



DOPPELGÄNGER

He's a monster.

David Staller Jr.

Doppelgänger

David Stahler Jr.

 HarperCollins e-books

For my brothers, Daniel and Nathan

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He had been watching for most of the day, watching the far mountains as they faded in and out of clouds, then the trees closer by as they came and went amid the mist as well. Later he began watching the strip of gravel road that wound its way up to the cabin, waiting for her to get home so she could feed him. He was hungry. He'd been hungry all day, and yesterday, too. In the end, he settled on watching the rain patter against the glass, watched the drops as they puckered and trickled, splitting up or drawing together in patterns he couldn't understand. Then finally, as even the drops began to fade against the encroaching darkness, a pair of headlights at the corner, and soon a station wagon pulling up to the house. It was a new car. She usually came back with a new one.

He left the window, ran behind the chair, and crouched in the darkness. A minute later, the door opened. There were footsteps—six slow ones—followed by light in the cabin, causing him to pull back, blinking, even further into the shadows. Footsteps again, closer now. Then the face, illuminated by the overhead light as she bent down to stare into the hollow place behind the chair.

"It's not much of a game if you always hide in the same spot," she said.

He didn't reply. He just pulled his knees in tighter to his chest and studied the face.

It was a full face, smooth and pale, with the slightest hint of a double chin. Its eyes were round and blue, and its hair was yellow like the sun. He liked this face better than her last one. The last one was old. Old and mean, with squinty eyes and a cruel mouth. This face wasn't mean. It even looked like the face of somebody's mother, one that could be warm and kind if the wearer wanted it to be. And maybe with a face like that, the wearer would want it to be.

Still, even though he liked it better, he didn't move. He never moved when she first came back, until she made him. She thought it was a game, but it wasn't—he just had to be sure.

"You can come out," she said. "Come out of there."

He shook his head, stubborn. She looked away, sighed, and then looked back. There was a twitching along the corners of her jaw and hairline, followed by a ripple, as if her face were a pool into which he'd thrown a pebble. For a moment he could see the old eyes, lidless, round and cold; could see the gray skin and nostril folds. It both comforted and terrified him.

She turned away and went over to the woodstove.

"The lights were off," she said. "Were they off yesterday, too? Did you never turn them on?"

He crawled out from behind the chair and shook his head, even though she wasn't looking.

"It's freezing in here." She opened the stove door and peered in. "You let the fire go out." She glanced back at him in disgust. "And after I showed you how to do it."

"I wasn't cold," he said. It wasn't true. He was cold last night.

"Well, I'm cold, and it's only now getting dark. Sit at the table. You probably didn't eat, either."

He sat at the table and waited while she built a new fire. Soon it was warm in the cabin again, and his mouth watered at the smell of the bacon she was cooking to go with the beans.

When she finished, she put the food before him and sat at the table watching him eat. The rain had stopped throbbing against the metal roof, and the quiet, coupled with the warmth of the fire, had coaxed a cricket out of hiding, and then another. He'd listened to the pair the night before, sometimes chirping together, but usually taking turns. Lying alone in the house, he'd wondered if they were trying to outdo each other or if they were just talking. Now, as they set to chirping once more, he smiled vaguely at their song.

“You’ve got to do a better job taking care of yourself,” she scolded as he shoveled beans into his mouth. “Otherwise you’ll never survive.”

“I’ll try harder next time.”

“Do,” she said.

She left the table for a while and came back as he was finishing up, opening her hands to set the two crickets on the table. He watched them take a few tentative hops. They’d stopped chirping, suddenly shy.

“Dessert,” she said.

“I don’t like crickets,” he whined. “They tickle in my mouth.”

“That’s because you don’t kill them first,” she said.

From the corner of his eye, he watched her pick one up and pinch its head precisely. Only when its legs stopped their frantic squirming did she pop the black-shelled creature into her mouth and crunch down on it.

“Just like that,” she said. “Now you try.”

He reached out for the remaining cricket, but it hopped out of reach. She retrieved it for him and held it out, dangling by one leg. Taking it from her, he held it tight until it stopped squirming. Then, looking away, he pinched, closing his eyes at the crush. His eyes still closed, he thrust it in his mouth, feeling it break apart as he chewed. She was right—they did go down better dead.

Opening his eyes, he looked back at his mother. She had the same look of disgust on her face as before.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do,” she said. “It’s ridiculous, a boy your age, can’t keep a fire going, can’t even kill a cricket without squirming. And how old are you?”

“Five,” he whispered.

“That’s right. Five years old. Shameful.”

I met Amber two days after I throttled her boyfriend, Chris Parker. A week later we were in love. Or rather, I was in love with her. It took a while on her part. After all, she thought I was him.

Let me explain—I am a doppelganger.

Not many people have heard of us before. We're a pretty secretive race. So secretive, in fact, that I don't even know that much about us myself. Most of what I know about my kind I learned from my mother, and she wasn't all that informative. I can't even tell people my name. I don't have one. Not one I was born with, anyway. My mother always said names are worthless to a doppelganger. So the whole time I was growing up, she was she, and I was me, and that's as far as it ever got.

The problem is that doppelgangers are loners. We don't keep in touch. We don't call each other or send postcards. We would never e-mail. There's no annual doppelganger convention or home base or family reunion. When you're a doppelganger, you're on your own.

Maybe there just isn't much to know about us. We're pretty simple, actually—primitive, one might say—which is how we've managed to survive for so long.

But there are a few things to know. The most important is that we're shape-shifters. We can change the way we look, the sound of our voice; we can even change our sex, though we usually prefer not to. We're like chameleons, but taken to a higher level.

And it's a good thing we are shape-shifters, because in our natural state we're ugly as sin. Really hideous, to the point where we can barely stand to look at ourselves, let alone others of our kind. A doppelganger mother will even turn from her own child in disgust. I'm sure it's hard to imagine such a thing—after all, a human mother will love even her ugliest child—but with us it's true. It must be an evolutionary thing or something. If so, it works pretty well—a doppelganger can rarely be found in its natural form. I can count on one hand the number of times I saw my mother in her own skin. Who knows, maybe I've just blocked the other times out of my head. Between the mottled, almost transparent flesh, the bulging eyes, and a face with no nose or mouth other than a few slimy slits, you've got the makings of a real freak. Actually, all those drawings of aliens recreated from people's so-called abductions—those things with the egg heads and spindly arms—they're not aliens, they're doppelgangers. And those people who *think* they were abducted didn't go anywhere—they were just lucky enough to have survived. That's my theory, anyway.

Which brings me to another important doppelganger fact: We're killers. Of people, that is. We prey on your race—stalking you, watching your moves, the places you go, learning the patterns of your life. Then, when we think we've got it down, we find a nice quiet little corner to strangle you in and take over. At least that's how it's supposed to work. Sometimes things get a little messy.

But if we're really good, no one can tell it's not you. We look like you, sound like you, even act like you. We take your life and live it in your place. And then, when we get bored or someone seems to be getting too close to the truth, we move on. Though, to be honest, we can only hold a form so long before we start to lose it. It takes a lot of strength to hang on to somebody's life. After a while it even starts to hurt.

Of course, the letting go can be just as bad. Trust me, I know.

Does this sound awful? Are we evil creatures? Monsters? I've been asking myself the question since I was old enough to wonder, and I still haven't figured it out. My mother would say no. In her

view, our people have nothing to do with the concepts of good or evil. “Foolish human conventions,” she once called them. In her mind, we do what we do because that’s who we are.

“Are we bad?” I remember asking one afternoon as I watched her break the neck of a rooster for our supper. I was eight, I think, and had recently learned the truth about doppelganger ways. “Are we bad for killing?”

She looked at me in disgust. “You’ve been watching too much TV,” she said, tossing me the limp bird to pluck. “That’s a foolish question. The kind a human would ask.”

“Well, are we?” I pressed.

“Is the tiger evil when it kills the zebra? Is the shark malicious for biting the swimmer? Does the bee sting out of wickedness?” she said.

I took her meaning. She felt it was our nature to kill—nothing more, nothing less. And it’s true, it’s not like we doppelgangers want to take over the world or enslave the human race or anything like that. Far from it—we prefer to live quietly, below the radar. Still, it troubled me. Not because I didn’t believe her, but because I did. Because I believed a doppelganger was supposed to obey its nature. That’s what bothered me. For even back then, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to live by killing. Not like her.

Anyway, that’s about it. There’s only one other important thing to know about doppelgangers that we can think of. Since we keep to ourselves, we don’t run into each other very often, but when we do, we know it. Even in human form, we can tell. It’s like we can sniff each other out. If two doppelgangers of the same sex happen to meet, they’ll more than likely ignore each other and move on. But if a heganger and sheganger come together, they’re going to mate. It’s practically unavoidable—nature’s way of ensuring the continuation of the species, I guess. My mother told me all about it not long before she kicked me out.

“Even if you don’t want to—and you won’t—you’re going to couple,” she said, “and she will bear an offspring, just as I bore your miserable excuse of a being.”

“What was my father like?” I asked.

“Weak,” she said. “The males always are. But he was there, for that day of our coupling at least.”

“Did you have another child before me?” I asked her. I’d always wanted to know, and since she was in a rare talking mood, I figured I’d ask.

“Once. A long time ago,” she said.

“A boy or a girl?”

“I hardly remember.”

My mother wasn’t exactly the warm and snuggly type. I didn’t take it personally. I knew that’s just how she was. She told me we were all that way, and since I’d never met another one of us, I took her word for her word.

I also knew, without her even having to tell me, that I was a hindrance. Putting aside the fact that—as she often put it—I was an embarrassment with no prospects, there was the simple matter that she’d been holed up with me in our cabin for the last sixteen years, rarely leaving except when the urges got too great to bear. Then she’d disappear for a day, maybe even two or three, and come back as someone else. It was enough to calm her, but not enough to truly satisfy. She wanted to be on the road again and alone, but she couldn’t leave me. For though her urge to kill was strong, equally strong was the urge to make sure her offspring survived. Nature is funny that way.

Still, she must have been convinced I could make it on my own because she eventually got rid of me. I remember the moment she called me out one night onto the porch as she was preparing to leave.

“I’m going,” she said, watching me in the light of the open doorway. “There’s a pack with some food in it on the counter. Enough for a few days. When I get back, you’d better be gone. I’ve babied you long enough.” She shook her head. “When I was your age, I’d already gone through three forms.”

“Where am I supposed to go?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Wherever you want—I don’t really care. Just don’t do anything stupid. And for heaven’s sake, don’t travel in the daylight, at least not until you’ve taken a form. I’ve had to look at you for sixteen years now—you’re not a pleasant sight.”

“I guess this is good-bye, then,” I said. I tried to decide if I should thank her.

“Spare me the sentiment. And don’t bother thanking me,” she said, as if reading my mind. “I tried to teach you, but as far as I can tell, it was a waste of time. You’re my only failure in life. You’re a weak one, even worse than your father.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I suppose it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let you watch all that TV. I figured it would keep you occupied, but it only made you soft, like a human. Still, you’re a clever boy in your own way. Who knows, maybe you’ll get by.”

With that, she headed down the porch steps. A minute later she’d driven away, and I haven’t seen her since.

I went inside and saw the pack on the counter. I’d noticed it earlier in the afternoon, but hadn’t thought anything of it. It had been sitting in front of me the whole time, waiting—the signal of my departure. And now it was time to go.

I didn’t feel too bad about it. I’d only left my immediate surroundings a half dozen times in my entire life. A change of setting was called for. And really, there wasn’t much I’d miss there, least of all my mother. I even contemplated burning the place down before I left, just to spite her, but I realized it was pointless. Somehow I knew she wasn’t coming back. Besides, I didn’t want to toast my books. I’d read everything I could get my hands on—trashy paperbacks, supermarket tabloids, schoolbooks, even instruction manuals—and had amassed quite a little library in one corner of the cabin. Whenever my mother came back with a new car, I’d comb through it, looking for reading material. I almost took a few of the books with me, then decided against it. To bring some and not others—it didn’t seem fair.

What I really hated leaving was the TV. I liked my books well enough, but I’d miss our television the most. I took one last look at it before I left. I’d spent most of the last seven years watching it. It didn’t matter what time of day it was or what was on—soap operas, cartoons, news—I took it all in. And my mother was perfectly happy to let me—it made her life easier, that’s for sure.

I didn’t really know where to go as I left the cabin, so I followed my momentum downhill, walking the half mile or so of our driveway to the main road, then crossing into the woods where I kept on walking. Night had fallen, but it wasn’t bad going—with our bulbous eyes, doppelgangers can see almost as well in the dark as we can in the light. The rain had stopped, and it was actually quite peaceful in the woods. The night birds were calling to each other, and I could see a pair of deer drifting between the trees a ways off.

Maybe I could just stay here, I thought. But I knew it was foolish. Necessity would drive me to civilization. Already I could feel it pulling me, like gravity, toward the lowest spot.

As I headed out into the world, I had no idea what lay ahead of me. I didn’t know anything about Chris Parker, his sister, Echo, or his parents. I didn’t know about the kids at school, the teachers, the coaches, or any of that. Most of all, I didn’t know about Amber or have a clue that in a few short weeks I would be in love with her. Why would I? Doppelgangers aren’t supposed to fall in love. But then, like my mother said, I always was different. The question was—could I be different enough?

It took me about three days to get out of the mountains. It wasn't hard at first, because in the woods I could still walk during the day. But as the trees began to thin out and I started coming across fields and the occasional house, I had to be more careful. By the time I hit the first town, I was pretty much forced to walk at night and find some place to lay low before the sun came up. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been able to sleep, but I was always on edge. I was still in my natural form. If I got caught, who knows what they'd do to me. After all, I'd seen *E.T.*

Of course, there was a way out of this predicament. And when I came across a man stumbling drunk down a backstreet at two in the morning, or spied a boy on his lonely way home from school, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the urge. It's a strange feeling, like hunger, only deeper, a sort of inner clenching that comes in waves and leaves longing in its wake. But I wasn't ready yet to assume a form. That's what I told myself, at least.

I couldn't figure out what my problem was. I mean, after all, I was a doppelganger. I was supposed to follow through on the urges. And it wasn't as if I hadn't been trained. My mother had taught me all the tricks, all the signs to look for, the right way to go about making a proper kill. So what was I waiting for? Maybe my mother was right. Maybe watching too much TV had spoiled me. It was the news, I think, that did it. All those sad stories of human failings or plain old bad luck. I couldn't help it, I just felt sorry for them.

I remember once—I'd say I was around ten or eleven—seeing two parents being interviewed on the local news. They were both crying, taking turns breaking down. Their daughter had disappeared. They showed her picture on the screen—a pretty girl, about my age, with dark pigtails and green eyes.

"They should just be glad they don't have to feed her anymore," I heard a little voice say. I whirled around to see the girl standing there in real life, right behind me. Her clothes and hair were different from the picture, but it was her. I jumped back, almost knocking the TV over, but the girl just giggled and shook her head.

"There's a whole pile of schoolbooks in here," she said, throwing a loaded backpack onto the floor between us. "Since you finished the other ones, I figured you could start working on these. She looks to be about your age, after all."

I nodded but couldn't look her in the eyes. I just took the textbooks out of the pack and began studying them, not wanting to seem ungrateful. Later I realized it wasn't my mother I felt I owed—it was that girl's frantic parents, and the little girl herself. Her form hung around the house for the next two weeks, cooking my meals and splitting wood.

Deep down I knew I would've been in trouble, even without the TV. My squeamishness went way back. When I was younger, I had trouble killing even the smallest of creatures. It didn't matter if it was a squirrel, a hen, or even a cricket that my mother caught for me, I always resisted, holding out until I didn't have a choice. The worst was when she brought home a puppy. I'd seen dog food commercials on TV and was excited to have a pet. She let me play with it three whole days before making me strangle it.

Still, in spite of my hesitation, I knew I'd have to pick a mark sooner or later. The urges would only get stronger, and I couldn't hide from the world forever. Food wasn't really a problem—doppelgangers are hardy creatures. We can go a long time without eating and can gobble down almost

anything. Worms, insects, grubs—it doesn't matter. But shacking up behind a Dumpster every night no way to live. Besides, part of me was eager to prove myself, to show my mother she was wrong. I wasn't weak. I could take care of myself.

I reached the city a week later, following the lights as they got brighter each night until they finally blotted out the stars. Fall was coming, and the air was getting colder. By the time I reached the outskirts of the city, I was feeling pretty low. For the first time, I missed the comfort of my cabin. And the trees, too—spires of fir softer and warmer than these city towers—that had stood between the other mountains and me. I longed for my TV most of all and kept thinking of the shows I watched. And those characters who had joined me every week or every day—it sort of caught me off guard how much I missed them. I found myself thinking about them, worrying about the difficult spots I'd left them in, the problems that dogged them from episode to episode. And now they were all gone. Actually, they were still out there, going on without me. I was the one left alone.

At my lowest point, I even missed my mother. At least she'd been someone to talk to. I was in a train yard at the edge of the city. It was late. Most of the windows in the nearby skyscrapers were dark. There was a full moon out, and I was shivering from the cold snap as I wandered between the glowing boxcars scattered along the tracks. I'd started thinking about her, wondering where she was now, what she might look like, when I saw a light ahead and made my way toward it. Soon I could make out a group of men in the distance. From where I stood, peeking around the corner of a coal car, I could barely tell the four of them apart. They were wrapped up pretty tight against the cold, standing around a barrel fire, like four bundles of rags, passing bottles around, talking loudly. They seemed pretty lit.

I wanted some of that fire. I remember thinking they might just be drunk enough for me to put in a late-night appearance, maybe even scare them off, when I heard a loud cough behind me and nearly jumped out of my skin. I ducked into the shadows and looked around. The cough had come from right behind me, but there was no one in sight.

I heard it again. This time it came in a long spasm, and I realized the sound was coming from a nearby boxcar, its door ajar. Sticking to the shadows, I sidled up to the door. I could hear rattled breathing coming from inside and someone mumbling to himself. The noise made me shiver worse than the cold.

I stole a glance inside. The moon shining into the car illuminated a figure lying on a pile of blankets against the far wall. It was an old man. I could see his beard, a white blaze in the moonlight. He coughed again, even more fiercely. His whole body stiffened and shuddered with the effort, as if every muscle was working to get out whatever was filling his lungs. This was the closest I'd ever been to a human. It was an awful sight.

But I was curious. I paused in the doorway and took a look back. There was no sign of anyone. Either the men at the fire hadn't heard the coughing or didn't care.

I pulled myself up into the car and plopped down next to the old man, shifting so that the light could still shine down on his face. The stench in the car was overwhelming.

"That you, Ridge?" he rasped. His face was covered with sweat.

"No," I said.

He blinked and looked over at me, his eyes widening for a second. My back was to the moon, so he couldn't have seen more than my silhouette, but it was enough.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Nobody," I said. "Just me."

"What are you?" he asked. He didn't sound afraid. "Are you an angel?"

“Something like that.”

He nodded. It was weird. It was like he had been expecting me or something. It was then that I realized what I was there for, why I'd climbed in there to begin with. The old man had figured it out before me.

“I'm in a bad way,” he moaned.

“So it seems,” I said.

“Hand me my bottle, will you?” he asked, and gestured toward the corner of the car. He started coughing so bad he could barely get his words out. “It's in that bag there,” he said.

I went over and poked around the shadows until I found the shopping bag with the bottle in it. I pulled it out and brought it over to him. For a moment he just rested it on his chest, pointing it at the sky. Its curved glass reflected the bright square of the boxcar's open door, a window for the moon. The bottle was empty but for a small bit at the bottom.

“Been saving this,” he said. “It's the good stuff.”

He was wheezing pretty heavily. Then he glanced my way. “Got no regrets,” he said. “'Course I got no family nor no money, neither. But I got no regrets.”

“That's good,” I said. I suddenly didn't want to look at him.

He struggled to pull himself up until he rested on one elbow, and then unscrewed the cap. I had never smelled anything like it before. To this day I still can't stand the smell of whiskey.

“Cheers,” he said, raising the bottle to me.

“Cheers,” I whispered.

He tipped the bottle and emptied it in one swig, then sank back to the floor, gasping. “Better.”

Though the rattle in his chest didn't diminish, his breaths came slower and he seemed to relax a bit. He'd closed his eyes and I thought he'd fallen asleep when I heard him say something. I told him I hadn't caught what he'd said, so he said it again, and this time I leaned way down so that even breathing through my mouth I could smell the rotten, boozy odor of his breath.

“Mercy,” he whispered.

I won't describe what happened next.

I can hardly recall it anyway. I just remember being surprised at the strength with which the old man kicked out before it was over and the grip he had on my arms. Most of all I remember thinking over and over again, *Please don't open your eyes.*

Then he was gone. Moving back to where I'd been sitting earlier, I watched the light play over his body. He looked better in death.

It hit me all at once. I could feel myself stiffen, overwhelmed both by the rush of killing and my revulsion at the deed, and I shuddered the way he had at the end. I felt disgusting and full, like I'd just eaten too much of something sickly sweet.

“There you go,” I said to her, even though my mother wasn't there. Good thing, probably. But I could still hear her voice in my head—“*Well, he was just about dead anyway. Where's the challenge in that? And he practically wanted you to. You did him a favor.*” I don't know, maybe it was what I wanted to hear right then.

I reached over and placed my hands on his chest the way she'd taught me. Soon enough I could feel him drawing into me. I gasped. I didn't think it would hurt that much. It was worse than any pain I'd felt before—like my whole skin was on fire, like a part of me was being torn away, though really it was just rearranging. It didn't take long. A lot less than the actual killing part.

I looked down at my worn hands, the nails dirty and cracked, then picked up the bottle and turned to face the moon. There he was in the glass, his scraggly face staring back at me, wrapped around the bottle's curve like a label.

Voices called out and I ducked back inside, pressing into the darkened corner of the car.

“Loamer!” they cried. A minute later, one of the men from the fire poked his head in.

“There he is,” he said. ~~He climbed in and went over to the old man.~~ “Come on, Loamer. Get your ass up.”

Another man stood outside and peered in. “He sleeping?”

The first man prodded him a little with his foot. “Nope. Old geezer’s kicked the bucket.”

“I get his stuff,” said the man looking in.

“Screw you, Myers. I found him first.”

“Yeah, well, I loaned him five bucks last week and he never paid me back, so call it collateral.”

It went on like this for several minutes before they finally agreed to split the old man’s belongings. Watching them go through his stuff, I could feel myself grow more and more nervous—I had no idea what I’d do if they saw me. But it wasn’t just that. I needed the old man’s clothes, and I was afraid they’d take everything.

Fortunately they didn’t bother with Loamer’s clothing—it must have stunk too much even for them. I breathed a sigh of relief as they left, then crept from the shadows and dressed myself in the remaining rags as quickly as I could before covering the old man with a blanket. It didn’t seem right leaving him all naked like that, dead or not. I was about to cover his face, when something around his neck caught the moonlight.

I’m surprised the two bums missed it. I took the necklace off and held it up to the light. Attached to the chain was a tiny medallion with the picture of a robed man on the front with a halo over his head. “Saint Jude” was engraved on the back in small letters. I didn’t know who that was, but it was kind of cool. I put it around my own neck—a memento of my first time.

The coast was clear, so I dropped out of the boxcar and began stumbling down the tracks, surprised at how stiff my legs felt. I was a bit numb from what I’d just done, but that wasn’t the reason I was lame. Though the change is mostly skin deep, you still take on a little bit of the person you become. And here I was, a sixteen-year-old doppelganger in prime shape suddenly with an old man’s body—I took a bit of getting used to.

After everything that had happened, I was tired and sick. Sick of myself and sick of this place. So an hour later, when the first train came along and I spotted an empty boxcar, I hopped on board. As I watched the city fade and the stars come back, I felt a strange kind of relief. I’d gotten it out of the way, and maybe I’d even helped the old man by doing it. Most of all I was just relieved to stop moving, to finally sleep and let the rocking train decide my destination for me.

For the next couple of weeks, I rode the trains, bumming my way across the country. It wasn't bad. I saw some pretty interesting places. Eventually the mountains shrank to a tiny row of bumps on the horizon, and I crossed the plains and saw fields of wheat ready for harvest, rolling out from the tracks like golden sheets of silk. Then the plains ended and the land turned green and hilly, dotted with farms and the occasional town.

Every few days I'd hop off the train and head into a new town. It took me a while to work up the courage the first time. I had to keep reminding myself who I was—or rather, who I looked like. Though I felt bad about what I'd done to the old man, it was nice to walk out in the open and pass people on the street. 'Course, looking the way I did, they still gave me nasty glances, but at least they didn't run away in horror or try to capture me.

It's funny—some of them actually helped me. I was sitting near a street corner the afternoon of my first excursion, back against a building, just watching people go by and minding my own business, when someone dropped a dollar at my feet. I remember picking it up and looking at it sort of confused. I almost jumped up and ran after the guy to return it. But then another person did the same thing, and some others threw some coins down. Before long I had more than ten bucks. Then there were people who called me names and said all sorts of rotten things. One person did both—first he called me a filthy beggar, then he gave me a five-dollar bill. Humans can be strange.

After a while I had enough money to buy some food. I found a grocery store and stocked up on candy bars and cans of tuna. I even bought some beans. My mother always fixed me beans from a can to the point where I swore I'd never eat beans again when I was on my own, but for some reason I missed them. Since the old man had nothing left for supplies after his friends had gotten through with him, I bought a new spoon, a can opener, and a lighter with the last of the money. Then I hit the road again, catching another train out of town.

And that's how I ended up in Bakersville. It was the fourth town I stopped in, and as far as I could see, it looked like all the others—the same kind of main street with the same kinds of stores, parks, churches, same everything. It was a warm afternoon, and I was on the corner, doing my best to look down and out, which wasn't too hard. I had the whole thing down to an art at this point and was raking in the dough, when these three guys wearing football jackets came by and stopped to check me out. The one on the left was short with curly brown hair. The name stitched on his jacket was Josh. The one on the right was taller and blond. His name was Steve. The kid in the middle had black hair combed back and a sharp nose. That was Chris. He was a good-looking guy—like the kind I used to see on soap operas—but there was an edge to him, as if there was a storm brewing behind his eyes. I sensed trouble.

“Hey, Chris,” Steve sneered, “since when do we have beggars in town?”

“Since never,” said Chris.

“Man, I can smell him from here,” Josh said.

“Spare some change?” I murmured, and held out my hand. I could see it was shaking a little.

“Get a job,” Chris snarled.

I'd seen jocks on TV before. These three didn't seem much different from them, maybe a little meaner. But I knew they liked to joke around and give each other a hard time.

“Sure,” I said. “Just tell me where your mother lives and I’ll be right over.”

~~Looking back, I guess it was a stupid thing to say. But at the time, I was just trying to get along, maybe draw a laugh. Jocks are always talking about each other’s mothers.~~

It sort of worked—the other two laughed. Unfortunately, Chris didn’t.

“You stupid old bastard,” Chris snarled, and took a step toward me. Both his friends grabbed him by the arms and yanked him back.

“Forget it, Parker. Come on,” Josh said, nodding toward the corner.

Shaking his friends off, Chris scowled at me for a second. Then he glanced both ways down the sidewalk and, seeing no one nearby, turned back and spit on me.

It hit me on the arm. I looked down at it and did nothing. But as my heart started to pound, I could feel a little prickle along the back of my neck where the hairs were standing up.

As they walked away, Chris looked back and glared, then the three turned the corner. I was glad to see them go.

I forgot all about Chris and his pals until they showed up later that night. I’d made my way out of town to a deserted meadow off the tracks. I had a little fire going and was trying to enjoy my beans. But it was hard—I was starting to feel a bit at odds with my form, sort of itchy and a bit ragged around the edges. I mean, it wasn’t horrible or anything, but it just depressed me because I had no idea how much time I had before it would get too uncomfortable to bear. And when it did, I’d be right back where I started.

I was in the middle of eating when I heard their voices on the tracks. I glanced up and saw them coming out of the dark. I knew who they were right off—their jackets gave them away.

“Well, look who it is,” Steve shouted.

“So this is where bums go at night,” Josh pitched in.

Chris didn’t say anything. He just smiled when he saw me. As they drew in toward the light, I could see he was carrying a bottle. It looked just like the one the old man had owned and was just as empty. Between the bottle and their weaving, I knew I was in for a rough time. I thought about making a run for it, but I figured I didn’t have a chance outrunning the three of them.

They walked up to the fire and surrounded me. For a minute they didn’t say anything. I could see the other two looking over at Chris. It was like they were trying to decide what to do. Whatever it was, I was sure it involved kicking my ass.

“You guys want some beans?” I asked, and held out the can with the spoon in it. I wasn’t sure if being friendly would work, but I didn’t know what else to say.

Chris kicked the can out my hand. *So much for that*, I thought.

“Shut up,” he said. “Don’t talk.”

Steve threw the rest of the wood I’d gathered on the fire. The clearing darkened. Then Chris poured what was left in the bottle onto the fire. There was a *whoosh!* as the flames leaped up, and for a moment everyone froze, squinting at the light.

“Hey, what are you doing!” Josh hollered. “What a waste.”

“Shut up,” Chris snarled back.

“I’ll buy you some more if you want,” I offered, rubbing my hand.

“I can get it whenever I want,” Chris said, whirling around to face me. “And I told you to shut up.”

He chucked the bottle. I saw it spinning at my head and turned so that it merely glanced off my shoulder. They all laughed.

I shrank into myself as they closed in, but a part of me was starting to get pissed off. I could feel m

heart begin pounding the way it had back in town when Chris had spit on me. Still, I didn't want any trouble. I just wanted them to go away.

"Why are you doing this?" I said, looking up into each of their faces. "I'm nobody."

"That's right," Chris said. "You are nobody. A useless piece of shit. So who cares?"

He pushed me backward, then gave me a kick. I rolled over onto my stomach. Then Steve joined in and pretty soon the two were taking turns kicking me while Josh stood back and watched. I tried crawling away, tried pleading with them to stop, but they just hollered and laughed and kept on going. It didn't really hurt that much, at least not at first. But toward the end, they started kicking harder. Then came the big blow.

I remember seeing Chris come at me with the bottle, but before I could react, Steve nailed me in the side with a good one and I got distracted. The next thing I knew, I felt a shock and heard the sound of breaking glass. I collapsed and sort of went limp for a moment, trying to remember where I was and what was going on. Finally I managed to open my eyes a crack and saw the fire burning, and it all came back to me.

"Dude, you killed him," Josh said. He sounded scared.

"No, look. He's still breathing," Steve said, but he sounded just as scared.

"Hardheaded bastard," I heard Chris say.

"Good thing," Steve said. "Come on, let's get back to the car."

"Yeah, I'm bored," Josh said. "Let's go, Parker. It's getting late."

"What are you talking about?" Chris said. "We're just getting started."

"Funny," Josh said. "I'm out of here. Coming?"

"Yeah," I heard Steve say.

"Don't be a pussy, Josh."

"Screw you, Chris," Josh said. "You're whacked."

Chris laughed. "Go ahead," he said. "I'll catch up with you guys in a few minutes."

I turned to watch Steve and Josh head back toward the tracks. A minute later they disappeared into the darkness. Chris and I were alone.

I managed to push myself back up. I was feeling a bit spinny and there was a pretty good lump rising on the back of my head, but nothing seemed broken. As for Chris, he just sort of paced back and forth in front of me, glaring.

"You got what you came for," I gasped. "Go back with your friends and leave me alone."

"Take it back," he said.

"Take what back?"

"What you said today. About my mother."

It took me a moment to remember what he was talking about. "All right," I said. "I take it back. I'm sorry."

I figured maybe now he'd go, but he just started pacing faster and breathing sort of funny, like he was huffing through his cheeks or something. It kind of creeped me out.

"No, really," I said. "I shouldn't have said it. I'm sorry."

He crouched down and stared into the fire. He wouldn't look at me. It seemed like he was calming down, like maybe I could talk to him.

"You're right about not talking about someone's mother," I said. "I just wasn't thinking. If you knew my mother, you'd probably understand," I tried joking. "You close to your mother?"

"Not really," he muttered.

"Or maybe your father?" I offered. "I never knew my father."

He stood up and loomed over me. "What the hell do you care? You don't know the first thing about my family."

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