

# BLACK HOUSE

A Novel

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Stephen King  
Peter Straub



R A N D O M   H O U S E

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# Black House



A NOVEL

**STEPHEN KING  
PETER STRAUB**



RANDOM HOUSE  
NEW YORK

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*For David Gernert and Ralph Vicinanza*

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You take me to a place I never go,  
You send me kisses made of gold,  
I'll place a crown upon your curls,  
All hail the Queen of the World!

—The Jayhawks

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# **Black House**



Right Here  
and Now . . .

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Welcome to  
Coulee Country



*RIGHT HERE AND NOW*, as an old friend used to say, we are in the fluid present, where clear-sightedness never guarantees perfect vision. *Here*: about two hundred feet, the height of a gliding eagle, above Wisconsin's far western edge, where the vagaries of the Mississippi River declare a natural border. *Now*: an early Friday morning in mid-July a few years into both a new century and a new millennium, their wayward courses so hidden that a blind man has a better chance of seeing what lies ahead than you or I. Right here and now, the hour is just past six A.M., and the sun stands low in the cloudless eastern sky, a fat, confident yellow-white ball advancing as ever for the first time toward the future and leaving in its wake the steadily accumulating past, which darkens as it recedes, making blind men of us all.

Below, the early sun touches the river's wide, soft ripples with molten highlights. Sunlight glimmers from the tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad running between the riverbank and the backs of the shabby two-story houses along County Road Oo, known as Nailhouse Row, the lowest point of the comfortable-looking little town extending uphill and eastward beneath us. At this moment in the Coulee Country, life seems to be holding its breath. The motionless air around us carries such remarkable purity and sweetness that you might imagine a man could smell a radish pulled out of the ground a mile away.

Moving toward the sun, we glide away from the river and over the shining tracks, the backyards and roofs of Nailhouse Row, then a line of Harley-Davidson motorcycles tilted on their kickstands. The unprepossessing little houses were built, early in the century recently vanished, for the metal pourers, mold makers, and crate men employed by the Pederson Nail factory. On the grounds that working stiff would be unlikely to complain about the flaws in their subsidized accommodations, they were constructed as cheaply as possible. (Pederson Nail, which had suffered multiple hemorrhages during the fifties, finally bled to death in 1963.) The waiting Harleys suggest that the factory hands have been replaced by a motorcycle gang. The uniformly ferocious appearance of the Harleys' owners, wild-haired, bushy-bearded, swag-bellied men sporting earrings, black leather jackets, and less than the full complement of teeth, would seem to support this assumption. Like most assumptions, this one embodies an uneasy half-truth.

The current residents of Nailhouse Row, whom suspicious locals dubbed the Thunder Five soon after they took over the houses along the river, cannot so easily be categorized. They have skilled jobs in the Kingsland Brewing Company, located just out of town to the south and one block east of the Mississippi. If we look to our right, we can see "the world's largest six-pack," storage tanks painted over with gigantic Kingsland Old-Time Lager labels. The men who live on Nailhouse Row met one another on the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois, where all but one were undergraduates majoring in English or philosophy. (The exception was a resident in surgery at the UC university hospital.) They get an ironic pleasure from being called the Thunder Five: the name strikes them as sweetly cartoonish. What they call themselves is "the Hegelian Scum." The gentlemen form an interesting crew, and we will make their acquaintance later on. For now, we have

time only to note the hand-painted posters taped to the fronts of several houses, two lamp poles, and a couple of abandoned buildings. The posters say: FISHERMAN, YOU BETTER PRAY TO YOUR STINKING GOD OR WE DON'T CATCH YOU FIRST! REMEMBER AMY!

From Nailhouse Row, Chase Street runs steeply uphill between listing buildings with worn, unpainted facades the color of fog: the old Nelson Hotel, where a few impoverished residents lie sleeping, a blank-faced tavern, a tired shoe store displaying Red Wing workboots behind its filmy picture window, a few other dim buildings that bear no indication of their function and seem oddly dreamlike and vaporous. These structures have the air of failed resurrections, of having been rescued from the dark westward territory although they were still dead. In a way, that is precisely what happened to them. An ocher horizontal stripe, ten feet above the sidewalk on the facade of the Nelson Hotel and two feet from the rising ground on the opposed, ashen faces of the last two buildings, represents the high-water mark left behind by the flood of 1965, when the Mississippi rolled over its banks, drowned the railroad tracks and Nailhouse Row, and mounted nearly to the top of Chase Street.

Where Chase rises above the flood line and levels out, it widens and undergoes a transformation into the main street of French Landing, the town beneath us. The Agincourt Theater, the Taproom Bar & Grille, the First Farmer State Bank, the Samuel Stutz Photography Studio (which does a steady business in graduation photos, wedding pictures, and children's portraits) and shops, not the ghostly relics of shops, line its blunt sidewalks: Benton's Rexall drugstore, Reliable Hardware, Saturday Night Video, Regal Clothing, Schmitt's Allsorts Emporium, stores selling electronic equipment, magazines, and greeting cards, toys, and athletic clothing featuring the logos of the Brewers, the Twins, the Packers, the Vikings, and the University of Wisconsin. After a few blocks, the name of the street changes to Lyall Road, and the buildings separate and shrink into one-story wooden structures fronted with signs advertising insurance offices and travel agencies; after that, the street becomes a highway that glides eastward past a 7-Eleven, the Reinhold T. Grauerhammer VFW Hall, a big farm-implement dealership known locally as Goltz's, and into a landscape of flat, unbroken fields. If we rise another hundred feet into the immaculate air and scan what lies beneath and ahead, we see kettle moraine coulees, blunted hills furry with pines, loam-rich valleys invisible from ground level until you have come upon them, meandering rivers, miles-long patchwork fields, and little towns—one of them Centralia, no more than a scattering of buildings around the intersection of two narrow highways, 3 and 93.

Directly below us, French Landing looks as though it had been evacuated in the middle of the night. No one moves along the sidewalks or bends to insert a key into one of the locks of the shop fronts along Chase Street. The angled spaces before the shops are empty of the cars and pickup trucks that will begin to appear, first by ones and twos, then in a mannerly little stream, an hour or two later. No lights burn behind the windows in the commercial buildings or the unpretentious houses lining the surrounding streets. A block north of Chase on Sumner Street, four matching red-brick buildings of two stories each house, in west-east order, the French Landing Public Library; the offices of Patrick Skarda, M.D., the local general practitioner, and Bell & Holland, a two-man law firm now run by Garland Bell and Julius Holland, the sons of its founders; the Heartfield & Son Funeral Home, now owned by a vast, funereal empire centered in St. Louis; and the French Landing Post Office.

Separated from these by a wide driveway into a good-sized parking lot at the rear, the building at the end of the block, where Sumner intersects with Third Street, is also of red brick and two stories high but longer than its immediate neighbors. Unpainted iron bars block the rear second-floor

windows, and two of the four vehicles in the parking lot are patrol cars with light bars across their tops and the letters ~~FLPD~~ on their sides. The presence of police cars and barred windows seems incongruous in this rural fastness—what sort of crime can happen here? Nothing serious, surely; surely nothing worse than a little shoplifting, drunken driving, and an occasional bar fight.

As if in testimony to the peacefulness and regularity of small-town life, a red van with the words ~~RIVIERE HERALD~~ on its side panels drifts slowly down Third Street, pausing at nearly all of the mailboxes. The route man stands for its driver to insert copies of the day's newspaper, wrapped in a blue plastic bag, into gray metal cylinders bearing the same words. When the van turns onto Sumner, where the buildings have mail slots instead of boxes, the route man simply throws the wrapped papers at the front doors. Blue parcels thwack against the doors of the police station, the funeral home, and the office buildings. The post office does not get a paper.

What do you know, lights *are* burning behind the front downstairs windows of the police station. The door opens. A tall, dark-haired young man in a pale blue short-sleeved uniform shirt, a Sam Brown belt, and navy trousers steps outside. The wide belt and the gold badge on Bobby Dulac's chest gleam in the fresh sunlight, and everything he is wearing, including the 9mm pistol strapped to his hip, seems as newly made as Bobby Dulac himself. He watches the red van turn left onto Second Street and frowns at the rolled newspaper. He nudges it with the tip of a black, highly polished shoe, bending over just far enough to suggest that he is trying to read the headlines through the plastic. Evidently, this technique does not work all that well. Still frowning, Bobby tilts all the way over and picks up the newspaper with unexpected delicacy, the way a mother cat picks up a kitten in need of relocation. Holding it a little distance away from his body, he gives a quick glance up and down Sumner Street, about-faces smartly, and steps back into the station. We, who in our curiosity have been steadily descending toward the interesting spectacle presented by Officer Dulac, go inside behind him.

A gray corridor leads past a blank door and a bulletin board with very little on it to two sets of metal stairs, one going down to a small locker room, shower stalls, and a firing range, the other going upward to an interrogation room and two facing rows of cells, none presently occupied. Somewhere near, a radio talk show is playing at a level that seems too loud for a peaceful morning.

Bobby Dulac opens the unmarked door and enters, with us on his shiny heels, the ready room he has just left. A rank of filing cabinets stands against the wall to our right, beside them a beat-up wooden table on which sit neat stacks of papers in folders and a transistor radio, the source of the discordant noise. From the nearby studio of KDCU-AM, *Your Talk Voice in the Coulee Country*, the entertainingly rabid George Rathbun has settled into *Badger Barrage*, his popular morning broadcast. Good old George sounds too loud for the occasion no matter how low you dial the volume; the guy is just flat-out *noisy*—that's part of his appeal.

Set in the middle of the wall directly opposite us is a closed door with a dark pebble-glass window on which has been painted DALE GILBERTSON, CHIEF OF POLICE. Dale will not be in for another half hour or so.

Two metal desks sit at right angles to each other in the corner to our left, and from the one that faces us, Tom Lund, a fair-haired officer of roughly his partner's age but without his appearance of having been struck gleaming from the mint five minutes before, regards the bag tweezed between two fingers of Bobby Dulac's right hand.

“All right,” Lund says. “Okay. The latest installment.”

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“You thought maybe the Thunder Five was paying us another social call? Here. I don’t want to read the damn thing.”

Not deigning to look at the newspaper, Bobby sends the new day’s issue of the *La Riviere Herald* sailing in a flat, fast arc across ten feet of wooden floor with an athletic snap of his wrist, spinning rightward, takes a long stride, and positions himself in front of the wooden table a moment before Tom Lund fields his throw. Bobby glares at the two names and various details scrawled on the long chalkboard hanging on the wall behind the table. He is not pleased, Bobby Dulac; he looks as though he might burst out of his uniform through the sheer force of his anger.

Fat and happy in the KDCU studio, George Rathbun yells, “Caller, gimme a break, willya, and get your prescription fixed! Are we talking about the same game here? Caller—”

“Maybe Wendell got some sense and decided to lay off,” Tom Lund says.

“*Wendell*,” Bobby says. Because Lund can see only the sleek, dark back of his head, the little sneering thing he does with his lip wastes motion, but he does it anyway.

“Caller, let me ask you this one question, and in all sincerity, I want you to be honest with me. Do you actually see last night’s game?”

“I didn’t know *Wendell* was a big buddy of yours,” Bobby says. “I didn’t know you ever got as far south as La Riviere. Here I was thinking your idea of a big night out was a pitcher of beer and trying to break one hundred at the Arden Bowl-A-Drome, and now I find out you hang out with newspaper reporters in college towns. Probably get down and dirty with the Wisconsin Rat, too, that guy on KWLX. Do you pick up a lot of punk babes that way?”

The caller says he missed the first inning on account of he had to pick up his kid after a special counseling session at Mount Hebron, but he sure saw everything after that.

“Did I say Wendell Green was a friend of mine?” asks Tom Lund. Over Bobby’s left shoulder he can see the first of the names on the chalkboard. His gaze helplessly focuses on it. “It’s just, I met him after the Kinderling case, and the guy didn’t seem so bad. Actually, I kind of liked him. *Actually*, I wound up feeling sorry for him. He wanted to do an interview with Hollywood, and Hollywood turned him down flat.”

Well, naturally he saw the extra innings, the hapless caller says, that’s how he knows Pokey Rees was safe.

“And as for the Wisconsin Rat, I wouldn’t know him if I saw him, and I think that so-called music he plays sounds like the worst bunch of crap I ever heard in my life. How did that scrawny pasty-faced creep get a radio show in the first place? On the *college station*? What does that tell you about our wonderful UW–La Riviere, Bobby? What does it say about our whole society? Oh, I forgot, you like that shit.”

“No, I like 311 and Korn, and you’re so out of it you can’t tell the difference between Jonathan

Davis and Dee Dee Ramone, but forget about that, all right?” Slowly, Bobby Dulac turns around and smiles at his partner. “Stop stalling.” His smile is none too pleasant.

“I’m stalling?” Tom Lund widens his eyes in a parody of wounded innocence. “Gee, was it me who fired the paper across the room? No, I guess not.”

“If you never laid eyes on the Wisconsin Rat, how come you know what he looks like?”

“Same way I know he has funny-colored hair and a pierced nose. Same way I know he wears a beautiful-to-shit black leather jacket day in, day out, rain or shine.”

Bobby waited.

“By the way he sounds. People’s voices are full of *information*. A guy says, Looks like it’ll turn out to be a nice day, he tells you his whole life story. Want to know something else about Rat Boy? He hasn’t been to the dentist in six, seven years. His teeth look like shit.”

From within KDCU’s ugly cement-block structure next to the brewery on Peninsula Drive, via the radio Dale Gilbertson donated to the station house long before either Tom Lund or Bobby Dulac fired, put on their uniforms, comes good old dependable George Rathbun’s patented bellow of genial outrage, a passionate, inclusive uproar that for a hundred miles around causes breakfasting farmers to smile across their tables at their wives and passing truckers to laugh out loud:

“I swear, caller, and this goes for my last last caller, too, and every single one of you out there, love you *dearly*, that is the honest truth, I love you like my momma loved her *turnip patch*, but sometimes you people DRIVE ME CRAZY! Oh, boy. *Top of the eleventh inning, two outs! Six-sevenths! Reds! Men on second and third. Batter lines to short center field, Reese takes off from third, good throw to the plate, clean tag, clean tag. A BLIND MAN COULDA MADE THAT CALL!*”

“Hey, I thought it was a good tag, and I only heard it on the radio,” says Tom Lund.

Both men are stalling, and they know it.

“In fact,” shouts the hands-down most popular Talk Voice of the Coulee Country, “let me go out on a *limb* here, boys and girls, let me make the following *recommendation*, okay? Let’s replace every umpire at Miller Park, hey, every umpire in the *National League*, with BLIND MEN! You know what my friends? I *guarantee* a sixty to seventy percent *improvement* in the accuracy of their calls. GIVE THE JOB TO THOSE WHO CAN HANDLE IT—THE BLIND!”

Mirth suffuses Tom Lund’s bland face. That George Rathbun, man, he’s a hoot. Bobby says, “Come on, okay?”

Grinning, Lund pulls the folded newspaper out of its wrapper and flattens it on his desk. His face hardens; without altering its shape, his grin turns stony. “Oh, no. Oh, hell.”

“What?”

Lund utters a shapeless groan and shakes his head.

“Jesus. I don’t even want to know.” Bobby rams his hands into his pockets, then pulls himself perfectly upright, jerks his right hand free, and clamps it over his eyes. “I’m a blind guy, all right. Make me an umpire—I don’t wanna be a cop anymore.”

Lund says nothing.

“It’s a headline? Like a banner headline? How bad is it?” Bobby pulls his hand away from his eyes and holds it suspended in midair.

“Well,” Lund tells him, “it looks like Wendell didn’t get some sense, after all, and he sure as hell didn’t decide to lay off. I can’t believe I said I liked the dipshit.”

“Wake up,” Bobby says. “Nobody ever told you law enforcement officers and journalists are on opposite sides of the fence?”

Tom Lund’s ample torso tilts over his desk. A thick lateral crease like a scar divides his forehead and his stolid cheeks burn crimson. He aims a finger at Bobby Dulac. “This is one thing that really gets me about you, Bobby. How long have you been here? Five, six months? Dale hired me four years ago, and when him and Hollywood put the cuffs on Mr. Thornberg *Kinderling*, which was the biggest case in this county for maybe thirty years, I can’t claim any credit, but at least I pulled my weight. I helped put some of the pieces together.”

“One of the pieces,” Bobby says.

“I reminded Dale about the girl bartender at the Taproom, and Dale told Hollywood, and Hollywood talked to the girl, and that was a big, big piece. It helped get him. So don’t you talk to me that way.”

Bobby Dulac assumes a look of completely hypothetical contrition. “Sorry, Tom. I guess I’m kind of wound up and beat to shit at the same time.” What he thinks is: *So you got a couple years on me and you once gave Dale this crappy little bit of information, so what, I’m a better cop than you’ll ever be. How heroic were you last night, anyhow?*

At 11:15 the previous night, Armand “Beezer” St. Pierre and his fellow travelers in the Thunder Five had roared up from Nailhouse Row to surge into the police station and demand of its three occupants, each of whom had worked an eighteen-hour shift, exact details of the progress they were making on the issue that most concerned them all. What the hell was going on here? What about the third one, huh, what about Irma Freneau? Had they found her yet? Did these clowns have *anything*, were they still just blowing smoke? You need help? Beezer roared, Then deputize us, we’ll give you all the goddamn help you need and then some. A giant named Mouse had strolled smirking up to Bobby Dulac and kept on strolling, jumbo belly to six-pack belly, until Bobby was backed up against the filing cabinet, whereupon the giant Mouse had mysteriously inquired, in a cloud of beer and marijuana, whether Bobby had ever dipped into the works of a gentleman named Jacques Derrida. When Bobby replied that he had never heard of the gentleman, Mouse said, “No shit, Sherlock,” and stepped aside to glare at the names on the chalkboard. Half an hour later, Beezer, Mouse, and the other companions were sent away unsatisfied, undeputized, but pacified, and Dale Gilbertson said he had to go home and get some sleep, but Tom ought to remain, just in case. The regular night men had both found excuses not to come in. Bobby said he would stay, too, no problem, Chief, which is why we find these two men in the station so early in the morning.

“Give it to me,” says Bobby Dulac.

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Lund picks up the paper, turns it around, and holds it out for Bobby to see: FISHERMAN STILL A LARGE IN FRENCH LANDING AREA, reads the headline over an article that takes up three columns on the top left-hand side of the front page. The columns of type have been printed against a background pale blue, and a black border separates them from the remainder of the page. Beneath the head, smaller print, runs the line *Identity of Psycho Killer Baffles Police*. Underneath the subhead, a line even smaller print attributes the article to *Wendell Green, with the support of the editorial staff*.

“The Fisherman,” Bobby says. “Right from the start, your *friend* has his thumb up his butt. The Fisherman, the Fisherman, the Fisherman. If I all of a sudden turned into a fifty-foot ape and started stomping on buildings, would you call me King Kong?” Lund lowers the newspaper and smiles. “Okay,” Bobby allows, “bad example. Say I held up a couple banks. Would you call me John Dillinger?”

“Well,” says Lund, smiling even more broadly, “they say Dillinger’s tool was so humongous, they put it in a jar in the Smithsonian. So . . .”

“Read me the first sentence,” Bobby says.

Tom Lund looks down and reads: “ ‘As the police in French Landing fail to discover any leads on the identity of the fiendish double murderer and sex criminal this reporter has dubbed “the Fisherman,” the grim specters of fear, despair, and suspicion run increasingly rampant through the streets of that little town, and from there out into the farms and villages throughout French County, darkening by their touch every portion of the Coulee Country.’ ”

“Just what we need,” Bobby says. “Jee-zus!” And in an instant has crossed the room and is leaning over Tom Lund’s shoulder, reading the *Herald*’s front page with his hand resting on the butt of his Glock, as if ready to drill a hole in the article right here and now.

“ ‘Our traditions of trust and good neighborliness, our habit of extending warmth and generosity to all [writes Wendell Green, editorializing like crazy], are eroding daily under the corrosive onslaught of these dread emotions. Fear, despair, and suspicion are poisonous to the soul of communities large and small, for they turn neighbor against neighbor and make a mockery of civility.’ ”

“ ‘Two children have been foully murdered and their remains partially consumed. Now a third child has disappeared. Eight-year-old Amy St. Pierre and seven-year-old Johnny Irkenham fell victim to the passions of a monster in human form. Neither will know the happiness of adolescence or the satisfactions of adulthood. Their grieving parents will never know the grandchildren they would have cherished. The parents of Amy and Johnny’s playmates shelter their children within the safety of their own homes, as do parents whose children never knew the deceased. As a result, summer playgrounds and other programs for young children have been canceled in virtually every township and municipality in French County.’ ”

“ ‘With the disappearance of ten-year-old Irma Freneau seven days after the death of Amy St. Pierre and only three after that of Johnny Irkenham, public patience has grown dangerously thin. As the correspondent has already reported, Merlin Graasheimer, fifty-two, an unemployed farm laborer of no fixed abode, was set upon and beaten by an unidentified group of men in a Grainger side street late

Tuesday evening. Another such episode occurred in the early hours of Thursday morning, when Elv Praetorious, thirty-six, a Swedish tourist traveling alone, was assaulted by three men, again unidentified, while asleep in La Riviere's Leif Eriksson Park. Graasheimer and Praetorious require only routine medical attention, but future incidents of vigilantism will almost certainly end more seriously.' ”

Tom Lund looks down at the next paragraph, which describes the Freneau girl's abrupt disappearance from a Chase Street sidewalk, and pushes himself away from his desk.

Bobby Dulac reads silently for a time, then says, “You gotta hear this shit, Tom. This is how it winds up:

“ ‘When will the Fisherman strike again?

“ ‘For he will strike again, my friends, make no mistake.

“ ‘And when will French Landing's chief of police, Dale Gilbertson, do his duty and rescue the citizens of this county from the obscene savagery of the Fisherman and the understandable violence produced by his own inaction?’ ”

Bobby Dulac stamps to the middle of the room. His color has heightened. He inhales, then exhales a magnificent quantity of oxygen. “How about the next time the Fisherman *strikes*,” Bobby says, “how about he goes right up Wendell Green's flabby rear end?”

“I'm with you,” says Tom Lund. “Can you believe that shinola? ‘Understandable violence’? He's telling people it's okay to mess with anyone who looks suspicious!”

Bobby levels an index finger at Lund. “I personally am going to nail this guy. That *is* a promise. I'll bring him down, alive or dead.” In case Lund may have missed the point, he repeats, “Personally.”

Wisely choosing not to speak the words that first come to his mind, Tom Lund nods his head. The finger is still pointing. He says, “If you want some help with that, maybe you should talk to Hollywood. Dale didn't have no luck, but could be you'd do better.”

Bobby waves this notion away. “No need. Dale and me . . . and you, too, of course, we got it covered. But I personally am going to get this guy. That *is* a guarantee.” He pauses for a second. “Besides, Hollywood retired when he moved here, or did you forget?”

“Hollywood's too young to retire,” Lund says. “Even in cop years, the guy is practically a baby. So you must be the next thing to a fetus.”

And on their cackle of shared laughter, we float away and out of the ready room and back into the sky, where we glide one block farther north, to Queen Street.

Moving a few blocks east we find, beneath us, a low, rambling structure branching out from a central hub that occupies, with its wide, rising breadth of lawn dotted here and there with tall oaks and maples, the whole of a block lined with bushy hedges in need of a good trim. Obviously an institution of some kind, the structure at first resembles a progressive elementary school in which the various wings represent classrooms without walls, the square central hub the dining room and administrative

offices. When we drift downward, we hear George Rathbun's genial bellow rising toward us from several windows. The big glass front door swings open, and a trim woman in cat's-eye glasses comes out into the bright morning, holding a poster in one hand and a roll of tape in the other. She immediately turns around and, with quick, efficient gestures, fixes the poster to the door. Sunlight reflects from a smoky gemstone the size of a hazelnut on the third finger of her right hand.

While she takes a moment to admire her work, we can peer over her crisp shoulder and see that the poster announces, in a cheerful burst of hand-drawn balloons, that TODAY IS STRAWBERRY FEST !!!; when the woman walks back inside, we take in the presence, in the portion of the entry visible just beneath the giddy poster, of two or three folded wheelchairs. Beyond the wheelchairs, the woman, whose chestnut hair has been pinned back into an architectural whorl, strides on her high-heeled pumps through a pleasant lobby with blond wooden chairs and matching tables strewn artfully with magazines, marches past a kind of unmanned guardpost or reception desk before a handsome fieldstone wall, and vanishes, with the trace of a skip, through a burnished door marked WILLIAM MAXTON, DIRECTOR.

What kind of school is this? Why is it open for business, why is it putting on festivals, in the middle of July?

We could call it a graduate school, for those who reside here have graduated from every stage of their existences but the last, which they live out, day after day, under the careless stewardship of Mr. William "Chipper" Maxton, Director. This is the Maxton Elder Care Facility, once—in a more innocent time, and before the cosmetic renovations done in the mid-eighties—known as the Maxton Nursing Home, which was owned and managed by its founder, Herbert Maxton, Chipper's father. Herbert was a decent if wishy-washy man who, it is safe to say, would be appalled by some of the things the sole fruit of his loins gets up to. Chipper never wanted to take over "the family playpen," he calls it, with its freight of "gummers," "zombies," "bed wetters," and "droolies," and after getting an accounting degree at UW-La Riviere (with hard-earned minors in promiscuity, gambling, and beer drinking), our boy accepted a position with the Madison, Wisconsin, office of the Internal Revenue Service, largely for the purpose of learning how to steal from the government undetected. Five years with the IRS taught him much that was useful, but when his subsequent career as a freelancer failed to match his ambitions, he yielded to his father's increasingly frail entreaties and threw in his lot with the undead and the droolies. With a certain grim relish, Chipper acknowledged that despite a woeful shortage of glamour, his father's business would at least provide him with the opportunity to steal from the clients and the government alike.

Let us flow in through the big glass doors, cross the handsome lobby (noting, as we do so, the mingled odors of air freshener and ammonia that pervade even the public areas of all such institutions), pass through the door bearing Chipper's name, and find out what that well-arranged young woman is doing here so early.

Beyond Chipper's door lies a windowless cubicle equipped with a desk, a coatrack, and a small bookshelf crowded with computer printouts, pamphlets, and flyers. A door stands open beside the desk. Through the opening, we see a much larger office, paneled in the same burnished wood as the director's door and containing leather chairs, a glass-topped coffee table, and an oatmeal-colored sofa. At its far end looms a vast desk untidily heaped with papers and so deeply polished it seems nearly to glow.

Our young woman, whose name is Rebecca Vilas, sits perched on the edge of this desk, her legs crossed in a particularly architectural fashion. One knee folds over the other, and the calves form two nicely molded, roughly parallel lines running down to the triangular tips of the black high-heeled pumps, one of which points to four o'clock and the other to six. Rebecca Vilas, we gather, has arranged herself to be seen, has struck a pose intended to be appreciated, though certainly not by us. Behind the cat's-eye glasses, her eyes look skeptical and amused, but we cannot see what has aroused these emotions. We assume that she is Chipper's secretary, and this assumption, too, expresses only half of the truth: as the ease and irony of her attitude imply, Ms. Vilas's duties have long extended beyond the purely secretarial. (We might speculate about the source of that nice ring she is wearing as long as our minds are in the gutter, we will be right on the money.)

We float through the open door, follow the direction of Rebecca's increasingly impatient gaze, and find ourselves staring at the sturdy, khaki-clad rump of her kneeling employer, who has thrust his head and shoulders into a good-sized safe, in which we glimpse stacks of record books and a number of manila envelopes apparently stuffed with currency. A few bills flop out of these envelopes as Chipper pulls them from the safe.

"You did the sign, the poster thing?" he asks without turning around.

"Aye, aye," says Rebecca Vilas. "And a splendid day it is we shall be havin' for the great occasion too, as is only roight and proper." Her Irish accent is surprisingly good, if a bit generic. She has never been anywhere more exotic than Atlantic City, where Chipper used his frequent-flier miles to escort her for five enchanted days two years before. She learned the accent from old movies.

"I hate Strawberry Fest," Chipper says, dredging the last of the envelopes from the safe. "The zombies' wives and children mill around all afternoon, cranking them up so we have to sedate them into comas just to get some peace. And if you want to know the truth, I *hate* balloons." He dumps the money onto the carpet and begins to sort the bills into stacks of various denominations.

"Only Oi was wonderin', in me simple country manner," says Rebecca, "why Oi should be requested to appear at the crack o' dawn on the grand day."

"Know what else I hate? The whole music thing. Singing zombies and that stupid deejay Symphonic Stan with his big-band records, whoo boy, talk about thrills."

"I assume," Rebecca says, dropping the stage-Irish accent, "you want me to do something with the money before the action begins."

"Time for another journey to Miller." An account under a fictitious name in the State Provident Bank in Miller, forty miles away, receives regular deposits of cash skimmed from patients' funds intended to pay for extra goods and services. Chipper turns around on his knees with his hands full of money and looks up at Rebecca. He sinks back down to his heels and lets his hands fall into his lap. "Boy, do you have great legs. Legs like that, you ought to be famous."

"I thought you'd never notice," Rebecca says.

Chipper Maxton is forty-two years old. He has good teeth, all his hair, a wide, sincere face, and narrow brown eyes that always look a little damp. He also has two kids, Trey, nine, and Ashley, seven.

and recently diagnosed with ADD, a matter Chipper figures is going to cost him maybe two thousand year in pills alone. And of course he has a wife, his life's partner, Marion, thirty-nine years of age, five foot five, and somewhere in the neighborhood of 190 pounds. In addition to these blessings, as of last night Chipper owes his bookie \$13,000, the result of an unwise investment in the Brewers game. George Rathbun is still bellowing about it. He has noticed, oh, yes he has, Chipper has noticed Marion Vilas's splendidly cantilevered legs.

"Before you go over there," he says, "I was thinking we could kind of stretch out on the sofa and fool around."

"Ah," Rebecca says. "Fool around how, exactly?"

"Gobble, gobble, gobble," Chipper says, grinning like a satyr.

"You romantic devil, you," says Rebecca, a remark that utterly escapes her employer. Chipper thinks he actually is being romantic.

She slides elegantly down from her perch, and Chipper pushes himself inelegantly upright and closes the safe door with his foot. Eyes shining damply, he takes a couple of thuggish, strutting strides across the carpet, wraps one arm around Rebecca Vilas's slender waist and with the other slides the folder of manila envelopes onto the desk. He is yanking at his belt even before he begins to pull Rebecca toward the sofa.

"So can I see him?" says clever Rebecca, who understands exactly how to turn her lover's brains into porridge . . .

. . . and before Chipper obliges her, we do the sensible thing and float out into the lobby, which is still empty. A corridor to the left of the reception desk takes us to two large, blond, glass-inset doors marked DAISY and BLUEBELL, the names of the wings to which they give entrance. Far down the great length of Bluebell, a man in baggy coveralls dribbles ash from his cigarette onto the tiles over which he is dragging, with exquisite slowness, a filthy mop. We move into Daisy.

The functional parts of Maxton's are a great deal less attractive than the public areas. Numbered doors line both sides of the corridor. Hand-lettered cards in plastic holders beneath the numerals give the names of the residents. Four doors along, a desk at which a burly male attendant in an unclean white uniform sits dozing upright faces the entrances to the men's and women's bathrooms—Maxton's, only the most expensive rooms, those on the other side of the lobby, in Asphodel, provide anything but a sink. Dirty mop-swirls harden and dry all up and down the tiled floor, which stretches out before us to improbable length. Here, too, the walls and air seem the same shade of gray. If we look closely at the edges of the hallway, at the juncture of the walls and the ceiling, we see spiderwebs, old stains, accumulations of grime. Pine-Sol, ammonia, urine, and worse scent the atmosphere. As an elderly lady in Bluebell wing likes to say, when you live with a bunch of people who are old and incontinent, you never get far from the smell of caca.

The rooms themselves vary according to the conditions and capacities of their inhabitants. Since nearly everyone is asleep, we can glance into a few of these quarters. Here in D10, a single room two doors past the dozing aide, old Alice Weathers lies (snoring gently, dreaming of dancing in perfect partnership with Fred Astaire across a white marble floor) surrounded by so much of her former life

that she must navigate past the chairs and end tables to maneuver from the door to her bed. Alice still possesses even more of her wits than she does her old furniture, and she cleans her room herself immaculately. Next door in D12, two old farmers named Thorvaldson and Jespersen, who have not spoken to each other in years, sleep, separated by a thin curtain, in a bright clutter of family photographs and grandchildren's drawings.

Farther down the hallway, D18 presents a spectacle completely opposite to the clean, crowded jumble of D10, just as its inhabitant, a man known as Charles Burnside, could be considered the polar opposite of Alice Weathers. In D18, there are no end tables, hutches, overstuffed chairs, gilded mirrors, lamps, woven rugs, or velvet curtains: this barren room contains only a metal bed, a plastic chair, and a chest of drawers. No photographs of children and grandchildren stand atop the chest, and no crayon drawings of blocky houses and stick figures decorate the walls. Mr. Burnside has no interest in housekeeping, and a thin layer of dust covers the floor, the windowsill, and the chest's bare top. D18 is bereft of history, empty of personality; it seems as brutal and soulless as a prison cell. A powerful smell of excrement contaminates the air.

For all the entertainment offered by Chipper Maxton and all the charm of Alice Weathers, it is Charles Burnside, "Burny," we have most come to see.

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