

THE END IS NEAR

THE END IS NEAR

Harry Ramble

Published by Ebb Press

Copyright © 2010 by Harry Ramble

All rights reserved. Published in the United States
by Ebb Press, LLC.

ebbpress.com
harryramble.com

ISBN: 978-0-9816502-2-7
Library of Congress Control Number: 2010933014

This is a work of fiction. Names characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Manufactured in the United States of America
First North American Edition Published September 2010

*For Abigail and Owen.
Treasure every day.*

THE END IS NEAR

The first Angel of Death came to me on my seventh day here.
My seventh conscious day, I should say.

I woke from a sweaty, haunted nap and there she was, sitting in the wooden chair by the door.

Napping is most of what I do here at the Hudson Maxim Long-Term Care and Rehabilitation Unit, since I emerged from five weeks of coma, minus my jaw and a lot of my face, my head a beanbag of buckshot. Napping and filling one notepad after another with hastily scribbled replies and requests.

“Well! Hi there!” the Angel of Death said.

I knew right away that this visitor was different from other visitors I’ve received since I awoke here. She was wearing a lime-green pant suit with matching lime-green, strap-buckle shoes. And a little hat. A round, lime-green hat with an orange band. Death’s Angel was sitting very straight in the chair, an opened magazine in her lap.

I did what I usually do upon waking and finding someone in my room. I tried to say something. Something like, Who are you? I couldn’t say anything though, because the lower part of my head now consists of a temporary prosthetic device, an elaborate enamel contraption bristling with drains and shunts and clamps and plastic tubing.

“My goodness,” the woman said. “That all looks like it hurts. Does it hurt?”

THE END IS NEAR

I had retrieved my notepad from the bedside table and was looking around for the pen I usually keep clipped to its cover.

"I'm sorry," Death's Angel said. "I borrowed your pen." She closed her magazine, rose from the chair, and offered my pen to me. I saw that the magazine was, in fact, *The Big Book of Word Finds*.

I took the pen and pushed the nurse call button. Then I started writing. Death's Angel returned to her seat and watched me. She had a cherubic round face, a mole at the left corner of her mouth, and red hair tied back severely into a bun at the nape of her neck.

After a moment, a nurse entered the room, a young black guy with a lifter's build, a goatee, and a ribbon pin in the lapel of his nurse's coat, one of those ribbons commemorating this or that disaster or disease.

"What's up, Nathan?" He didn't look pleased. His name was Jordan. He wasn't one of my favorites.

I held up the pad. On it, I had written, Tell me you don't see this one.

This is my primary means of communication now. I write on the pad, hold it up for inspection, write on the pad, hold it up. I pointed at the chair Death's Angel was occupying.

Jordan didn't bother looking at the chair. "Come on," he said. "I've got forty-five minutes left on this shift. Save it for Shaniqwa."

I pointed again.

"He won't be able to see me," my visitor said. "They never do."

Fine, I wrote. Then I don't see you either.

"It's a chair, Nathan. It's just a chair." Jordan was looking around for something. "Why don't you watch some TV?" He lifted a remote from the foot of the bed and clicked on the TV.

Turn that thing off.

I can see, right away, that I'm going to have trouble distinguishing my notebook-scribbled communications to others from my un conveyed musings. I could put my written statements into quotes, as if I'd said them. But I don't really say anything, do I? Not aloud, as others do. I think what's required is a new form of notation. Let's try this:

Turn that thing off.

No, maybe not. Little stars give this account a kind of Girl's First Diary feel, I think. Like any minute I'm going to start dotting my i's with hearts. Hang on.

Turn that thing off.

How about that, huh? From now on my notebook communications to others will be in blue, everything else in black. For your reading convenience. So let's get back to our first Angel of Death.

"But you do see me," she said. "Some people see me and some people don't. The ones who see me, I think, must be closer to me and farther from them." I should point out here that the Angel of Death doesn't call herself any such thing. She calls herself Estelle.

No. Fuck you. And your little friend, too. The girl in the pinafore who keeps running around painting blood on the walls.

Jordan had clicked off the TV and was watching me write. "Enough with the girl already, Nathan. There's no girl."

"Oh, that sounds scary. I haven't seen anything like that," the Angel of Death said. "That could be your imagination. You never know with some of these medications."

And you're not, right?

"What? Imaginary?"

"Alright, Nathan." Jordan was backing toward the door. "You want to do this the hard way, we can do it the hard way."

I was looking at Death's Angel. The problem with her was that she was nothing like my previous otherworldly visitors. She looked as substantial as Jordan. She possessed quite a bit of finely

THE END IS NEAR

realized surface detail. Her eyes were painted up like a cartoon peacock's; her lips were a happy crimson bow of enthusiasm. She was no wispy hallucinatory fragment. She looked like a young housewife. Granted, a housewife who did her clothes shopping at some mod-hippie-era Sears or Montgomery Ward. And she had handed me a pen. This pen. The one I'm writing with.

What do you want?

"I guess I could be imaginary," she said. "But to be perfectly honest, I don't feel imaginary. I feel as real as ever."

I should also say here, in the interests of full disclosure, that I had been having some problems, earlier in the week, with my medication. With the morphine, specifically. Nurses and orderlies without faces. Odd, flickering images of people, moth-fluttering in a kind of half-light, rising up through the floor, walking through the walls. A bad episode with the chicken pot pie on, I think, Wednesday.

It's no secret. It's all documented in my chart. As are the doctors' successful efforts at correcting these problems. Tinkering with my dosages. Medicine isn't as precise a business as some would hope.

"I'm getting Croate," Jordan said. "I'm sick of this. You can work it out with her." He left the room.

"Well, he's no ray of sunshine, is he?" The Angel of Death rose from her chair again and peered at something on the bedside table. Then she approached and exchanged her Big Book of Word Finds for the untidily stacked, rubber-banded sheaf of paper, about an inch thick, that had been lying there. She went back to her chair and started peeling back the tops of the first pages, glancing at them. "He wouldn't last a day in my line of work."

Your line of work?

"I'm a stewardess. Well, I was a stewardess. For NAL."

NAL?

She looked up and grinned. “National Airlines. Airline to the playgrounds of the world. You wouldn’t catch me back-sassing a paying customer.”

The sheaf of paper was a transcript of my suicide journal. A court-produced copy of the blood-fouled original found by state troopers and local police next to my shotgun-ventilated body, after they’d stormed into the auto-parts store where I was holding my two remaining hostages. My lawyer, a shiny-suited legal beagle provided for me by the state of New Jersey, gave it to me.

A lot of people are familiar with some of the contents of that journal. Excerpts of it were picked up by the local newspapers here, printed as poignant evidence of my deranged frame of mind, before and during the “Standoff in Sussex.” Even the national news services picked up bits of it, I’ve been told.

The transcript is officially Exhibit C in an ongoing criminal trial, State of New Jersey v. Nathan Huffnagle, that originated with charges filed against me by one Felicia Fowler. Felicia was the woman I released first among my hostages, unthreatened and unharmed, early in the “Standoff.” She is also, paradoxically, the most vengeful of my four “victims,” and the only one to file charges of any sort against me.

But I’m getting ahead of myself, aren’t I, Death?

Beginnings within beginnings, ends within ends. I have to keep it all straight.

“Some of us have a theory about why we’re here.” Death’s Angel was still thumbing through the transcript.

Us?

“People like me. Like you. People stuck in the middle.”

Oh no you don’t. Jordan can see me. You’re the one he can’t see.

“I don’t know why they can see you. Or, since they can see you, why you can see me. It happens sometimes, but it’s very confusing. Every time I think I have it figured out, something new comes up.” She looked vexed. “What was I saying?”

THE END IS NEAR

You have a theory.

“Right! I do!” She beamed at me, her dramatically made-up lashes fluttering. “It must be something we’ve left undone. Something we have to finish. What else could it be?”

Could what be?

“The reason we’re here, silly. Stuck in the middle.”

In the middle? You mean dead. Are you dead?

She looked pained. “I don’t like to think of it that way. I like to think of it as, well, stuck in the middle.”

Well speak for yourself. I’m clearly not dead, despite my best efforts.

To illustrate my robust corporeality, I thumbed the nurse call button again.

“But you can see me. Usually, people who can see me—”

Die?

“No. Get stuck. Are stuck. In the middle.”

All I can say is your thing isn’t here. Whatever it is you’re looking for. Unless it’s in your Big Book of Word Finds. You can take that with you.

“There’s no need to be mean,” she said, sitting up even straighter in her chair. “I don’t know what my thing is yet. I might not even have a thing. It’s just a theory. But you have this big . . . letter.”

If I had known dying was going to be this entertaining, I’d have died a lot sooner.

“I’m glad you’re entertained. But all of this is no joke to me, I can tell you.”

How did you die?

Her brow furrowed and she looked away. “I don’t know.”

Maybe it was a plane crash.

“Well now, I think I’d remember that.”

So you’re just wandering around.

“I’ve met some very nice people.”

We looked at each other for a freighted moment. I really don’t have enough face left to convey much in the way of

expression, but if I did, you might have said that I watched my visitor apprehensively.

If you're a figment of my imagination, you can go away now.

She didn't answer this.

All I wanted to do was die. And then, thinking about it, I wrote, *I'm not up for any kind of afterlife thing.*

The Angel of Death laughed, a raspy, earthy horse laugh from someone who clearly laughed a lot. "I wasn't either!" she said. "Believe me, it takes some getting used to!"

Why can't you just die? Like everybody else?

"My point exactly! That's what I mean about something left undone. It's not like the halls are packed with people neither here nor there. There's hardly any of us at all!"

There's more of you?

"It must be something we have to finish. Or set right. Or something."

Who else is here?

"Well, you for one. And me." She popped up out of her chair and extended a hand to me. "I'm Estelle, by the way."

I took her slim little hand. It was cool, and light, but certainly not so much so as to seem otherworldly. She had stewardess's hands.

"There are a few others, too. I'm sure they'll be by."

Oh, no. I'm on a suicide watch. Visitors restricted. I can't just be having people come by. Especially dead people.

The Angel of Death—oh, alright, Estelle—had returned to her chair. She was thumbing through the transcript again. "The thing is, you have this letter. It's a suicide letter, isn't it?"

I like to think of it as an editorial statement to the world about life as I knew it.

"Aren't you fancy? Is it finished?"

As much as it could possibly be. Given the hectic pace of events toward the end there.

THE END IS NEAR

She leaped up again and abruptly deposited the sheaf of paper into my lap. “You should finish it! This could be your thing!”

Trust me. This is not my THING.

“Well, then, I just don’t know.” She picked up her Big Book of Word Finds from the bedside table and clutched it to her chest. “Maybe we don’t have anything. Maybe there is no rhyme or reason.” She arranged her face into a sorry little pout. “Still, it’s nice to have company, at least. Some of the others here aren’t big talkers, you know.”

I was afraid to even touch the transcript in my lap. I knew perfectly well the pathetic drivel I’d written weeks before, back in June, looked even more pathetic in its second incarnation as court evidence. There’s a lot of bushwah in it about the sanctity of truth and the tyranny of lies. All of which didn’t prevent the journal itself from being packed to the gills with lies. Lies and self-deceptions and empty sarcasms of the sort that I’d thought were amusing when I’d also thought that my sorry life was someone else’s fault.

If I’m going to be visited by hallucinations or ghosts of Christmas past or whatever, I hope they’re all as pretty as you.

“That’s very flattering,” Estelle said, still looking sad. “Thank you.”

I wasn’t much of a magnet for hot chicks before I blew my head off. You have an interesting fashion sense.

“Fashion sense?” Estelle said. She drew herself up in her chair and looked at me sternly. “Have I mentioned I’m married?”

Your outfit. It seems a little

But Estelle wasn’t paying attention to my notebook now. “I guess I mean I was married. Almost two years. Tom was a pilot. Is a pilot.” She held up her ringless left hand and tugged at the base of her ring finger. “They don’t like us to wear rings, wedding rings, on the flights. It gives passengers the wrong idea.

They want us all to be, you know,” she shrugged deferentially, “sky bunnies, I guess.”

I set aside my notebook and lifted the transcript in my lap. I peeled back the last page. To the last nine words I’d written.

“I’m kind of hoping, if I have a last thing, something that I have to do,” and here I looked up as her voice began to waver, “that it isn’t my ring, you know?” She grinned weakly. “Because where would I find it here?”

I didn’t know the answer to that, and I looked politely away, back to the transcript.

The last full entry in my suicide journal is dated June 30th, 12:15 am. The last nine words of the journal, however, were written twenty-four hours later, in the first hour of July 1st. I scrawled them in the stock room of A&B Auto Parts, as my hostages, the two that remained of the original four, lay sleeping in a heap of foam packing peanuts on the other side of the room. I wrote them just before jamming the cold twin o’s of shotgun barrels beneath my chin and reaching out for the trigger with a trembling fingertip.

It was all for nothing. There’s nothing to say.

When I wrote those words, all I wanted to do was die. And I was thinking, how hard could dying be? People are doing it every day. For the most part, without even trying.

I started to reach for my notebook, to say something else, but I saw that Estelle was gone.

That was two days ago.

It was all for nothing. There’s nothing to say.

If there are any truer words about my life, about the human endeavor itself, I’m sure I don’t know them.

THE END IS NEAR

June 22nd, early am

I wasn't going to do this. Leave a suicide note.

People in my position, in extremis, as it were, often delude themselves with the notion that they have something special—or necessary—to impart, at the end. As if the last moments of life were some grand stage and the mere proximity of death might confer some great wisdom.

But what is there to say, really? Not much, in most cases. Why am I killing myself? For the same reason anyone does, I guess. The less said, the better.

Tonight, though, that changed. My simple suicide has become a murder-suicide. Before I kill myself, I'm going to confront Randy Trent with his crimes of long ago. Then I'm going to kill him. I may torment him a bit in the days leading up to that confrontation.

That's why I'm writing this tonight, instead of being dead. That's why you're reading this.

This journal—for it's no mere suicide note, it's a whole suicide journal—is intended to document my actions leading up to my death. And to present the reasoning behind them.

Note the verb. Present. Not justify. Not excuse. Because, believe me, there's no excuse for what I'm about to do.

This journal is addressed to the Lake Lenape police, who'll want to know how I did what I did. And it's addressed to the family and loved ones of Randy Trent, who'll want to know why.

So. Why have I decided to harass and kill Randy Trent? Why did my elegantly simple suicide become a more messy and complicated murder-suicide?

It's a long story. So I'll start with the facts of this night and work backwards. And sideways and forward.

Here's what happened.

I was finishing a last glass of beer in the Sail Inn. Or a next-to-last glass of beer, I hadn't decided yet. I was raising a silent toast to a life poorly lived, a life squandered, preparatory to going back to my late mother's derelict, barren house and snuffing myself as unobtrusively as possible.

That's when I heard it. A voice from my past.

"Hey, Brittany! I remember when you used to love me!"

It was a distinctive voice, a raspy growl with a rough, ruined edge to it, like a starter motor stuttering ineffectually on a cold winter morning. It was a clout to the ears. It was the carefree, careless bray of the bully. The call of someone accustomed to getting his own way in everything. The voice of someone used to living at the expense of others. Used to using people up. It sent a chill up my spine, as they say in paperback thrillers. I looked up and there he was.

It was Randy Trent. He was leaning on the bar, an empty beer pitcher in his hand. He was hectoring a barmaid, calling out across the length of the bar to her.

The sight of him, the sound of him, triggered a fight-or-flee response in me so long dormant, I'd forgotten it existed. It was like a genetic marker, lodged deep in my DNA, emerged from some long benign dormancy to give my heart a good, swift kick. I hadn't seen Randy Trent, hadn't cringed at the sight of him, in more than twenty years.

The past has been much on my mind these days, since my mother died—a week ago this morning—and I returned to tidy up her house, the house I grew up in, for the realtors. I'd like to say that I wouldn't have recognized Randy Trent so instantly in a different setting, out of the context of this shitty bar in this shitty town we both grew up in. But I don't think that would be true. Some people make a mark on you, for better or for worse, and you don't forget.

"In your dreams, Trent. In your dreams." Brittany the barmaid took the pitcher and went to fill it at the tap.

THE END IS NEAR

So I didn't have long to second- and third-guess my initial impression. It was confirmed right away. I was looking at Randy Trent.

After Brittany exchanged his empty pitcher for a full one, Randy Trent turned from the bar and his hard gray eyes fell on me, stopped by what must have been an odd expression on my face.

"Yeah?" Randy Trent said. "You got a problem?"

Twenty-some years is a long time. People change. I don't think I look anything like the pale, slight, narrow-shouldered, long-faced boy I once was. Two decades and more of mostly sedentary pursuits have caused me to grow redder, riper, and rounder, like a berry, while stress and bad habits have pulped and tenderized every square inch of my surface.

But Randy? He looks very much the same to me. It may be that his physical attributes are elemental like prime numbers or fractions reduced to their lowest terms. He was always this way: long-jawed, heavy-browed, with big hands and feet. Pale with deep-set eyes. There's something stiff about his face that resists warmth or expressiveness. His ears have no lobes; the lower planes of his ears line up directly with the lines of his jaw, giving him a simian quality. His nose has two distinct facets—out, then down—vaguely Native American in aspect. He's big, over six feet tall. Even as a teen, he seemed a man among boys. His features seemed already set, with nowhere else to go. Today, his belly might be a little bigger, his eyelids a little fleshier, his hair grayer and shorter. That's about it.

Cold. That's the first word that always comes to mind when I think of Randy Trent.

"No," I said, and then, "Not me. I've got a smile for everybody I meet." And I smiled.

I don't know what I expected from Randy. Surprise, anger, contempt. Something. At the very least, I expected him to recognize me.

But he didn't. Instead, he watched my big, goofy grin grow wider, a cross, put-upon expression settling on his own face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," I had to say. And it was true. He didn't remember me at all.

Randy grunted and carried his pitcher of beer back to the table he was sharing with two women and another guy. Back to his unexamined, untroubled, unshadowed life. The easy life of the bully.

And that set me to thinking.

About things, and why they are the way they are.

About the unfortunate irony of encountering Randy Trent, of all people, on the last night of my life. About how utterly unsurprising—how fitting, even—it was, that I should be killing myself against the backdrop of another prosperous, carefree day in Randy Trent's life. Killing myself—discreetly, unobtrusively—even as Randy Trent, the architect of my childhood despair and mortification, lifted another beer with his plainly admiring friends.

I watched Randy Trent for a while. Randy looked happy. So did his friends. The girl Randy Trent was with looked happy to be with him. She was very pretty. She was of some Asian descent, her cheekbones high, her blunt haircut sleek and shimmering and black, her eyes large and lively above a tiny lipsticked mouth, her laugh a sudden, surprised-sounding bark. She might have been thirty or so, maybe less. She seemed too solicitous of his regard, too self-consciously aware of his presence, to have known him for long. She looked like a girl on the make.

And why not be desirous of making Randy Trent? If this Randy Trent was much like the Randy Trent I knew twenty-some years ago, he had a lot going for him. An easy, offhand way of breaking things, of breaking people. A rough and charming sadism. A simple happiness derived from humbling the weak, the shy, the fearful. There's something in a man who knows that life

THE END IS NEAR

is unfair and shabby and demeaning and brutal, and delights in it, that women find reassuring, attractive. I know, I've seen it myself. All my life.

I watched Randy for quite a while. I watched myself in the mirror behind the bar, huddled, alone, over my last beer.

And that was it. That's when I stopped playing by the rules. How do they say it now? I "went over to the dark side." I became a "rogue operative." See? Even the language is sexy.

That's when I decided to harass and kill Randy Trent.

I mean, why not? What had reason and civility, fair play and good manners, empathy and restraint ever done for me? Nothing, that's what.

Why should I die alone? Why should I die like a sheep, while this brutal thug lifts a glass of cheer with his adoring friends? Why shouldn't I take this bully with me? This bully whose reign of terror cast a shadow over my youthful life that—let's be honest—exists to this day?

Why not? I'll never have a better chance.

Oh, don't worry, loved ones of Randy Trent. I don't expect you to understand. That's not the purpose of this communication.

Blame me, of course, for what's about to happen to him. Blame Fate, too. With a capital F. For surely Fate must have had something dire in mind for your beloved Randy, when she swept him into my path at such a perilous juncture, mere moments before I would have sheepishly pulled the plug on myself.

Tough luck, indeed.

I've given myself an eight-day stay of execution. I've given myself a reprieve until June 30th, my birthday. I've made a new plan.

And I want to clarify something here. I'm no old hand at harassment. I've never stalked anyone before. I've never tormented anyone. Unlike Randy Trent, I've never made someone's life miserable just for the sheer sport of it. I've

certainly never killed anyone before. These are all first-time additions to my job jar.

Read on, officers of the law, loved ones of Randy Trent.

Read on in these journal pages and you'll find my reasons for everything I'm about to do.

Maybe you won't like my reasons. I'm prepared to accept that. But I can promise you this. My reasons for killing Randy Trent will be at least as good, at least as valid, as his reasons for tormenting me, all those years ago.

And now, to get things started, I'll give you a reason. My first reason.

It's a reason the Randy Trent I once knew would surely have understood and appreciated. Here it is.

Because I can. That's why.

Because I can.

§

I have to admit, Estelle's visit didn't change much about what I was doing with my time here at Hudson Maxim. I slept a lot. I watched hospital TV. I made an effort to keep my notebook-scrawled thoughts to myself around Jordan and Dr. Croate. Probably, I was hoping that I was simply losing my mind and that I would be able to take an essentially passive approach to the onset of derangement.

But it's true, what they say. You can't cheat Death.

Today, Death sent me a Waitress.

She was a not unattractive redhead, fortyish, a bit frowzy, lean and backlasy like a green willow branch, with pale blue eyes and a bent snub of a nose that looked like it might have been broken once or twice. She was wearing a green apron with a white frill, a green cloth visor, and a name badge. The badge

THE END IS NEAR

said *Hi, I'm* in flowing script and, beneath that, in handwritten block caps, BETTY.

Death's Waitress wasn't taking any orders, though. She was issuing them.

"For a writer, you sure don't do much writing, do ya?"

Am I supposed to be writing?

"You're supposed to be doing whatever it takes to get from Point A to Point B. Didn't you hash this all out with what's-her-name? The flight attendant?"

Estelle. She calls herself a stewardess.

"Right. So? Writers write. Stewardesses . . ." she waved her hand vaguely, "steward. We've all got our job to do."

I don't want to write anymore.

"Oh, please. So you're going to, what, watch Judge Judy all day?" Death's Waitress was sitting in the chair by the door. She reached into a canvas bag by her feet and produced a bundle of knitting. "Cry me a river, Mr. Creative Person."

I'm not a creative person. I'm an ad writer.

I crossed out the 'm and replaced it with *was*.

"My son's the same way. Nine parts whining, one part creating."

He's an ad writer?

"He's a painter. Have you ever been to the Florida Central Power & Light home office?"

I shook my head.

"Well, if you had, you'd've seen one of his paintings. Twenty feet high and forty feet across. Fills the whole atrium, practically. It was commissioned by the president of the company himself."

Can I ask you a personal question?

Death's Waitress looked at me, a heap of fuchsia yarn-knots in her lap, her knitting needles poised. "You can get to work, Mr. Creative Person."

Are you supposed to be dead?

She started knitting, needles ticking busily through the fuchsia fuzz. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t ask me that.”

Sorry. I’m just curious.

“Where I come from, a man doesn’t just up and ask a woman intimate questions.”

I watched Betty knit for a while. She had mastered a perfect economy of movement, so that the knotted rows seemed to boil up and out of her nearly motionless hands. I wondered what she was knitting, and for whom. What with my current physical state, a lot of questions that I might normally ask go unasked simply because I can’t be bothered writing them out by hand. Some questions, however, must be asked.

Why are you here?

“Because there’s a chair here.” Knitting one, purling two. Lips pursed. “And because I have work to do. As do you, I believe.”

Is this some kind of Seventh Seal thing? Because I’m really not up for that.

“Seventh Seal?”

Bergman? Chess board. The plague? Death has this

“Save it for your book club, mister. I’m talking work. We all have work to do. Work is what we are. Work is what gets us from here to there.”

Again with the work. Is this Estelle’s THING thing? The reason we’re here? We never got to the bottom of that.

Betty glanced at this, written at the bottom of the next-to-last blank page in my notebook, and let it pass, unremarked upon. I resisted the urge to hit the nurse call button again. I’ve pretty much exhausted the goodwill of the nurses on the day shift.

Can I call you Betty?

“You can call me queen of the county fair, if you’ll just get to work. This is very important, you know.”

WHAT is important? Writing more of this crappy journal? You’ve got to be kidding me!

THE END IS NEAR

“Do you have a better idea? It doesn’t look like you’re in any position to start building an ark.”

Are you being funny?

“Why don’t you just start where you left off?”

Because I left off at the end!

“Can’t be the end if we’re still here. Maybe what it needs is less fancy-pants poetry and a little more truth.”

Truth, Betty? You want to talk about truth?

“Don’t get snippy with me,” Betty said. And then, “You got a problem with the truth?”

I’d scribble you a short thesis on objective and subjective reality, Betty, but I’m running out of paper here.

“You can save the philosophy nonsense for your egghead friends, Mr. Creative Person. The truth is, the truth ain’t nearly as hard to pin down as some people would have it. Sometimes it’s staring you right in the face. It might be painful to live with, but it’s there all the same.”

I don’t have any egghead friends.

Betty just looked at me. Sternly.

I’ve already tried to write the truth, Betty. I made a mess of it. Truth may not be my medium.

And that was it. I had used the last blank page of my last notebook. I’ve ordered more. Nonessential supplies aren’t always immediately forthcoming for those of us without health insurance. Eventually, Betty balled up her knitting and left. Through the door. She didn’t just disappear or poof or anything. That was a few hours ago. Long enough for me to scribble the foolishness above.

I’m writing this on the backs of the pages of my suicide journal transcript. And boy do I have writer’s cramp. How did everyone do all this damned writing, before computers? I can’t remember.

Pick up where you left off. That’s what Betty suggests.

Is that what you want, whoever you are, out there? Is it okay if I call you Death? Does Betty speak for you?

I left off where I left off—on June 30th, the morning before the actual taking of hostages—for a couple of reasons. One, because hostage situations are time-consuming and filled with distractions. And two, because the journal no longer served any purpose. I wrote the journal to tell the truth, as I knew it. And I wrote it to explain why I was stalking Randy Trent with the intent to kill him.

I knew pretty soon after taking my hostages that I'd failed on both counts. I never did get to the truth. And I knew, by the evening of June 30th, that I wasn't going to kill Randy Trent. That I wasn't going to kill anyone but me.

Readers of my journal might be mystified as to why I didn't kill Randy Trent. I certainly seemed like I was going to, at the point where the journal ends. But I had my reasons.

I'm not going to be coy about them, either. There are no secrets here, Death. If you're looking for hard-won truths, truths lodged in deep, secret hiding places, you've got the wrong guy. The truths of my life are self-evident. They're right on the surface for everybody to see. There are no artful subtexts here, Big Guy.

I didn't kill Randy Trent because, quite simply, he had beaten me again. Beaten me in a manner more devastating than he could ever have managed, all those years ago, with his taunts, his contempt, even his fists.

He beat me by becoming a better person than I was. That was the final indignity.

So I scribbled nine words beneath my neatly laser-printed entry for June 30th, 12:15 am, and then I peppered my brain pan with buckshot.

It was all for nothing. There's nothing to say.

Nine words of the truth, as I saw it.

THE END IS NEAR

Not enough for some otherworldly agents, evidently. For some glorified toll-takers at the gates of the eternal void.

You want more, Death? I'll give you more. You can have all you want.

The truth is, I pretty much suspected I was wrong about everything, even as I was kicking open the door to A&B Auto Parts, a shotgun tucked under my left arm, a pistol in my right hand. Wrong in my assumptions about Randy Trent. Wrong in blaming anyone else but me for the dismal outcome of my life.

Maybe I had hoped to find out differently, in confronting Randy Trent. Maybe I'd hoped Trent would confirm my worst—my fondest—imaginings, under pressure. Or maybe I really believed, as I'm sure I've stated somewhere on the other sides of these pages, that one injustice could cancel out another, and tip the scales back to even. More likely, I'd merely hoped to muddle my way through the way I always have, to complete my fool's errand of havoc and violence and vengeance on the sheer strength of self-deception and forward motion.

But havoc and violence and vengeance are the refuges of the strong, not the weak. And I'm the weak. Oh boy, am I the weak.

So here's the rest of the "Standoff in Sussex," Betty. The rest of the story, Death. You too, Estelle.

Memo to Death—If you're expecting something different, feel free to let me know. Maybe you can send Death's Busboy around to deliver the news.

§

June 22nd, 5pm

If you're reading this, loved ones of Randy Trent, then your Trent is very likely dead, as am I. If that's the case, you'll have

some grievances to air. Let's get them out in the open now, before we go on.

You think it's unfair that you've been deprived of your Trent by some crazed suicidal killer.

Okay. Unfair to you, perhaps. I'll grant you that.

But unfair to Trent? No, I don't think so.

What, after all, constitutes just punishment? Where, exactly, does fair punishment cross the line into cruel and unusual punishment? Are the punishments inflicted on me by Randy Trent—unprovoked punishments which, in a very real way, blighted my youth and my adult life—less cruel and unusual than those I'm choosing to inflict upon him?

I don't think so. I, at least, had a worthy motive. Revenge.

Randy Trent did it for nothing. He made my life a living hell because it amused him. Because he had nothing better to do. Because he could. Because he was safe from retribution. My capacity for it, anyway.

And now I'm getting even. Why? Simply because I can. Because I have nothing better to do with the last eight days of my life. Because I'm beyond retribution.

That's one of the great things about being dead. It's a perfect getaway.

But what about us, you say, the aggrieved family and friends?

Tough luck, I say. Next time, choose your loved ones better.

Am I being harsh? Well, I used to have empathy. I used to sympathize with the plights of others. I commiserated with buddies down on their luck, girls mistreated by their guys, the misfortunate, the downtrodden. I got teary-eyed at sad movies. I signed petitions. I donated to the World Wildlife Fund.

I cared about things a lot. I cared to a fault. And look what it got me. Nothing.

Not anymore, bucky. You're on your own, now.

THE END IS NEAR

I only hope I can bring the same unreflective, vicious, hoodlum glee to the task of killing your Trent that he brought to making my life hell.

Okay, what else?

Oh, right. What kind of guy, you say, goes around brooding over adolescent insults and humblings that happened half a lifetime ago?

What kind of guy plots mayhem and murder based on some stupid playground shit from over twenty-five years ago?

This frigging Nathan Huffnagle must be some kind of addled, self-pitying crackpot. He must be the national poster boy for arrested development.

Well, you're absolutely right.

There. Feel better?

Actually, this seems like a good place to introduce myself. To start explaining my motivations. To tell you who I am.

Who is this crackpot, Nathan Huffnagle?

To answer that question, I think I'll show you around this house I'm occupying right now. My mother's house, the house I lived in when Randy Trent was my mortal enemy.

Would you like that? A tour of the house?

A guided tour?

Sure you would. Come on.

As I tap this out on my laptop, I'm sitting at my mother's old kitchen table, the battered formica-topped centerpiece of countless Huffnagle skirmishes, nursing a mild hangover with aspirin and Rolling Rock beer.

But let's move now, from the kitchen to the dining room. Don't worry, we'll come back to the kitchen later.

I grew up in this house, as I've said. No, I wasn't born here. I moved here with my family—father, mother, sister, and brother—when I was ten. The house was brand new, then. It isn't brand new anymore. It's seen better days.

So has my family. In fact, in what must be something of a statistical anomaly, four of those five Huffnagles are now dead, if you count me. My father, my mother, my brother, and me. All dead, four different exits. Only my sister Sherilyn remains to tell the tale. And I haven't seen or talked to her in almost twenty years. She could be dead, too, for all I know.

Here we have the dining room.

That's what it was called in the builder's floor plan, although the Huffnagles did very little group dining here. The Huffnagles did very little group anything. I can remember Sunday dinners here, Huffnagles huddled apprehensively around a rickety dining room table. False cheer, false little politenesses. Lengthy silences. The sound of chewing. At first we gathered here most Sundays, then just major holidays, then we abandoned the practice altogether. Toward the end, my father was rarely around; my mother ate standing up at the kitchen countertop, when she ate at all. My sister, brother, and I fended for ourselves. Spaghetti, pancakes, breakfast cereal, lettuce sandwiches. Whatever was around.

That dining table is still here, in this room. Somewhere.

A lot of families have what they call a "junk drawer." A drawer in the kitchen or family room where unclassifiable odds and ends go. Our family had a junk room. This is it.

It wasn't this bad when I lived here. After we stopped eating together, the table collected junk; stacks of newspapers and magazines grew on the chairs. The sideboard cluttered up with dead plants, catalogs, and unpaid bills. Cast-off clothing and the leavings of scores of half-finished household projects were pushed under the table and into the corners. But you could still walk into the room and pass through it into the living room. It wasn't impassable.

Now, the junk has piled up to the ceiling and engulfed the table and sideboard entirely. A folding screen, stretched across the entryway to the living room, gave the junk a foothold across

THE END IS NEAR

that side of the room and soon the junk reached the ceiling there, too. There's a door in the opposite wall that's completely obstructed by junk. Just as well, since it leads outside to what was once a small wooden porch and steps down to the side yard. The porch and steps rotted away years ago; no one bothered to replace them. Walk around the side of this house and look up and you'll see a door suspended ten feet off the ground, no exterior access to it.

What is all this stuff? The byproduct of laziness, mostly. The crap that most people bag and leave at the curb twice a week. The crap that normal people—people concerned with appearances—impose order on, tidy up, give away, throw out. The whole house isn't like this. Not at all. My mother didn't save this stuff on purpose. It just piled up and this room turned into a kind of big closet.

So let's backtrack through the kitchen and enter the living room the other way.

Quite a difference, eh?

The living room is bare, but for a spring-sprung Barcalounger, an old-style folding TV tray, a footrest, and a newish 17-inch Samsung TV. The rest of the furniture—a rotting couch, a rocker, a collapsed chair—is in the basement. The TV would have been the only new addition my mother made to the house in, oh, fifteen years, I'd say. In the Huffnagle house, when a big-ticket item—a couch, a dishwasher, a garage door—broke or wore out, it stayed broken and worn out. It wasn't fixed or replaced. Small-ticket novelties and decorations and gimcracks ascended to the rafters, but big-ticket items were, somehow, too daunting to be realistically considered. The Huffnagles suffered from a failure of imagination in that way.

The TV works, though there's no cable. Sometimes I can tune in police radio chatter, down by channel two on the dial.

Not much else to see here. There's nothing on the walls, just a long dark stain where the top of the couch used to be. In here,

you can see that the screen drawn across the dining room entry is a cheap folding thing with ersatz Chinese dragons printed on it. It bulges dangerously into the room, barely restraining the rising tide of junk behind it. There are no plants hanging from the hooks in the ceiling above the picture window, my mother's patience with plants having evaporated long ago. There are no curtains in any of the windows, just a couple of battered, flimsy shades. My mother must have reached a point where she just didn't have anything to hide anymore.

My mother was a couple months short of her sixty-seventh birthday and in not particularly poor health. She was at the courtesy counter at FoodKing, cashing a check, when she collapsed. A stroke. She lingered for three days in the hospital, never regaining consciousness. I spent most of her last day by her bedside.

She's buried in a big Catholic cemetery in Tuxedo Junction, New York. Next to her sister, who died, unmarried and childless, some thirty years ago. There's an empty plot next to my father's grave in Locust Knoll Cemetery here in Lake Lenni Lenape. It had been intended for my mother, until she bought the one next to her sister. And that's where she is.

I say that a stroke got her, but the truth is, my mother gave up on life a lot earlier than her faulty cardiovascular plumbing gave up on her. She was bushwhacked by two climactic events in Huffnagle life—the deaths of her husband and son—and never really recovered. Her last two decades were spent living check-to-check off my father's life insurance and Teamster pension, bedroom-slipping around the house, avoiding bill collectors, mouthing mild pieties, fabricating a fanciful alternative Huffnagle family history, and watching TV. Oh, and beating me out life's back door.

Here's an odd fact. If my mother had lived for a few more weeks, your Randy Trent would have been safe. I would have killed myself in my Hoboken apartment, rather than here in my

THE END IS NEAR

childhood home. I never would have run into Randy Trent in the Sail Inn. There's Fate again, stacking the deck, rigging the game.

Let's move on. Back through the kitchen and down a short hall. Past a room on the left, the bathroom, to a second door on the left. I shared this room with my brother for six years. Until he moved downstairs, into the unfinished basement. I had the room to myself for one year, my seventeenth year, and then I was gone, too.

My brother Thomas played sports, had friends, and generally spent as much time as possible out of the house. After completing eighth grade, he went to the county vocational/technical school and drifted ever further away. He learned a valuable trade—something to do with fluid-regulating machines and computers, some new and profitable interface between the two—and married. He liked to keep busy, my brother. And he liked people. He was a joiner. He was a real go-getter.

My brother, who thought college was a place for lazy people to hide for four years, was married at eighteen, had a son at nineteen, bought a house at twenty, and made more money in his twenty-first year than I would ever make in a year in my life. And then he died.

Late one summer night in 1986, he came upon a leaking oil truck, pulled onto the shoulder of Route 15. My brother was a volunteer auxiliary policeman, so he did what volunteer auxiliary policemen do. He radioed the police station, set out some little triangular reflective markers, and started directing traffic around the truck and the spill. When the cops arrived, my brother was a long stripe of gore on the road. He'd been mowed down by a drunk driver. Dragged over a hundred feet, I was told. I was impressed by the number of people who came to his funeral. He liked people and they, evidently, liked him.

This is the bunk bed I slept in, the only bed I ever had as a kid. Thomas moved one just like it downstairs. Toward the end

of my time here, the soles of my feet would touch the footboard as the crown of my head pressed the headboard. I got out just in time. This is the little pine desk I scribbled and typed at, night and day. This is the bureau my brother and I shared. If I tried to pull out one of its cheap, pressboard drawers, it would fall apart, just like when we were kids. On the walls here are my brother's posters of his sports heroes of the day. My mother never took them down.

Let's cut, caddy-corner across the hall, to my sister's old room.

Nice shade of blue, eh? Sherilyn picked it out. It looked relatively benign on its little sample tile. It was only later, as the last brush strokes were being applied to the room, that it assumed its true character, this deep ultramarine blue of the vasty deeps. Davy Jones' Locker, we called it. My sister kept it this color. She was stubborn that way.

Sherilyn was twelve when I left for college. The girl I left here was loud and insolent, round with baby fat, and quick to cry at insults both real and imagined. When I returned five months later, for winter break, that girl was gone. She had been replaced by a tall, shy, long-haired beauty who rarely spoke, never ate. On the occasions when she did speak, she spoke in a whisper. The metamorphosis was astonishing. They were two completely different people. What I know about this second person is mostly inferred from circumstances.

I know she must have been dying to get out of this house, already abandoned by my brother and me. And my father, too. Unaccustomed to beauty, she seems not to have known what to do with hers until it was too late. Her first boyfriend was a shady, long-faced manic depressive with a jealous streak and few marketable skills, remarkably few even for this no-future town. Their breakup was followed by stalking episodes and a restraining order.

Sherilyn married the second boyfriend, a quiet, intensely religious repairer of home appliances and electronics. Maybe his

THE END IS NEAR

abiding belief in God made him seem less dangerous. He did, at least, have a marketable skill. His name was Jacob or Caleb, something like that.

I can remember their wedding, a grueling, three-hour, extended-service affair with a full roster of optional readings and arcane devotionals. I remember the rehearsal dinner that was held here, the future groom nervous and grim, my sister gamely silent, the groom's family appalled at the state of this house. My mother rented folding chairs and set them up in the living room; the shabby, broken living room furniture was moved to the basement. Afterward, no one ever moved it back.

Within three years, Jacob/Caleb's religiosity escalated into an all-encompassing mania that consumed his little appliance repair business and his prospects here in town. So he packed up the appliance repair truck with wife and belongings and headed out to, I think, Montana. A religious commune of some sort. That commune, that cult, vanished without a trace a few years later. So did Jacob/Caleb and my sister. As I've said, I haven't talked to her since.

The walls here are a mosaic of girlish passions—pasted-up magazine photos, mementos of school and social events, glitter-and-paste crafts, self-conscious artwork and cards and notes. Sherilyn's bed is made; her dresser is strewn with my mother's stuff. My mother slept here in later years, after everyone was gone.

The room next to it is empty, wall-to-wall. There was furniture in it once—my parents' bed, his-and-hers dressers, a mirror in the corner—but that's all gone now. My mother had it hauled away. This room isn't characterized by a presence at all, but by an absence. The absence of my father.

In the early years of our life here, my father worked odd hours, nights and Saturdays. They paid better, he said. And we needed the money. He'd come home in the early morning hours,

be in bed as we readied ourselves for school, and be gone, headed back to work, when we returned.

Later on, my mother got a job, too, and my father transferred to a regular nine-to-five shift at the shop. Soon, though, my father took a room in the city where he worked, east of here, and stayed there during the week. Ostensibly, he did this to be closer to his job, to avoid the fifty-mile, rush-hour commute each way. But really he did it to be further from us.

Years before this, in the very beginning, we Huffnagles lived in an apartment in urban northeast New Jersey. My father, newly discharged from the army, shook off a bad period of drinking and general wildness, learned the commercial printing trade, and devoted himself to a dream, a dream of moving us to a house in the country. It took ten years of saving to build that house. On summer weekends, he drove us into the woods of northwest New Jersey, so we could walk through the scrub and trees of our undeveloped lot and then swim in the waters of Lake Leni Lenape. On the day after my tenth birthday, we bid farewell to our apartment-building neighbors and moved into our dream house in the country.

That's when the trouble started. My father, as it turned out, was a one-dream man. And his dream, achieved, proved too small somehow, too meager, to hold his attention for long. My father emerged from his ten-year devotion like a man waking from a trance. We would catch him looking around, dazed, wondering, perhaps, what he could have been thinking, walling himself up in this shabby country castle with a wife he only now suspected he didn't like much, and three children he barely knew. He'd sit in a wrought-iron chair on his sparse and weedy front lawn, a newspaper folded, forgotten, on his knee, and look around. Puzzled.

My father, a man of very, very few words, wouldn't have told us any of these thoughts. He didn't have to. We sensed them. We knew.

THE END IS NEAR

After ten years on the wagon, my father returned to drinking. He returned to it with a vengeance, like a man making up for lost time. At first, he confined it to his rented room and the bars of Fort Lee, near his job. He'd return to our house on weekends looking wan and pained and fidgety. Sober, but desperate to escape on Sunday night, back to his room.

Very soon, his drinking leaked into our lives, the way serious, dedicated drinking will, staining everything around it. There was trouble at work, phone calls from my father's workplace that my mother took, tight-lipped, shaking her head and making one-word replies. He would arrive at our house on Saturday morning, not quite sober, and disappear for mysterious stretches of time. He would become oddly garrulous and touchy-feely with us, then retreat into angry, silent funks.

Beer showed up in our refrigerator, in our house where alcohol had never been before. Flasks of liquor, cheap vodka and bourbon, materialized in odd places, tucked in a toolbox in the shed or behind the hot water heater in the basement. Strange new friends came calling. Scruffy, disreputable people who kept late hours. They came calling for my father, a man who'd had, until then, very few friends to speak of. My mother wouldn't let them in the house, refused even to speak to them. After a few spectacular, shrieking, wall-pounding fights with my father, she stopped speaking to him, too.

The entire descent, from unhappy, unremarkable family man to sunken-eyed, furious, helpless wastrel, took less than a year. From the autumn into the early spring of my senior year in high school.

One weekend, he didn't show up at all. The next, either. His absence went uncommented upon by my mother. The third weekend, he showed up. Or rather, a leering, disheveled, shitfaced scarecrow bearing a passing resemblance to my father showed up. Somehow, my mother convinced him to leave. I don't know how. He packed a few random, inconsequential

items—a steam iron, some cans of soup, a framed print that had hung, unnoticed, on the wall in the living room for years—into a vinyl carryall and left.

The next morning, there was a call from the Fort Lee police. They needed our help in removing my father from their city. My mother took me along, literally grabbing me by the shoulder and pushing me into the car. It was time I grew up, she said. That's all she said.

When we arrived at the Fort Lee police station, my father wasn't there. He wasn't under arrest, the helpful cops informed us. It was merely time for him to go. There had been complaints from proprietors in town. The cops would take us, my mother and me, to where he was.

We could see, right away, that this was all great fun for these Fort Lee cops. They were enjoying themselves.

We followed the cops—four of them in two cruisers—in our car to a round-the-clock tavern called Pete's Peek-In, a barely legal enterprise on the outskirts of Fort Lee, above the abandoned waterfront docks of Weehawken. When my mother asked for help in getting my father out of the bar—she surely didn't want to go into a shithole bar by herself, at eleven o'clock in the morning—the cops refused. Pete's, they said, smirkingly, was a rough place they usually steered clear of. I still don't understand, to this day, why the cops treated us the way they did. Maybe it was their obscure, misguided way of getting back at my father. I don't know. The cops waited in their cruisers across the street.

My mother sent me in. Another part of growing up, I guess.

My father was the only customer at the bar. The bar was a big rectangle surrounding a rack of booze bottles and a well for mixing drinks. A single heavysset bartender was polishing ashtrays by the cash register and a Hispanic kid about my age, seventeen, was loading packs of cigarettes from a box into an open vending machine. The shades were drawn up at all the windows, letting

THE END IS NEAR

in shafts of daylight that spotlighted random circles of profound filth on the floor and walls. My father was at the opposite side of the room, slumped on the bar, watching me stand in the entrance. He had, I remember, a messily scabbed-over cut on his forehead. He looked gray, ill.

After about twenty minutes of nothing much—my father rambling one-sidedly, me foisting off the drinks he was attempting to buy me—my mother came in. She asked my father to leave the bar, to come home with us. She told him the cops were outside. My father looked her over and agreed.

We got him into the car. We managed to drive a short distance, maybe a few blocks, the two Fort Lee squad cars right behind us, escorting us out of town.

My father was sitting in the back seat, looking at his folded hands in his lap. Then he looked up at me, watching him from the front passenger seat. He smiled an impish grin and raised a finger very slowly to his lips, shushing me, as if I were about to say something, as if we were complicit in some naughty secret. Then he reached forward, buried both hands in my mother's hair, and ripped her head back, while howling a rapturous, anguished howl of fury.

Our car hopped the curb before my mother managed to somehow get it into neutral or park. My father was hauling her back by her hair, over the front seat, and screaming a torrent of vitriol into her ear. He was, he said, going to kill her. Right now. She would see. We'd all see.

What was I doing? I wish I could say. I haven't the slightest idea. Maybe I was trying, feebly, to defend my mother, to beat my father back. Maybe, but I doubt it. Probably, I was just sitting in the front passenger seat, watching the last, pathetic remnants of our family life vanish in front of my eyes.

All four doors of our car seemed to fly open at the same time. Two cops grabbed my father, one grabbed my mother, and one picked me up and threw me free of the car. When I scrambled

back to my feet in the roadside dirt, I saw that my father hadn't given up his intentions, regarding my mother. The cops ended up dragging both my father and mother from the back seat of the car, my father still wrapped to the elbows in my mother's hair. The cops beat him with their clubs until he let go.

My mother had not uttered a word, a single sound, in all this time. When she was free, she stood up, shakily, crazy-eyed, and tottered stiffly back to the car. She got in, put the car in gear, and drove it off the sidewalk. The car rolled to a stop in the road and idled for a while—a full minute, at least—before I realized she was waiting for me. Three of the doors were still wide open. I went around, shutting them, and got in.

My father, meanwhile, was giving the cops all they could handle. In the end, it took all four of them to wrestle him to the ground.

As we were driving away, I turned and looked back through the rear window of the car. The four cops were methodically, efficiently beating the living shit out of my father. I watched until they were too small, too far away, to see.

I never saw him alive again.

Oh, no. He wasn't beaten to death by Fort Lee cops. Nothing as dramatic as that. In fact, he was released some time later, when my mother refused to press charges against him. I'm not sure how domestic violence is handled now, but back then you could cut some corners, absent formal charges. My mother may have had a restraining order placed on my father, though I never heard about it. My father never came back to the house. He telephoned a few times. My mother had the phone disconnected.

Six months later, in October, my mother received a visitor. She still hadn't reconnected the phone. I was away at my first semester in college. My father's body had been found in a tenement courtyard in Manhattan's Lower East Village. He'd been beaten unconscious, robbed, and left to choke to death on his own vomit.

THE END IS NEAR

My mother identified his body, made the few arrangements for burying him. There were no services. We weren't a religious family and, by then, my father no longer occupied a place in our lives or, presumably, our hearts. In fact, I didn't hear of his death until Thanksgiving, when I returned from school for the break. My brother had already moved out of the house. My sister? She had gone mysteriously silent.

Looking back on the whole episode, I scarcely know what to add to the words I've written above. His descent was so steep and sudden, it was like a single, sharp blow to us. He had never been happy, and then he was crazy, and then he was dead. It must be true what they say, that some people harbor within themselves the seeds of their own destruction, their own fiery immolation, predestined and unalterable. And this, too: Some people just won't abide moderation. They're all of one thing, and then they're all of another.

Okay. So.

Ready for the kitchen?

The kitchen, as you can see, is where I spend most of my time. I keep the sum of my worldly belongings here. This laptop that I'm writing to you on. My printer. A big box of envelopes, paper, and office supplies left over from my freelance ad writing. Some microwaveable goodies, keeping the beer company in the fridge. And an opened suitcase with some clothing in it.

Yes, that's it. I'm traveling light, here at the end of my life.

There's a table. A chair rescued from the garage. A single plaque on the wall, above the table. God Bless This Home. That dishwasher worked for a few years, then broke down. It was never fixed. There's a bottle opener on the counter, a fork and knife set out on a dish towel.

The pantry is empty, the shelves bare. But if you step inside and look closely . . . see? There? On the door jamb? Right there. The obligatory hashmarks denoting the heights of growing children. Look closely. See?

Dates and heights and names, ascending from Sherilyn, 3'11" to Nathan, 5'4 1/2". A few entries for Thomas, my brother, as well. Every house has one of these irregular little growth charts. Right?

The Huffnagles' chart dates back to a time in the very beginning, a brief time when we would have been filled with hope, with optimism and team spirit, with simple awe for what we must have felt was the start of a good life for all of us.

It just didn't work out that way.

Oh, now, don't cry.

Sometimes things don't turn out for the best. Not every ending is a happy one.

Ask your cherished bully, Randy Trent. He knew.

Anyway, now it's left to me to unload this ramshackle wreck of a house on someone else. Though it obviously isn't worth much. Not even as a "handyman's special." And it wasn't just our slovenly maintenance that destroyed it, either. The builders built it as cheaply as they could, never using four nails when two or even one would do. Even the design was odd—a sort of upright, featureless rectangle on two floors, with the first floor a bare claustrophobic entry walled off from an unfinished basement, and the second floor as I've described it, with that afterthought of a porch hanging off the side of it. More of a barracks than a house, really. It looks nothing like the other split-level ranches on the street.

My mother died without leaving a will, so a sizable portion of whatever this house is worth will go to the state of New Jersey and/or the federal government. The rest will be held in trust for my sister, if she's alive and if anyone can find her. I've already had the realtors through, each wandering the rooms and clucking like distressed pigeons at the shoddy workmanship, the neglect, the waste of resources. The land is worth quite a bit, they say.

THE END IS NEAR

§

Alright, what did Betty say? Start where I left off.

That's what death—or Death—wants, right?

So let's start here.

As I walked into A&B Auto Parts, packing a shotgun and a pistol, all hell was breaking loose. This state of affairs had nothing to do with me or my entrance.

Randy Trent was standing behind the counter, holding an air filter in both hands, clasping it to his chest, looking unhappy. “I am not screwing Alice,” he said.

In addition to the shotgun and pistol, I was also carrying a rough cotton twill bag, its handles slung over my shoulder. I set the bag down by the door.

It was about three-thirty on Monday afternoon, June 30th. I had originally planned to make my entrance in the morning—about ten am or so—but I'd been up very late the night before and I just couldn't get started. As it was, I was lucky to get to the shop before it closed.

Randy was talking to a tallish, attractive woman with long curly black hair. She was wearing a kind of wrap-around slinky dress, fire-engine red, and heels, an unusual outfit for a visit to an auto parts store on a Monday afternoon. She was facing Randy, leaning forward over the counter, her back to me. I knew this woman, Felicia, from the Sail Inn crowd. And from her amateur film work. She was one of Randy's girlfriends.

“Fuck you,” she was saying. “Then whose car was outside your apartment at eleven-thirty last night?”

“You were outside my apartment at eleven-thirty?”

“No, I wasn't outside your apartment at eleven-thirty.” I've already described Felicia in my first account, on the other sides of these pages, so I won't be rehashing any of that content here, for

the benefit of omniscient and/or otherworldly beings. Death, you're up to speed, right? But I will say that Felicia is the kind of woman you might describe as "lovely," but not "pretty." Does that make sense? Anyway, she has a commanding presence. She had balled up her fists and was staring Randy down with what must have been an expression of fierce disdain. "What do I look like? Some kind of pathetic stalker?"

Which was, of course, exactly what she was. I would know, being some kind of pathetic stalker myself. Pathetic stalkers both of us, our stalking paths had already crossed a few times, by then. I'd encountered her most recently the night before, in the Sail Inn. She'd been looking for Trent. Apparently she'd found him.

By now, PJ, the stock clerk and third occupant of the shop, had noticed me standing there, between a rack of motor oil liters and a shock absorber display. PJ was a tall, gangly kid with a flattop haircut, jug ears, and huge hands and wrists. He seemed unsure what to do or say about my presence in the shop. My armed presence. Or reluctant to interrupt Randy and Felicia.

"Then how do you know there was a car in front of my apartment?"

"A little fucking bird told me, okay? And you can be damned sure if I had been outside your apartment at eleven-thirty, which I would have had every right to be, as your goddamned girlfriend, I would have been at your front door, crashing your little fuck party.

"I certainly haven't gone through life making a big impression on people. I don't know why I'd thought that this day, the supposed last day of my life, would be any different. But I had. That had been the point, after all. To make a big impression.

"As it is," Felicia was saying, "I strongly suggest you see a doctor. Because, from what I hear about this tramp Alice—"

"I am not fucking Alice."

"—from the guys in that supermarket she works in, you are at risk of having your dick fall off, from some kind of disease."

THE END IS NEAR

“Felicia, she’s a pharmacist, for god’s sake. A perfectly nice, respectable . . . pharmacist. And I am not fucking her.”

“How nice for her. A pharmacist. Easy access to antibiotics must come in handy.”

I should have been saying something dramatic to Randy and Felicia here, barking orders and waving the pistol. But that stuff doesn’t come naturally to everyone. I know that now.

“Were you in my apartment the other day?” Trent was saying. “Did you sneak in and flood my place?”

“Did I . . .” Felicia looked shocked. “You son of a bitch. No, I did not sneak into your place.”

Untrue. She had. Snuck into his place. Just before I snuck into Randy’s place.

“And stop trying to change the subject. Whose car was outside your apartment all night?”

“There are a lot of cars outside my apartment. It’s an apartment complex. Other people live there, too.” Trent, finally, was looking over Felicia’s shoulder, recognizing my presence in his shop. “And it wasn’t all night.”

“Then there was a car. You admit that there was a car.” Felicia turned around and gave me a contemptuous glare. “Oh, terrific. You again. What the fuck do you want?”

“It was Colleen,” Randy said. “It was Colleen’s car.”

“This is a hostage situation.” I tossed the pistol into the bag at my feet and raised the shotgun, pointing it first at Felicia, then at Randy. “Put your hands up where I can see them.” That seemed like the right thing to say.

PJ raised his hands and started sidling backwards toward the door to the stock room. Felicia, though, turned back to Trent, slowly, an incredulous look on her face.

“You sick fuck,” she said. “You’re fucking your ex-wife?”

“Look,” I said. “I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“I am not fucking Colleen,” Randy said.

“Well, mostly anybody,” I corrected myself.

“And you, you wormy little psycho,” Felicia spat venomously at me, “you can just wait your turn, loser.”

Loser. That hurt. Even here, entered upon the presumed last day of my life, I had to be subjected to unwarranted abuse. Even packing an arsenal, I was finding respect hard to come by. I took a step further into the room. Just as I did so, the front door opened behind me, the bell tinkled, and someone else entered the shop. I saw Felicia’s eyes slide from me to the new visitor. Her expression of contempt, if anything, only grew.

“Well surprise, surprise,” she said. Sneered. “The little pharmacist herself.”

I turned. It was Alice, a petite, third-generation Chinese-American girl whom I also knew from the Sail Inn crowd. She was a pharmacist. She was another of Randy’s girlfriends.

“What’s going on?” Alice said, looking, not at me, but at Randy.

“Go stand with the others,” I said, pointing with the shotgun to Randy and Felicia.

I saw that PJ was gone, slipped out through the stock room.

Alice wasn’t moving. She was holding a plastic shopping bag with something bulky in it. “What’s going on?” she said again.

“Let me guess,” Felicia said to Alice. “You’re making a prescription delivery.”

That’s when I fired my first shot. It was the first time I’d ever fired a gun.

§

June 23rd, just before dawn

Good luck all around today.

THE END IS NEAR

Good luck for you, Miz Trent and Boy Trent. And good luck for me.

Yes, that's right, Miz Trent and Boy Trent. I know who you are now. No first names yet, but I'm working on it.

It looks like my job is going to be even easier than I could have suspected. Such is the quality of my luck, now that I'm dead.

Your good luck, Miz Trent and Boy Trent, resides in the fact that you've been moved off center stage, remote from the unpleasantness to come. You probably won't know a thing until it's over.

There are sixteen Trents in the Sussex County phonebook. Two Trent, R.'s. And one Trent, Randall. The Trent, Randall is a listing in Waverly, a prefab strip-mall town huddled around the nexus of Interstate 80 and several local highways, about ten miles from here. The address, 37 Circle Drive, #3D, suggested one of the anonymous beehive garden apartment complexes that have been springing up and fading into instant shabby disrepair in that area for decades. I would have called the number, just to cross it off the list, had I not recognized the address for one of the Trent, R.'s.

16 Reese Trail.

Not a half-mile from this house I grew up in. I remembered the Trent house well, a white, ceramic-shingled house, oddly tall and narrow, almost like a rowhouse lifted from some city street and dropped here in the middle of the woods. Standing on tiptoe on its half-acre, conserving space, as if anticipating an influx of similar rowhouses that never arrived.

All those years ago, Randy lived there with his mother. An older woman even then—fifty, at least—she had never married; she worked as a nurse in the local loony bin. That loony bin, Greyling Hospital, is closed now, after what seemed like decades of news “investigative reports” exposing its wretched conditions and patient-care atrocities. Her name, I still remember, was

Vivian. She was a small, round-faced woman with untinted gray hair—a rarity then, among the mothers of Lake Lenape's teens—who, like my mother, kept to herself, far removed from town and school life. On those rare occasions when she appeared in public, she was always dressed in one of her nurse's uniforms with matching nurse shoes.

I can remember it being rumored—maliciously, in whispers—that Randy's dad was one of the Greyling lunatics. Whispered by kids braver than me.

Vivian would be almost eighty now, if she were still alive. I tried to picture her, still ghosting about in her nurse shoes, in that broken-shingled, tiptoed house, but I couldn't see it. I couldn't picture Randy Trent still living there, either, though the Trent, R. listing suggested otherwise.

What kind of life would Randy Trent be living in that house? Would he have brought a wife to it, raised kids there, little thugs and thugettes in miniature? The girl he was with in the Sail Inn, the Asian-American cutie-pie, hadn't looked like any kind of wife. Little more than half his age, for starters, and far too frankly admiring of Trent. A girlfriend on the side, perhaps. Maybe he was divorced. A lifelong bachelor myself, it hadn't occurred to me to look at his hands for a ring, the way a married man might have.

But let's start at the beginning.

Yesterday afternoon, I stopped at a hunting and fishing supply outlet and bought myself a spiffy camouflage jacket, a pricey pair of binoculars, and some bug spray. The first two items were extravagances for this one simple task I had planned. But hey, I can afford to do this right.

Credit cards can be a joy, when you're dead. Especially when you're dead and have no heirs or dependents to fuss about. Already this month, I've far outstripped my meager budget and maxed out my credit cards with purchases and cash advances. Probably, even now, red flags are going up in the consumer-

THE END IS NEAR

surveillance departments of Capital One and Citibank. Too late, though. Too late.

I'm packing a bankroll and I've got things to buy.

The hunting and fishing outlet, like many such stores, had a community bulletin board bristling with business cards and index cards, offering services and items for sale. I looked at the cards offering weaponry—hunting rifles and shotguns represented by gnomonic, obscure signifiers like Mossberg 500 Combo, GP 100 357, and Woodside 12 Gauge 28". Each card, I noticed, had some variation of the phrase Must have valid FID on it. I plucked a couple of the more childishly scrawled cards from the board and left.

Staking out a house in Lake Lenni Lenape is both easier and more difficult than it would be in most neighborhoods. On the one hand, a stranger walking these streets—curbless, sidewalkless "Trails," where undeveloped, wooded lots still outnumber houses two-to-one—will attract notice, if there's anyone around to notice. On the other hand, there's plenty of cover to spy from. As it happened, I was lucky on both counts. I encountered no one during the half-mile walk to the Trent, R. home. And the lots opposite the Trent house are still undeveloped, due to a deep gully and steep, rocky rise beyond the gully. Fifteen minutes after leaving my mother's house, I was nestled in the scrub atop the rise, camouflage-jacketed, engaged in a bug-spray battle with the mosquitoes, and training my binoculars on the front door of 16 Reese Trail.

No one was home. A half-hour later, at about six o'clock, a late-model Jeep Cherokee pulled into the unpaved driveway and a woman got out. She was forty-or-so and short, gone a little ruddy and thick through the hips, though not unattractively so. She had long black hair tied in a pony tail and an inward-toed way of walking, like a geisha girl in the movies.

You, I presume, Miz Trent.

I got a bit of a scare when you went to the front door, opened it, and a German shepherd bounded outside. The dog made a beeline across the street and raced right up to me, barking and circling. You'd already gone inside, though, and the dog settled down almost immediately, rubbing against my legs and looking up at me hopefully. When it had determined that I had no snacks and didn't want to play, it wandered off, back to the house. Eventually, the front door opened and the dog slipped back inside, my presence our little secret.

And I waited some more. Until seven, when you arrived, Boy Trent.

I heard you, your motorcycle's engine keening on the uphill, rumbling and farting on the downhill, some moments before I saw you. And then there you were, accompanied by a friend on another motorcycle. You both rolled to a stop before the house, straddled your idling bikes, and gave your throttles the obligatory, purposeless twists into high gear required by youth and testosterone.

When your friend removed his helmet, however, I saw that he was a she. She lifted her helmet and a gorgeous length of auburn hair spilled out. She tugged it back and arranged it with unmistakably girlish movements and rose into a hip-slung stance above her bike.

Thirty years ago, the boys rode the motorcycles, and the girls, if they were present at all, sat off to the side, knees hugged to their chests, waiting patiently for the guys to tire of showing off for each other and talking engine talk. But times have changed, as I hear it, and the girls do boy things now; they play baseball and tinker with tech hardware and form rock bands.

The world's a better place. And not just because I'm no longer part of it.

You, too, had a surprise for me, Boy Trent. You shrugged off your motorcycle helmet and all the years fell away. You're the mirror image of your dad, as he was then. Cold and gray-eyed

THE END IS NEAR

and pale-cheeked, thick-chested and blocky, possessed of that same ominous gravity and chilly indifference your dad used to radiate like an open icebox on a summer day. A glittering iceberg, wickedly adrift in the shipping lanes, just like your fucking dad.

I watched you through the binoculars, entranced. There were subtle differences. Your blond hair is buzz cut in today's style, while your father's was shoulder length in deference to yesterday's fashion. And tattoos. All the kids have tattoos now. In our day—mine and your father's—tattoos weren't cool. They were something Uncle Rocky had, something he'd gotten during a drunken shore leave in Manila. And the places you kids get them! That one on your neck, the black widow spider, that must have hurt, huh? Even the girl had one, revealed at the small of her back by the cropped black shirt she was wearing. An eagle? A phoenix? Something with wings.

At first, I assumed she was your girlfriend. My middleaged mind, leaping to outdated conclusions about a boy and girl alone. What else could they be up to? But when she left, there was no touching or kissing. She just tugged her helmet on, waved, and roared off. Just a buddy, on her way home. You wheeled your bike into the ramshackle detached garage and went into the house, leaving me to consider the cyclic nature of life, circles inside of circles.

The sun dipped toward the hills ringing the lake valley behind me and the bats came out, flitting through the trees and feeding on the hordes of mosquitoes that were feeding on me. The cicadas and tree frogs went berserk, shrieking in full jailbreak mode. The twilight deepened gradually. Very, very gradually, on this second longest day of the year. At about eight-thirty, a few lights came on in the house. A TV flickered blue in an upstairs window. Your bedroom, Boy Trent? Yours, Miz?

Lacking programmed entertainment, I sat in the luminous half-dark and entertained myself with memories. When you're

dead, memories are all you have, and my recall was particularly keen last night, jump-started by the sight of that house, the former den of my enemy, and by the sight of you, Boy Trent, a mirror reflection from my past.

I remembered other times, other waits.

I was a great one for waiting, in my youth. A real keeper of vigils. I was that kind of boy. Patient, unobtrusive, unassuming. Indifferent to small indignities like wasted time and doomed pursuits.

Even in puppy love, I was content to wait at the fringes. In my junior year of high school, I fell in love with a girl. Her name was Terry. Short for Teresa. She existed on the border between plain and pretty—a tall, narrow-chested, freckled girl, with straight blond hair that hung in bangs over her forehead, a little snub nose that twitched and crinkled, just like a bunny's, and a hipshot, slouchy way of standing that was surely intended to de-emphasize her height. She was a specific kind of girl, and widely known for it in our high school. In fact, she was so widely known for it that even I knew of it. She was a girl who “put out.”

I think I must have fallen in love with her simply because she, on occasion, would take time out from her busy, fascinating life to belittle me, in a not unfriendly manner. Though we were on two different tracks through high school—me on my “honors program” track, she on a general or “vocational” track—we shared two classes. A typing class and a U.S. history class.

The typing class was a haven for dull-witted, hair-chewing girls already anticipating their futures as secretaries. Terry, though, was a ‘tweener, brighter than the vocational crowd, but not focused or disciplined enough to aspire to college. I was in the typing class because I'd already exhausted our small school's tiny roster of “elective” courses, and because I harbored some dim thought of becoming a journalist. For some reason, I'd thought a basic knowledge of touch-typing might prove helpful in such a career.

THE END IS NEAR

I was one of only three boys in the class. In most settings, I tended to be invisible, a shadow presence at the periphery. In the typing class, though, I couldn't help but stand out, first because of my gender, and second, because of my odd proficiency at typing. I discovered, right away, that I was a natural touch-typist. In no time at all, I was typing eighty, ninety words a minute, with no errors, while my hair-nibbling classmates were fumbling along, dogged by errors, at thirty words a minute.

Terry thought both my typing skills and my stolid, self-effacing silence were funny. She would make a point of bringing my typing feats to the attention of the class. "How did you do, Nathan?" she would call out, at the conclusion of an exercise. I would look up into her falsely earnest gaze and look away, dumbstruck. She would applaud the work of others, only to conclude, mock sadly, "though you're no Nathan." Eventually that phrase, "You're no Nathan," became the catch phrase of the class. Even the teacher picked it up. And I—graceless, charmless—sat in red-faced silence and endured.

Soon, to my horror, Terry's needling carried over to our U.S. history class, a "straight" class with real students who had been content to ignore me, until then. Caring as little for U.S. history as she did for typing, Terry would raise her hand and flub the answer to some easy question. Then she would turn in her seat and spear me with a deadly look, counterfeit wide-eyed curiosity, and ask, "What do you think, Nathan?"

My history classmates thought this was hilarious. They probably couldn't decide which was funnier, that two such disparate social circles—loser/geek and prole/wild child/slut—should suddenly overlap at this one point, or that I existed in their class, in their lives, at all.

I responded to this good-natured abuse predictably. I fell in love. I began to shadow Terry around, taking note of her daily schedule. It didn't take me long to determine likely times and places where I might arrange "chance" meetings. The most

likely, and safest, time was after school, after Terry was released from detention and, having missed the buses, would sometimes walk home alone. Terry, like many smokers, could count on after-school detention virtually any time a teacher decided to raid the girls' restrooms. Which was fairly often.

On days when I knew Terry had detention—the same fifteen or twenty kids had their names called over the PA at the end of every day—I would hide in the woods in a spot along her route home and wait for her to pass by.

Yes, Boy and Miz Trent. Just as I was hiding in the woods above your house, last night.

Why was I hiding in the woods? Because I was working up the courage to meet Terry on the road. To engage her in conversation. Beyond that, I hadn't dared to imagine.

I'll spare you the full account of that first encounter, Boy and Miz, except to say that it went well, in its clumsy, overheated way. Better than I'd had any right to expect. Terry seemed as amused by me in an after-school, one-on-one situation as she did in the public life of the classroom. Our conversation, such as it was, consisted of Terry making ironic observations about me and me enduring them with all the reserve of an ecstatic puppy. It was probably perfectly apparent to her that I was in love. And though there was most likely nothing she could do—or wished to do—about this fact, she wasn't unkind to me.

I floated in a fog of wonderment and joy for three full days, until I could manage another "chance" meeting. I remember that it felt like a whole new world had opened up before me, a world in which it might be possible to co-exist with Terry, to talk and laugh and be with Terry, on almost equal terms.

In the midst of our second conversation, Terry as bemused with me as before, I heard the distant rumble of a motorcycle. As it grew louder, I knew, with the unerring prescience of the downtrodden and doomed, who it was, riding that motorcycle.

THE END IS NEAR

The bike eased up behind me, rumbling ominously, and came to a stop. I turned. It was Randy Trent.

He was straddling his mud-spattered dirtbike, arms folded, coatless and wild-haired on that chill spring day. No one wore motorcycle helmets in those days, Boy Trent. He twisted the throttle, then cut the engine.

“So what do we have here? Secret meeting, looks like.”

No one responded to this, and Randy looked from Terry to me to Terry again, seemingly delighted. “Love, true love,” he said.

“Fuck off, Trent,” Terry said. “We’re talking here.”

We. We’re talking. My heart soared, though I knew my situation was hopeless. Terry and I, we made up a we, in her mind. For now. For one precious moment. We.

“Yeah? Why’s that? You two need privacy?” Getting no answer to this either, Trent turned to me. “What I tell you about leaving your mousehole, Nathan?”

He’d told me that if he ever saw me out on the street, I’d be one sorry-ass faggot. That my dick-sucking face would be feeling the heel of his boot. That I’d best tug my jism-stained bedsheets over my head and hide, if I knew what was good for me. And etcetera.

“You know what I think? I think maybe you got some ideas about maybe sticking your needle dick into Terry here. Am I right?”

What could I do? I knew from experience that if I tried to flee, as embarrassing as that would be, Trent would run me to ground in fifty paces. Likewise, hitting him first was out of the question. Trent had half a foot and fifty pounds on me, and wasn’t very meticulous about the rules of fair fighting. So I stood there and gaped like a fish.

“What’s the matter? You tired of fucking your hamsters? You think you’re gonna get yourself some real gash?” He swung a leg

over his bike and propped the bike on its kickstand. “You gonna help him out, Terry?”

“Fuck you, Trent. Why don’t you go find some greaser monkey your own size to pick on?” Terry, no stranger to taunts, was used to giving as good as she got. Which was more than I could say.

Trent grinned and threw a companionable arm around my narrow shoulders, turning me so that we both faced Terry. So that we almost appeared to be united against her.

“Fuck me? Again? Don’t you ever get enough, honey?”

“Fucking creep. Let him go.” Meaning me. Let me go.

“Creep, huh. That’s not what you were calling me a couple of months ago, in the CYO parking lot, was it, Terry?” He hugged me tighter. “You should see little Terry here suck dick, junior. She really aims to please. Don’tcha, honey?”

Terry stepped forward and smacked Trent, hard, across the face. I struggled to get free, but Trent’s grip only tightened across my shoulders. I could feel him radiating dangerous good humor.

“She’s a real eager beaver, with a cock in her face. Don’t waste a drop, neither.” He gave me a shake, like shaking a ragdoll. “Tommy Flanagan says you assfuck, too. That true?”

Terry was holding her hand to her chest, as if she’d hurt it on Trent’s face.

“Lemme save you some trouble here, Nathan. Terry here’ll fuck anyone. Already has fucked just about everybody, the way I hear it. But she ain’t fucking you.” He suddenly snagged a hand in my hair and jerked my head up. “See that pretty mouth? Every swingin’ dick in Lenape High’s been in that hole. Except yours.”

It would be difficult for me to piece apart the anguish in my heart at that moment. To lay bare for you, Miz and Boy, the many different assaults being made on my heart and mind. Trent lifted my head and forced me to look into Terry’s eyes as he said these things. I was a virgin, obviously, still sufficiently shy and

THE END IS NEAR

unworldly enough to be wincing at some of the ugly epithets above. He both humiliated me with these words and, somehow, made me complicit in them, as he said them. He had the torturer's genius for inflicting pain, Trent did.

"And your dick'll never be in it, junior," Trent was saying. "Because no whore, not even Loose Lips Terry here, would fuck you." He shook his head. "Nope. Never happen."

"Let him go, Trent." Terry's bunny face was set in a mask of stoic sufferance. Her face told this simple story: she'd been in spots like this before, and survived it those times, too. That was the difference between Terry and me. She was a swimmer. I was a drowner. "Go home and help your mom try to remember which one of those Greyling loonies is your dad."

Trent grinned and nodded at this.

"I think it's cute, little no-nuts Nathan here hoping you'll fuck him. He must've thought, as long as you're fucking every guy who asks for it, you wouldn't mind doin' him, too." He turned to me, his eyebrows raised in a pantomime of polite interest. "Is that what you were thinking, Nathan?"

I started to struggle again and suddenly I was on my knees, my face viced between the blacktop and one of Trent's knees.

"Maybe if you ask nice, she'll do it." Trent's voice was steady, easy, conversational. "So ask nice." He applied more pressure to my head. I could hear something, my neck, my skull, creaking. I was still struggling, but it was pointless. My soul was already dead. "Ask Loose Lips, will you please suck my little needle dick." I felt his hand encircle the back of my neck, expertly seeking the pressure points there. "Ask."

I wrapped my arms around Trent's boot and tried to topple him, but it was like trying to tip a statue.

"Loose Lips. Will you please ..." Trent dug thumb and fingers into the sensitive pouches between shoulder and neck, "... suck my ... little ... needle ... dick." Calm, remorseless. "Say it."

Lights were exploding before my eyes. I couldn't breathe.

“Will you ... please ...” I didn’t have breath enough to say more.

“No, no, no,” Trent said. “You wanna address a lady by name. Say, Loose Lips, will you please—”

I heard Terry’s shoes on the road gravel—crunch, crunch, crunch—then I heard a soft thump above me and a gasp. Trent released his hold on me and fell over sideways.

“Fuck,” he said, almost sadly.

And I was free. I stumbled up and I ran blindly, careening off the road and into the roadside scrub. I fought through a thicket of creepers and pricker bushes and turned around. Trent was on both knees then, hands cupping his crotch. Terry was already gone. I started to make my way up the hill above the road.

And that was it. In the year and a half that followed, I never again looked Terry in the eye. I think she must have avoided me, too, though I can’t be sure of it. Viewed from afar, she seemed like much the same person she’d been before—a wild child, a prole, a specific kind of girl. But her gentle taunting of me was over, and I never shared another class with her.

This still hurts me today as much as it did twenty-some years ago. When I think of it, my chest still constricts, my heart flutters, my face twitches, as if it had happened this morning.

Does this surprise you? Do you think that’s an exaggeration, Miz and Boy Trent?

Do you?

And so.

At about nine o’clock, full darkness had thrown its cloak over me, in my station above your house, Miz and Boy. And it began to occur to me that Randy Trent might not be coming home. At ten o’clock, I gave up. I had to. I’d run out of bug spray.

I went to the Sail Inn, where, not surprisingly, I found Randy. Either he no longer lived with you, Miz and Boy, or he was an extraordinarily low-key, hands-off hubby and dad. I wouldn’t have bet against either explanation.

THE END IS NEAR

He was eating his dinner alone, at the bar, and watching a baseball game on TV. He didn't appear to be in the jovial mood he was in two nights ago. People would stop and exchange a few words with him on entering or leaving the bar, or getting a pitcher refill, but Randy seemed intent on his dinner, the game.

There was one woman—a frown-lined divorcee, already looking chronically tired and old at, maybe, thirty—who was making a valiant effort to engage him in conversation, over the course of three trips to the bar for drinks. Finally she succeeded, pulling a barstool nearer to Randy's and entering into a long tale that required a lot of amazed looks on her part and touching of his shoulder. Randy slid his dinner plate away and attended to the woman's tale, occasionally glancing over her shoulder at the ball game.

I sat on a barstool at the other end of the bar. And watched. And waited. I saw that Randy does not, in fact, wear a wedding ring.

I didn't have to wait long. Eventually, the woman's tale came to an end and the barmaid brought Randy's check. Randy started making the fidgety movements of someone wanting to go, but trying to be polite. I left the bar first, so I'd be prepared to follow him in my car.

At first, comically, I followed Randy at quite a distance, skulking at least a block behind, almost losing him in a couple of places. Then I reconsidered the situation and cruised right up behind him, at times only a car's length behind.

Because really, what was Randy supposed to think? That someone was following him?

Life isn't like a detective drama on TV. People aren't dusting the doorknobs for fingerprints; they aren't checking the rearview mirror and employing evasive driving techniques. In real life, people are oblivious. They don't suspect a thing.

When we got to Randy's place, I all but pulled into the spot next to him in the lot and got out with him. And where were we?

Where else? 37 Circle Drive, #3D. Randy had a garden apartment in a development called, depressingly, The Dominion at Waverly Acres.

He was divorced. Or separated, at least. Hence the women attending to his every movement. Any unattached, uncommitted guy not currently in prison is a catch, out here in Buttfuck Nowhere, New Jersey.

Randy got out of his truck, a gleaming-red Ford F-250 with all the options, and let himself into his apartment. The kitchen light went on behind dingy red-checked curtains.

It occurred to me that now there was another Trent boy at 16 Reese Trail, being raised by another working mom on her own. Just like all those years ago. I wondered what Randy made of the cyclic nature of life. I wondered if he was surprised at himself, disappointed in himself, for creating the same sort of broken home he himself had grown up in. For perpetuating the cycle of absent fathers. On June 30th, I'll have to ask him.

I pulled out of the lot and drove, slowly, around the complex. It was a huge complex, covering what seemed like square miles and flowing seamlessly into other developments with similarly depressing names.

It didn't take me long to find what I was looking for. The roads of Waverly, like those in Lake Lenni Lenape, are littered with vehicle-mangled animal carcasses. I found a stomach-turning sample of roadkill, a mashed squirrel the size of a fox, and returned to Randy's apartment.

After a short time, not five minutes, Randy's lights went out. I crept up to his door and wedged the dead squirrel into his mailbox.

THE END IS NEAR

I was surprised at the roar, the kick, of a shotgun blast.

The gun practically leaped out of my hand. The buckshot punched a good-sized hole in the plaster above my head, raining powder and debris on me.

Felicia finally shut up, though. Alice had yelped and dropped her shopping bag, her hands flying up to her mouth. She was still standing like that, her eyes wide, her hands over her mouth.

"I said move," I said. "Over there. With the others." I waved the barrel of the shotgun toward the counter, where Randy and Felicia were standing.

Alice dipped at the knees and retrieved her bag, then started moving toward the counter. We listened to Alice's shoes scrape across the gritty tiles as she shuffled across the room.

"I have something to say," I said, in the new, ear-ringing silence.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Nathan," Randy said, looking put out, "you can't fire a shotgun in here. You'll hurt somebody."

I lowered the shotgun until it was pointing at Randy. His blackened right eye looked a lot better than my blackened left eye, though we'd looked like mirror images of each other five days before, when we'd received our respective clouts to the eye.

"That's the plan," I said. "In a nutshell."

"I knew it," Felicia said bitterly, throwing up her hands in disgust. "I knew it. I knew he was a whack-job freakout waiting to happen. I knew it the first time I saw him." She looked in exasperation at Randy. "Did I tell you or what?"

"What are you talking about, Nathan?"

"I'm talking about today's itinerary, Randy. I'm talking about some unfinished business we have. Me and you."

"Me and you." He seemed guardedly surprised at this. "Have I pissed you off in some special way I'm not aware of, buddy?"

"Yes, Randy. You have."

"Okay. How's that?"

I took a step back and hefted the shotgun in both hands. A shotgun's heavier than you'd think. Heavier than it looks in the movies, anyway.

"You know, I don't know which pisses me off more," I said. "The fact that you ruined my life for fucking sport," I pointed the shotgun at Randy's head, "or the fact that you can't even remember doing it."

"This is what happens! You see? This is what happens when you treat a desperate, creepy loser like a normal person. This." Felicia waved a dismissive hand at me. "You see it on the news every day."

"That's enough, Felicia," Randy said. "Stay out of this."

"Don't you watch the fucking news?"

"No. I don't." Randy wasn't taking his eyes off me. "Okay, so we got some issues to iron out, it looks like. Okay." He set the air filter he'd been holding on the counter. Cautiously. "But there's no reason we gotta involve the girls in this, right?"

"There isn't?" I swung the shotgun from Randy to Alice, who seemed to be eying the distance back to the front door. Alice yelped again. Gratifyingly, I must say.

"So why don't we let the girls go powder their noses and me and you can lock horns on this, see if we can't get to the bottom of things."

I pretended I was thinking about this. "That would be the fair and reasonable and generous thing to do. Wouldn't it?"

Randy blinked at this, as if reconsidering. "Just common sense," he said in a more careful tone of voice. "So whaddeya say?"

"What do I say? I say . . . I'm moved by your call to a shared sense of fair play, of justice. Here I am, advocating senseless violence, the unprovoked harassment of blameless innocents, and you're lobbying hard for kindness and compassion for all. Randy, I'm really moved."

Randy's brow furrowed. "I guess."

THE END IS NEAR

“But tell me this, Randy. When did senseless violence and sadism go out of style? Huh? How did I miss that? Because it seems to me, it used to be all the rage. Thirty years ago, it was a scream. Everybody was doing it.”

“You’re losing me, Nate.”

“I guess I am, Randy. Why? Because I’m behind the times. Leave it to me to embrace stupid, vicious, unthinking cruelty, after it’s lost its cachet. After its day is gone. But that’s me all over, isn’t it? Forever out of step with the current fashion.”

“You’re talking in riddles, Nate. I think I need a clue, here.”

“Fuck you, Randy.”

Randy chewed on this awhile, then said, “I thought we were friends.”

“Friends, Rand?” Leaning on the last word, sarcastically. “Well, we’re not. We’re really not.”

“Okay.” Nodding at this, gamely. “I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Randy!” Felicia barked, her patience at an end. “Will you fucking do something? He’s pointing a gun at us.”

“Chill out, Felicia. We’re just talking here.” Randy still hadn’t moved his eyes from me. “I don’t know what sort of chip you got on your shoulder, but I know this. I know nothing bad has to happen here. Okay? Nothing bad has to happen.”

“Is that your considered wisdom on the subject, Randy?”

“I’m just sayin’, ain’t nothing happened here we can’t all walk away from. You might want to take a moment to think on it.”

Ah, Death, my reticent friend. Is this all you want? Really?

Of course, you know and I know what I should have said here. I’d come to a fork in the road. This was my big chance to do the right thing. To redeem myself.

I should have said this: Sure thing, Randy, let’s let bygones be bygones. I’ll set aside my petty grievances and rise above my flawed personality, my embittered worldview. I’ll grow as a person. Let’s be friends, neighbors, teammates on the A&B softball team.

That's what I should have said. But I didn't. Why? Because I was a pigheaded imbecile bent solely on vengeance and self-destruction.

If that's the truth you're looking for, if that's the Easter egg of wisdom hidden in the tall grass of my ignorance, than you're welcome to it. Just give me a sign, Death, and I'll stop writing, right here.

No? Okay, then.

Here's what I said instead.

"You know what, Randy?" I said. "You don't know shit. You don't even know who I am."

§