would he have attacked him? Even having such a thought made him shiver, and he wondered if he really were damned, just born without a chance.

The lock clicked and he pushed open the door. The room was small and dark, what little he could see only lit by the dim light from the hall behind him. There were a few cabinets, a closet door, and a queen-size bed. There was stirring within, a groan, the sound of a bedframe creaking.

“Who’s there?” A gravelly voice called out.

“It’s me, Grandpa.” Peter saw an arm reach out and flick on a low orange light, illuminating a wrinkled, liver-spotted face, a shock of snow-white hair, and a pair of wide, confused blue eyes. He must not have recognized the boy, at first. Walter Allman’s memory had
been retreating further and further into the past, and at fourteen, his grandson Peter was probably three years older than he’d ever remembered him to be. Peter wore a pair of dark, ratty jeans, old skate shoes, and the black turtleneck his mother had splurged on for him two Christmases ago.

“Petey?” The old man’s eyes cleared somewhat; it was like somebody behind them had remembered to flip on a switch, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to rescue you.”

“Petey.”

“No time to talk, Grandpa, we’ve only got a few minutes before the guard comes back.”

At that moment, standing there, Peter didn’t much care if the guard did come back. When they’d come to live with him in Hidden Rivers, his Grandpa told them they would always have a place in his home, that no matter what happened or what they did, he would be there for them. When he was diagnosed with his condition, and started forgetting, they took away everything from him, even his license. Peter thought his grandfather must have taken that the worst. Walter Allman was nothing if he wasn’t a driver, and Peter was really going to be damned if he let them lock his Grandpa away in some room until all of his lights went out, one by one. No. He had an idea, though he knew it was a long shot. If they could just get him out of the building . . .

Bigby suddenly appeared at the door in his ridiculous camouflage face paint and oversized, coke-bottle glasses. He clutched his walkie-talkie to his side, “Pete, what the shit is taking-” he stopped himself and smiled when he saw Peter’s grandfather, “Hello, Mr. Allman.”

“Is that little Timmy Bigby?”

“Yes, it’s good to see you, sir. Pete, Tomas just radioed and we gotta fuckin’ go now. The guard’s already on his way back, Jason couldn’t hold him for long.”

“Oh, you brought Tomas and Jason along, too?”
“We had to get you back, Grandpa,” Peter turned to his grandfather and offered his hand, “You remember what you said to me, when you took me with you in your Buick? ‘Some people are just damned. Damned if you are, damned if you aren’t, and damned just about everywhere in between, too.’ You remember when you said that?”

Something like fire flashed in his grandfather’s eyes again, like the person standing back there twisted the knob to brighten the bulbs, and Peter’s spirit dared to hope as Grandpa Allman smiled at his grandson. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll go. Just let me get my slippers on and take Lucky out, real quick.”

“Grandpa.”

“Yeah, Petey?”

“Lucky’s been dead for four years. Let’s go.”

“Ah, alright, then.”

Peter rushed to get his grandfather’s slippers on as Bigby stood at the doorway tapping his foot like mad and urging them to hurry up. The two boys nearly had to push Grandpa Allman from the room to get him going, but soon enough he caught on and the trio made their way silently into the hallway. They were approaching the door to the stairs when Peter’s heart turned to ice. He heard footsteps just on the other side. The handle jiggled, the door began to open, and just in that moment, by some miracle, the dim and flickering lights of the hallway suddenly flickered for the last time and went out. The trio found themselves plunged into darkness just as the door in front of them opened.

“What the hell?” A tall voice grunted. Peter felt the figure scrambling in his belt for something and he prayed it wasn’t a flashlight. Bigby was mere inches from the guard, unseen, probably frozen in fear and on the verge of going into some kind of asthmatic hyperventilation.
Peter waited for the sound of a click and the flash of a light, waited for it all to be over, when instead he heard the rumble of the door shutting and the static of a radio from the other side.

“Yeah, John, the lights just went out on the second floor.”

“ZZzxxxxzzzzflashlight?”

“Nah I lent it to you! Come here with it, no way I’m walking around up here alone in the dark.”

Bigby breathed, “Well that was fortunate.”

Peter regained himself. He felt a grip tighten on his shoulder and realized it was his grandfather. “There’s another way out,” Grandpa Allman whispered, pulling him backward and leading him away, “Mrs. Ellis’ room. She always leaves her door unlocked at night.” Pete reached out for Bigby and got him by the shoulder, and the three felt their way along the side of the wall, Grandpa Allman counting to himself along the way. “Here,” he said, abruptly stopping and causing Bigby to slam head first into Peter’s back. Peter felt a surprising amount of pain from Bigby’s obscene glasses digging into his shoulders. It was like being whacked by a pair of metal spoons.

“Ow. You seriously need to work on those glasses, dude.”

He felt Bigby shrug, “It’s on the list.”

Grandpa Allman felt for the handle and turned it, and the three entered. Peter locked the door behind them, heard the shifting of somebody in a bed and an old woman’s voice coming through the dark, “Who is it? Is that you, Walter?”

“It’s alright, Lindsay, we’ve just come to use your window.”

“Oh. Be careful not to fall!”

“That’s the plan, Lindsay. Come on, boys.”
“Wait, Grandpa,” Peter said, and stopped in the center of the room, “Does this mean you’re back?”

“Back from where? Where am I?”

“Nevermind.”

“C’mon, Pete,” Bigby said, “I’m tryin’ to get this fuckin’. Window. OPEN.” Peter saw Bigby’s strained silhouette turn to the form of Mrs. Ellis in the bed, “Sorry about the language, Mrs. Ellis.”

“That’s alright, young man. You have to pull it backward, then lift. It’s an old thing and it gets jammed real easy.”

Peter remembered something and took a step forward, “Wait, Bigby . . .”

“Oh you mean like this?” Bigby said, and pulled the window back and lifted it up. Two things happened, then: The first, a rush of warm summer air blew into the otherwise cool, air-conditioned room, a feeling like hot breath on Peter’s cheeks. The second, the delicate silence of the home was torn apart by a shrill, piercing alarm blaring through the air.

“ALARMS ON THE SECOND FLOOR WINDOWS,” Peter shouted, “SO PEOPLE DON’T FALL OUT OF THEM AT NIGHT!”

“OH YEAH!” Bigby shouted back, and tried to close the window shut, only for it to stick ineffectually to the sides.

“IT’S TOO LATE!” He turned back to the door, “WE HAVE TO FIND ANOTHER WAY OUT, GRANDPA WON’T BE ABLE TO-” He was interrupted by the sight of Grandpa Allman moving swiftly past him, sticking one leg out the window, and promptly leaping from the side of the building and disappearing into the dark.
“I FORGOT HOW MUCH YOUR GRANDPA ROCKS, MAN!” Bigby shouted, covering his ears with his hands.

There was a forceful knocking on the door. Peter only just heard it over the offensive tones of the alarm. A familiar voice echoed through, “Mrs. Ellis! Mrs. Ellis! Are you in there?! Open the door!” Peter supposed the security guard must have overcome his fear of the dark.

He made for the window, shouting in between the blares, “Looks like we don’t have a choice!” He peered over the edge out of it and saw a line of hedges below. He didn’t have time to scan them for his Grandpa, so he just made sure nobody was right beneath him, and turned back to Bigby, “Let’s go, you first.” Bigby’s smarmy reply was drowned out by the sound of somebody else coming to the door, and speech just on the other side.

“Now,” Peter ordered. He’d already given the three of them enough trouble, though indeed it was they who demanded to come along. He wouldn’t leave Bigby to the guards. Bigby complied, joined Peter at the window, and, giving him one last pale smile, put both legs over the edge and let himself drop. Peter heard a flurry of curses a moment later, but the unmistakable jingle of keys right outside the door erased the concern from his mind. He returned to that grey still he always did, saddled a leg over the side, and jumped to the bushes below. He landed hard and rolled forward, covering his turtleneck, his pants, his hair, in dirt and mulch. Besides a light pain that sprung up in his left knee, though, he felt alright. From the sounds of it, Bigby wasn’t so lucky. In the flickering light of a parking lot lamppost, Peter could see the silhouette of the small boy limping forward, toward another figure seemingly bent over. Peter caught up to them to see that is was Grandpa Allman hunched, examining a cluster of pale-flowered shrubs in the light.

“Blue hydrangeas,” he said, “They look like they could use a bit of a watering, though.”
Two more figures darted toward them from the north end of the building. Peter was about to grab his grandfather and run when he saw that it was Tomas and Jason. Tomas was still covered in radio-tech, shivering with excitement, while Jason stood calm and unconcerned. Peter thought that, of them all, it was the youngest boy who seemed the most like an adult. There was a confidence to him, a surety, and Peter supposed it was only natural the two had become friends when first he moved to Hidden Rivers. It was Jason who spoke first, stepping forward and clasping Peter’s hand, “We’ve got him, we have to move. Sounds like you tripped an alarm.”

“Which means the services might be here soon,” Peter said.

“Which means we should cut through the backwoods rather than stick to the dark of the neighborhood like we’d initially planned,” Jason continued. Peter nodded.

“HEY, WHAT’S GOING ON OUT THERE!? A heavy voice shouted from the window, the aching sound of the alarm still sending shockwaves of sounds out into the night, “STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

“We’re leaving,” Peter said, and found himself frowning at his friends. Peter underestimated how much of his grandfather had been lost, both from his disease and from being locked in that home. He knew that was the beginning of the end, that once they had nothing to do but sit around with themselves and wait, that the degradation came on fast. It was like a car left to rot in a garage with nobody driving it. It was like trying to start a fire without any fuel. It was like using flashlights to shine messages to friends across the street and getting no answer. It was impossible. You needed both sides, each going off of the other, otherwise you were just killing light. Peter didn’t understand why nobody realized that. He and Jason each grabbed one of Grandpa Allman’s arms, quickly shuffling him away from his old nursing home, into the tree
line, composed of oaken and pine sentries which stood tall and shadowy and proud before them, like an old guard holding the gateway into a terrible and wild new world.

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The trees were gently asleep, the sound of their slumbering lulling the boys into a dense trance of dreaminess, as if something had changed in the dim air, some thickening which laid upon them like a comfortable radiance of heat. Soft blue grass moved wavily in the summer breeze, moved like a thousand fibers of a silken blanket which had been draped over the forest floor and which took their weight and the fierceness of their steps with all the patient and knowing love of a mother to whom they had returned from the glowing night. For the boys paused their flight and looked up and breathed and the night was glowing, the full moon beaming down pillars of tangible silvery light, which lovingly brushed aside the smooth and innumerable layers of leaves and branches to touch down lightly upon the forest floor, as if a sibling awakening from sleep and reaching out its fingers to affirm its brother still rested beside it in the still, dark room. The stars shone their own mantle across the sphere of the midnight sky, enclosing Peter’s world, the world of Hidden Rivers, from all that rested outside of it. Somehow, Peter felt, those stars were just his own, given to him with the grace, and merit, and sheer undeniability and love of a treasure inherited. He almost reached out his hand to grab them, the flecks of light which hung in the air like shining coins made of stellar platinum.

Bigby’s awed voice breathed next to him, “Peter . . .”

“I know,” his voice cracking, high-pitched, setting aside its former depth, the assertive tension that had earlier led the group of boys to success on their serious and deadly mission. As it cracked it revealed something young and childlike beneath.
They stood in a clearing, all of them, a breach through the canopy that showed them the magnificence above. As they watched, a collection of stars shot by overhead, leaving a trail of glittering blue dust which dropped down to the earth like Christmas snowfall. The dust fell, and fell, and fell around them, changing color all the while until they realized they were surrounded by a cloud of lightning bugs, more than Peter had ever seen in his old town. They seemed to come out of the night and the forest, drifting toward the boys and their Grandfather in waves, blinking back a cacophony of colors: golden, red, green, purple, and blue, blue most of all.

Grandpa Allman stepped forward and into the mass of swirling fireflies. A group of pioneers landed upon him gently, and Peter watched as they bulbed to each other, speaking in some otherworldly and complex code only they could possibly understand. But Grandpa Allman tried. His eyes, glazed over with confusion and fascination, seemed blind when alighted upon by the shimmering mass, but the spark of something still rested within them, behind the whites and the unseeing pupils, and it was that spark which blinked in communication to the fluorescent messengers, who blinked back readily, seemingly having touched something within all the rest that they understood. They grew excited from the interchange, circling the rest of the boys, cautiously approaching and pulling back, until a particularly brave one landed on Peter’s arm, and he watched with dreamy amazement as it changed colors there, flickering between several before settling on a deep violet. This broke the tension, and more landed, clambering up Peter’s body. Bigby blinked back a laugh as one landed on the lens of his glasses and magnified its light into his eyes. Tomas, usually so afraid of bugs, looked at them with the attentive comfort he usually reserved for his beloved technology, now long forgotten. Jason held a cluster in his hand and examined them back to front, looking for the first time that night as young as he truly was.
Peter turned back to his Grandfather and saw them lightly touch him all over with their fiery bellies, as if trying to delicately impart him with some of their vital essence.

The time of the lights drew out among their memories like the hallways of a dream, and they found themselves gaining flight. The fireflies took off into the world and the woods and the boys followed, Grandpa Allman at the lead. They began to run, as if all together, lifted off the ground on steps of silver, of violet and blue. They chased the lights like retreating stars, reaching their hands up to catch them. Peter didn’t know why they were running, only felt sure that stopping, giving up the rush of the wind and the feel of his legs galloping along the ground, would be like worse than dying. Jason was ahead of him and to his left, that boy always faster, and Bigby lagged behind them by twenty feet, which might as well have been a hundred thousand miles, wheezing in between his laughter, just like in the old days when he would always shout, “Wait! You guys said you would wait!” and they never did, because the running took them as it was taking them now.

And the one in front was Grandpa Allman, cutting out a path ahead of them and leaving them in the dust. Their eyes focused on the shadow of his moving form, trying to keep up, to match his strides with their own. In that way they chased him on and on, losing themselves as wolves lost to the hunt or schools of diverse and magic life caught up in a great universal current.

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The group burst from the side of the woods and into the backyards of Peter’s street, waking up all at once and looking around themselves with a confused clarity. The lights, if they were ever there, had retreated far behind them, giving them their gift and sending them on their way, and the form of Grandpa Allman stood tired and uncertain once more, stopped abruptly just
past the threshold at the edge of the forest, like a man standing on the border of a dream he
would have preferred not to leave behind.

The way to Peter’s house was short: the problems were in Bigby’s slow limp, which he
refused all help for, and, really, in keeping Grandpa Allman on course. Every so often he would
step away to examine a bush, make notes on the trees and the foliage or stop to examine
something mundane, like the side of a house or a street sign. Peter was not quite sure what had
happened in the forest. Already now it seemed like something far away, like something on the
other side of the water, shimmering just below the surface. He recalled what his grandfather had
often told him of Hidden Rivers, that the town would take care of him. Peter had always just
assumed he meant the people in the town, but now he wasn’t so sure. But if it wasn’t the people
helping, what else could it be? Strange as it may sound, Peter couldn’t shake the feeling, as well,
that the place they’d come through in those woods was a place he’d never been through before,
like somehow it hadn’t necessarily always been there.

Peter’s house was a humble, single-story thing that belonged to his Grandfather, much
nicer than the house in his old town. They kicked open the jammed wooden side-door of the
detached garage, the one with the window ever-coated in cobwebs and dirt and bugs. Peter led
his grandfather inside and the others closed the door behind, and there, Peter and Jason stepped
forward and, each taking a side, whipped the blue cover off the car and onto the ground, and
there sat Walter Allman’s Gran Sport, a bit rusty and a bit tattered, but holding within it
everything of a sleeping lion or a dark cave with some great treasure inside. Peter watched as his
grandfather came forward and put a hand on the car, something like concern in his eyes, the
shadows of memory.
“You remember it, Mr. Allman?” Bigby said, “You used to take us for rides in it along
the back roads. We used to go swimming in Bluemoor, and stop by Jamesy’s for burgers
afterward.”

“Peter in the front, me, Jase, and Bigby in the back,” Tomas said.

“Peter said you used to run moonshine with it, and we all thought that was the coolest,”
Jason said.

“You were the coolest,” Bigby said, “You taught us Plus Ultra.”

“Why don’t you start her up, Grandpa?” Peter asked, and lifted the pair of jingling keys
from the red toolbox to his left, “Why don’t you let her take you back?” He turned the keys in
the lock and opened the driver side door, and as he did so, noticed the hanging bulbs beginning
to lightly flicker, and wondered at that. Was there something wrong with the town’s power grid
tonight?

Cautiously, Walter Allman took the keys. He looked over the boys and slowly made his
way and sat in the smooth leather driver’s seat. Peter walked to the other side and got into the
passenger’s seat, alongside his grandfather. The other boys didn’t say anything as he did so, and
didn’t move. Grandpa Allman’s fingers shivered and shook as they moved the keys to the
ignition, as if he wasn’t quite sure what he was doing, as if only his trained fingers remembered
where to go. The boys held their breath as the keys found their mark, as Grandpa Allman twisted
his arm, his body, and his head to start the ignition. They held their breath when it didn’t start,
and watched with sinking hearts as he twisted the key back, then forward, then back, then
forward again, time after time. The keys just made a dull clicking sound. The car was dead.

Peter’s eyes fell. The car hadn’t started before, either. His mother said the battery was
bad, and likely half of the other things inside of it, besides. He didn’t know what he’d been
expecting. A miracle? His mother had sat him down and explained to him there weren’t going to be any miracles, not for Grandpa. The doctors had said once some things stopped working, they stopped working for good, and there came a point you had to just cut your losses and let them go. Really, even if he’d somehow gotten his grandfather back, even for a night, what did he think would have happened? That the police would have just let it go? That nobody would have come looking? That his grandfather would somehow get himself back and then go on to live forever? There was nothing logical in anything Peter had done, so why had he done it? What was the point?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of sirens off in the distance, and he paled and looked up. His friends had heard them, too. His grandfather was still idly twisting the key back and forth, as if he were fascinated with the sound it made. Click. Unclick. Click. Peter got out of the passenger seat and listened. It sounded like both police and an ambulance. Jason caught his eye, and said, “They probably found out who was missing and came here. In retrospect, not the smartest move on our part.”

“That alarm really screwed us,” Bigby said, looking forlorn.

“Wasn’t your fault, man,” Peter said, “It was wrong of me to drag you guys along.”

“We wanted to go,” Tomas said.

“You guys should get out of here, go off into the woods, get home,” Peter said, “I’ll take the blame. Everybody already thinks I’m a criminal.” The sirens had grown steadily louder, now sounding as if they were just up the block, turning onto Peter’s street.

“They don’t think that here, man,” Bigby said, “And we’re not leaving.” He put his hand into the center of the four, and grinned, “Plus Ultra.”
The other three looked at each other solemnly, but one by one their faces broke into smiles. The sirens were loud as ever, right outside their house, and Peter could hear the sounds of door shutting and the speech of men, and, shaking his head in disbelief, he put his hand into the center last, and they made their agreement, “Plus Ultra.” And for the second time that night, two things happened in rapid succession: The overhead lights shut out in the garage, plunging the group of friends into darkness once more, and with a tremendous explosion, the engine of the Gran Sport roared to life, its headlights flaring like the twin eyes of a large cat caught in the moonlight, and a hearty laugh came from within, and the old and lucid sound of a familiar voice echoed through the darkened, musty air.

“I have an idea,” Grandpa Allman said, “How about we go for a drive, instead?”

The boys cheered, shocked as they were, and hustled to get in their old spots in the car. Peter laughed as his Grandpa turned to him with eyes that were entirely his own, and he felt sure this wasn’t the confused old man they had had to rescue from a nursing home and held the hand of to guide him through the woods. This wasn’t some poor bastard locked in a cell, either. This was his Grandpa, with all his fire and spirit and wisdom and defiance, and his hands clutched the wheel with such a laziness you’d know he’d driven that car all his life, and he offloaded such an air of ease and confidence that the boys didn’t even question that they wouldn’t have trusted him to do their laundry not ten minutes before. He clicked the garage door opener and zoomed out when it wasn’t even halfway up, and Peter heard the shouts and yells of the police and the EMTs ordering them to stop.

“Sheriff Lewis must be asleep,” Grandpa Allman said, laughing, “He wouldn’t have brought all this riff-raff if he were up and moving. Would’ve come by himself.” Peter smiled when he remembered the sheriff, a man who used to come over every Thursday night to their
house to play cards with his grandfather. He continued to do it, Peter learned, when his Grandpa was confined to the nursing home, though of course they stopped playing for money, then.

The car zoomed in around bends, up streets and backroads, the sound of the sirens distantly behind, but following. The boys buzzed with excitement and fear at being in a real car chase. They twitched and laughed and giggled. The car seemed to be in seizure, as well, various lights and bits of technology zipping in and out of life. Even Tomas’ walkie-talkies started chittering, the flashlights in his bag flickering. He looked down at himself in surprise. The radio spat and sputtered to life, and the wails and riffs of a Carter Reid song sounded their way through the static, “Candles bright and fashion, Ohhh taking all your dreams . . .”

Bigby rolled his eyes, “I hate that new rock,” he said, and reached forward to flip it off.

“You’re only saying that because your older brother said it,” Tomas laughed.

“Am not! That’s bullshit!”

“He’s right, man,” Peter said.

“Now Timothy,” Grandpa Allman said, and calmly shredded a sharp turn going fifty-five, “A part of growing up is learning to form your own opinions about things, regardless of what the people around you think. Even if they’re people you look up to. And besides,” He flipped the radio back on, “I like that song.” Bigby sat back with a look of contentment, and Peter thought that all the boys probably realized, then, how much they’d missed his words of wisdom.

He turned to his Grandpa, “You’re really back? For good?”

His Grandpa just grinned and looked at him out of the corner of this eye, “I’m back,” he said, “Thank you, Peter. And thank you, boys.”

“You got it, Mr. Allman.”

“We’d do it any day of the week.”
“Wasn’t even that hard.”

“Now, I’ve got to let you boys out, now,” Grandpa Allman said, “So you can stay out of trouble and get home.”

“You’re going to head for the border, aren’t you? What about the cops, Grandpa?”

“Hidden Rivers cops?” He gestured behind him in amazement, “I must have been down for longer than I realized if you’ve lost that much respect for me. I’m used to dealing with Appalachian boys, I can handle them.” He sprang the wheel to the left and tore his way down a gravel path behind the backyards of some development houses. The trailing sirens trailed further, then faded. Peter recognized where they were.

There was an old broken bridge on the western border of the town, colored bright red and made of wood. Rever’s Bridge, it was called, the one that went over the Creek, a shallow river the real name of which Peter could never remember. Peter had played in the shadow of that bridge only a few years ago; he would go with his little sister Melody and Jason and Jason’s little brother and the four of them would look for colored rocks along the bottom of the clear riverbed. Melody once claimed she had seen a golden ring with a pearl on it there in the river, between two rocks. They had spent several afternoons looking for the ring, imagining, perhaps, a gateway to a great pirate treasure, but they never found it, and she had probably been lying. The bridge had burnt down, since. During a terrific thunderstorm about a year ago, some kind of lightning strike had hit it when most of the townspeople were stuck inside their homes. A few people had seen it go up, but by the time the storm had died down enough for the roads to clear it was completely gone. All that was left of it was a gravel incline and a bit of wooden ramp which some of the older boys in Peter’s school always said they were going to ride their bikes off of down into the water, but never did. Rever’s Bridge . . . his grandfather was taking them there.
But Peter was mistaken, for Grandpa Allman brought the Buick to a grinding halt suddenly and looked to his grandson and the others: “This is where I leave you for now, boys. I’ll lead those jokers away and you all can run on home. You did your part.” He paused, and Peter noticed tears welling up in his eyes, and he leaned to the side and hugged his grandfather, and moments later he was joined by the rest of his friends in the back, all getting into one big bear hug, as big a one as they could do in the back of that old Buick.

“I’m damn proud of each and every one of you,” Grandpa Allman said, “But this I have to do alone. So get on out, boys, get on out, and I’ll show you what Plus Ultra really means.”

And the boys sprang out and clutched together in awe, amazement, and Peter stood away from them and watched his grandfather, who gave him a gentle wave as he twisted the car back around and started driving back toward the sound of the sirens. Before he could make it there, he veered right off the road and into the woods, scaring the hell out of a group of deer, and the flashing blue and red lights followed him.

“He’s heading for Rever’s Bridge,” Jason breathed.

“What’s he going to do?” Bigby wheezed.

“He’s going to make it,” Peter said.

And they watched as that Gran Sport stopped and twisted around once more, and they cheered as its engine revved loudly, and likely woke up half the neighborhood, and they heard the heavy gunfire-like sound of its tires tossing dirt and gravel, and it rocketed forward through the woods, dodging both of the police cruisers on the way, making a beeline for the bridge and its ramp to freedom. They watched as a warm wind blew over them and it felt like the world was taking a breath in surprise, the stars shining down like so many headlights turned to catch as much as they could of this impossible act.
Yeah, Peter felt like the stars were watching, then, and the ground, and the creek, and the world, and his grandfather rocketed up the side of the bridge going at least eighty and from there disappeared from their sight, up, up, up and gone, giving all of ‘em hell and shining like a blaze through the night.

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It was Sheriff Lewis who found them.

They had heard a resounding *crunch* and thought for a moment Grandpa Allman had crashed his Gran Sport into the hilly bank on the other side of the creek, but the rattling of his wheels spitting up dirt and the fierce howl of his engine made it known he had made the jump over the broken bridge and landed, not lightly, on the chunky gravel-and-dirt road he was aiming for on the far side. The cops chasing him had screeched their cruisers stop at the foot of the bridge and got out, talking like mad, yelling over one another. Peter knew, then, that it would be foolish to assume his grandfather or the Gran Sport could be stopped by a crash. That car had survived the grim and grinding iciness which awaited all machines when the line’s end came to snuff out their thunder, and it had come back howling and burning and ready for war. Grandpa Allman had come back from worse, and Peter didn’t think fire could kill either one of them any longer. The Buick revved itself loudly in one last final goodbye to the boys before Grandpa Allman took off into the back woods of Hidden Rivers for pastures green, disappearing from their lives and from the world that was theirs.

The boys made their way back to their neighborhood. They decided no longer to stick to the shadowed pathways, too tired and content and contemplative to bother any longer with their professionalism. Peter, if he had ever been afraid, was afraid no more. He felt, and his friends did, that the likes of Hidden Rivers cops couldn’t touch them, that they wouldn’t have dared,
after what they had accomplished this night. They were halfway home in this blatant, victorious manner when the unmarked car slowed up beside them on their left, the driver rolling down his passenger side window as he got equal to them. Peter almost continued walking until he recognized the man within as Sheriff Lewis, dressed in a pair of comfy-looking pajama trousers and a soft, periwinkle bathrobe covering a coffee-stained white undershirt. His eyes were bleary from sleep, but he looked at them with an amused expression from under his prickly five o’clock shadow. Quietly, he took them in. His car was a red Pontiac Firebird, something out of the 80s, but Peter didn’t mind as he crawled sleepily into the Sheriff’s passenger seat.

It was a quiet, peaceful journey back to each of their homes. Peter looked back at his friends all bunched together in the back seat, a puppy-like quality to them, now, the kind that rests its head among children who have heard the best story they’ll hear for the night, whose flames have erupted and towered and now hung low, burning quietly, steadily, contently. Though none would admit it, Bigby’s head nestled drowsily on Tomas’ shoulder, Tomas pulling up a scratchy, red-and-black checkered blanket from the floor which he cocooned over his legs, his arms. Bigby’s as well. Jason rested apart from them, his head turned back and his eyes reminiscing on the events of their mission. It really had been a long night, after all. The colored lights of the town passed them like floating lanterns held by guiding spirits, changing in their colors from red to gold to blue and back. They fell behind as the boys recognized themselves entering their neighborhood, the ordered look of it, like those miniature train-model towns that one wishes they could shrink into at night and dream, cozily, within.

They pulled up to the first of their houses, and Bigby was getting out of the car and onto his front lawn when he suddenly turned back to his friends, a new jitteriness having overtaken him. “I just remembered,” he said, and wheezily laughed, “I just remembered tomorrow is
Summer vacation.” All the boys sat up heatedly at this. It was true, in all the anticipation for this night the knowledge of their coming freedom had slipped into the backs of their heads, reawakened now with the warm pleasure of surprise. There was an outburst of excited laughter and then immediately the promises: They swore to meet up with each other at the clocktower and The Black Cat to grab sodas, at Bluemoor for exploring and at Rever’s Bridge, so they could see the size of the tire tracks Grandpa Allman left in the dirt when he took his Buick further beyond.

With such promises, Bigby parted ways from them, and Tomas shortly after. Jason was last, and as they stopped in front of his white-clad and double-storied suburban home he and Peter shared a single nod of solidarity and the boy disappeared across the grass and into his shadowed backyard. And then it was Peter’s turn, and the drive seemed longer, then, and Peter looked dreamily out over the colored lights of the town, his new town, and in his eyes there was a magic, a curiosity, an urge to scratch apart the curtain of the world and reveal something brighter, something even more wondrous.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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