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DEAN
KOONTZ



Odd
Interlude

ODD INTERLUDE

#1

An Odd Thomas Story

Dean Koontz

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PART ONE
SOUTH OF MOONLIGHT BAY

Oh! They're too beautiful to live,
much too beautiful.
—Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

ONE

They say that every road leads home if you care to go there. I long for home, for the town of Pi Mundo and the desert in which it blooms, but the roads that I take seem to lead me to one hell after another.

In the front passenger seat of the Mercedes, through the side window, I watch the stars, which appear to be fixed but in fact are ever moving and perpetually receding. They seem eternal, but they are only stars that will burn out one day.

When she was just a child, Stormy Llewellyn lost her mother, Cassiopeia. I lost Stormy when she and I were twenty. One of the northern constellations is called Cassiopeia. No group of distant stars is named for Stormy.

I can see Cassiopeia's namesake high in the night, but I can see Stormy only in my memory, where she remains as vivid as any living person I might meet.

The stars and everything else in the universe began with the big bang, which was when time also began. Some place existed before the universe, exists outside of it now, and will exist when the universe collapses back upon itself. In that mysterious place, outside of time, Stormy waits for me. Only through time can time be conquered, and the way forward is the only way back to my girl.

Yet again, because of recent events, I have been called a hero, and again I don't feel like one.

Annamaria insists that mere hours earlier, I saved entire cities, sparing many hundreds of thousands from nuclear terrorism. Even if that is most likely true, I feel as though, in the process, I have forfeited a piece of my soul.

To foil the conspiracy, I killed four men and one young woman. They would have killed me if given a chance, but the honest claim of self-defense doesn't make the killing lie less heavily upon my heart.

I wasn't born to kill. Like all of us, I was born for joy. This broken world, however, breaks most of us, grinding relentlessly on its metal tracks.

Leaving Magic Beach, fearing pursuit, I had driven the Mercedes that my friend Hutch Hutchison lent me. After several miles, when the memories of recent violence overwhelmed me, I stopped along the side of the road and changed places with Annamaria.

Now, behind the wheel, by way of consolation, she says, "Life is hard, young man, but it was not always so."

I have known her less than twenty-four hours. And the longer I know her, the more she mystifies me. She is perhaps eighteen, almost four years younger than me, but she seems much older. The things she says are often cryptic, though I feel that the meaning would be clear to me if I were wiser than I am.

Plain but not unattractive, petite, with flawless pale skin and great dark eyes, she seems to be about seven months pregnant. Any girl her age, in her condition, alone in the world as she is, ought to be anxious, but she is calm and confident, as if she believes that she lives a charmed life—which often seems to be the case.

We are not linked romantically. After Stormy, there can be none of that for me. Although we do not speak of it, between us there is a kind of love, platonic but deep, strangely deep considering that we

have known each other such a short while. I have no sister, although perhaps this is how I would feel if I were Annamaria's brother.

Magic Beach to Santa Barbara, our destination, is a four-hour drive, a straight shot down the coast. We have been on the road less than two hours when, two miles past the picturesque town of Moonlight Bay and Fort Wyvern—an army base that has been closed since the end of the Cold War—she says, “Do you feel it pulling at you, odd one?”

My name is Odd Thomas, which I explained in previous volumes of this memoir, which I will no doubt explain again in future volumes, but which I will not explain here, in this detour from the main arc of my journey. Until Annamaria, only Stormy called me “odd one.”

I am a short-order cook, though I haven't worked in a diner since I left Pico Mundo eight months earlier. I miss the griddle, the deep fryer. A job like that is centering. Griddle work is Zen.

“Do you feel it pulling?” she repeats. “Like the gravity of the moon pulling tides through the sea.”

Curled on the backseat, the golden retriever, Raphael, growls as if in answer to Annamaria's question. Our other dog, the white German shepherd named Boo, of course makes no sound.

Slumped in my seat, head resting against the cool glass of the window in the passenger door, half hypnotized by the patterns in the stars, I feel nothing unusual until Annamaria asks her question. But then I sense unmistakably that something in the night summons me, not to Santa Barbara but elsewhere.

I have a sixth sense with several facets, the first of which is that I can see the spirits of the lingering dead, who are reluctant to move on to the Other Side. They often want me to bring justice to the murderers or to help them find the courage to cross from this world to the next. Once in a while, I have a prophetic dream. And since leaving Pico Mundo after Stormy's violent death, I seem to be magnetized and drawn toward places of trouble, to which some Power wishes me to travel.

My life has mysterious purpose that I don't understand, and day by day, conflict by conflict, I learn by going where I have to go.

Now, to the west, the sea is black and forbidding except for a distorted reflection of the icy moon which on those waters melts into a long silvery smear.

In the headlights, the broken white line on the blacktop flashes toward the south.

“Do you feel it pulling?” she asks again.

The inland hills are dark, but ahead on the right, pools of warm light welcome travelers at a cluster of enterprises that are not associated with a town.

“There,” I say. “Those lights.”

As soon as I speak, I know we will find death in this place. But there is no turning back. I am compelled to act in these cases. Besides, this woman seems to have become my backup conscience, gently reminding me what is the right thing to do when I falter.

A hundred yards past a sign that promises FOOD FUEL LODGING, an exit from the highway looms. She takes it fast, but with confidence and skill.

As we reach the foot of the ramp and halt at a stop sign, I say, “You feel it, too?”

“I'm not gifted as you are, odd one. I don't feel such things. But I know.”

“What do you know?”

“What I need to know.”

“Which is?”

“Which is what is.”

“And what is this what-is that you know?”

She smiles. “I know what matters, how it all works, and why.”

The smile suggests she enjoys tweaking me by being enigmatic—although there is no meanness in her teasing.

I don’t believe there is any deception in her, either. I am convinced she always speaks the truth. And she does not, as it might seem, talk in code. She speaks the truth profoundly but perhaps as poets speak it: obliquely, employing paradox, symbols, metaphors.

I met her on a public pier in Magic Beach. I know nothing of substance about her past. I don’t even know her last name; she claims that she doesn’t have one. When I first saw Annamaria, I sensed that she harbored extraordinary secrets and that she needed a friend. She has accepted my friendship and has given hers to me. But she holds tightly to her secrets.

The stop sign is at an intersection with a two-lane county road that parallels the state highway. She turns left and drives toward a service station that is open even in these lonely hours before dawn, offering a discount brand of gasoline and a mechanic on call.

Instead of a double score of gasoline pumps that a truck stop might offer, this station provides just four pumps on two islands. At the moment, none is in use.

Dating from the 1930s, the flat-roofed white-stucco building features Art Deco details, including a cast-plaster frieze revealed by lights in the overhanging cornice. The frieze depicts stylized cars and borzoi hounds racing perpetually, painted in yellows, grays, and royal blue.

The place is quaint, a little architectural gem from an age when even humble structures were often artfully designed and embellished. It is impeccably maintained, and the warm light in the panes of the French windows no doubt looks welcoming to an average traveler, although nothing here charms *me*.

Intuition sometimes whispers to me but is seldom loud. Now it is equivalent to a shout, warning me that although this place might be pleasing to the eye, under the attractive surface lies something terrible.

In the backseat, Raphael growls low again.

I say, “I don’t like this place.”

Annamaria is unperturbed. “If you liked it, young man, there’d be no reason for us to be here.”

A tow truck stands beside the station. One of the two bay doors is raised, and even at this hour, a mechanic works on a Jaguar.

A nattily dressed man with a mane of silver hair—perhaps the owner of the Jaguar, recently rescued from the side of the highway—stands watching the mechanic and sipping coffee from a paper cup. Neither of them looks up as we cruise past.

Three eighteen-wheelers—a Mack, a Cascadia, and a Peterbilt—are parked on the farther side of the station. These well-polished rigs appear to belong to owner-operators, because they have custom paint jobs, numerous chrome add-ons, double-hump fenders, and the like.

Beyond the trucks, a long low building appears to be a diner, in a style matching the service station. The eatery announces itself with rooftop red-and-blue neon: HARMONY CORNER / OPEN 24 HOURS. Two pickups and two SUVs are in front of the diner, and when Annamaria parks there, the Mercedes headlights brighten a sign informing us that for cottage rentals we should inquire within.

The third and final element of this enterprise, ten cottages, lies past the restaurant. The units are arranged in an arc, sheltered under mature New Zealand Christmas trees and graceful acacias soft

but magically lighted. It appears to be a motor court from the early days of automobile travel, a place where Humphrey Bogart might hide out with Lauren Bacall and eventually end up in a gunfight with Edward G. Robinson.

“They’ll have two cottages available,” Annamaria predicts as she switches off the engine. When I start to open my door, she says, “No. Wait here. We’re not far from Magic Beach. There may be an all-points bulletin out for you.”

After thwarting delivery of the four thermonuclear devices to terrorists, mere hours earlier, I called the FBI office in Santa Cruz to report that they could find four bomb triggers among the used clothing in a Salvation Army collection bin in Magic Beach. They know I’m not one of the conspirators, but they are eager to talk with me anyway. As far as the FBI is concerned, this is pro night, and they don’t want me leaving the dance with anyone but them.

“They don’t know my name,” I assure Annamaria. “And they don’t have my picture.”

“They might have a good description. Before you show yourself around here, Oddie, let’s see how big a story it is on the news.”

I extract my wallet from a hip pocket. “I’ve got some cash.”

“So do I.” She waves away the wallet. “Enough for this.”

As I slump in the dark car, she goes into the diner.

She is wearing athletic shoes, gray slacks, and a baggy sweater that doesn’t conceal her pregnancy. The sleeves are too long, hanging past the first knuckles of her fingers. She looks like a waif.

People warm to her on sight, and the trust that she inspires in everyone is uncanny. They aren’t likely to turn her away just because she lacks a credit card and ID.

In Magic Beach, she had been living rent-free in an apartment above a garage. She says that although she never asks for anything, people give her what she needs. I have seen that this is true.

She claims there are people who want to kill her, but she seems to have no fear of them, whoever they might be. I have yet to see proof that she fears *anything*.

Earlier, she asked if I would die for her. Without hesitation, I said that I would—and meant it.

I don’t understand either my reaction to her or the source of her power. She is something other than she appears to be. She tells me that I already know what she is and that I only need to accept that knowledge that I already possess.

Weird. Or maybe not.

Long ago, I learned that, even with my sixth sense, I am not a singularity and that the world is a place of layered wonders beyond counting. Most people unconsciously blind themselves to the true nature of existence, because they fear *knowing* that this world is a place of mystery and meaning. It is immeasurably easier to live in a world that’s all surfaces, that means nothing and demands nothing of you.

Because I so love this wondrous world, I am by nature optimistic and of good humor. My friend and mentor Ozzie Boone says buoyancy is one of my better qualities. However, as though to warn that excess buoyancy might lead to carelessness, he sometimes reminds me that shit, too, floats.

But on my worst days, which are rare and of which this is one, I can get down so low that the bottom seems to be where I belong. I don’t even want to look for a way up. I suppose surrender to sadness is a sin, though my current sadness is not a black depression but is instead a sorrow like a long, moody twilight.

When Annamaria returns and gets behind the wheel, she hands me one of two keys. “It’s a nice

place. Sparkling clean. And the food smells good. It's called Harmony Corner because it's all owned and operated by the Harmony family, quite a big clan judging by what Holly Harmony told me. She's the lone waitress this shift."

Annamaria starts the Mercedes and drives to the motor court, repeatedly glancing at me, which I pretend not to notice.

After she parks between two cottages and switches off the engine and the headlights, she says, "Melancholy can be seductive when it's twined with self-pity."

"I don't pity myself," I assure her.

"Then what would you call it? Perhaps self-sympathy?"

I decide not to answer.

"Self-compassion?" she suggests. "Self-commiseration? Self-condolence?"

"I didn't think it was in your nature to needle a guy."

"Oh, young man, I'm not needling you."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Compassionate mockery."

The landscape lamps in the overhanging trees, filtering through leaves that quiver in a gentle breeze, flutter feathery golden light across the windshield and across Annamaria's face and surely across my face as well, as if projected upon us is a film involving winged multitudes.

I remind her, "I killed five people tonight."

"Would it be better if you had failed to resist evil and had killed no one?"

I say nothing.

She persists: "Those would-be mass murderers ... do you suppose they would have surrendered peacefully at your stern request?"

"Of course not."

"Would they have been willing to debate the righteousness of the crimes they intended to commit?"

"The mockery I get, but I can't see how it's compassionate."

She is unrelenting. "Perhaps they would have been willing to go with you on that TV-courtroom show and let Judge Judy decide whether they did or did not have the moral authority to nuke four cities."

"No. They'd be too scared of Judge Judy. *I'm* scared of Judge Judy."

"You did the only thing you could have done, young man."

"Yeah. All right. But why do I have to go from Magic Beach to Harmony Corner in the same night? So much death. No matter how bad those people were, no matter how bad someone might be here ... I'm not a killing machine."

She reaches out to me, and I take her hand. Although I can't explain why, the very contact lifts my spirits.

"Maybe there won't be any killing here," she says.

"But it's all accelerating."

"What is?"

"My life, these threats, the craziness—coming at me like an avalanche."

The feathers of soft light flutter not just across her face but also in her eyes as she squeezes my

hand. “What do you most want, Oddie? What hope drives you? The hope of a little rest, some leisure time? ~~The hope of an uneventful, quiet life as a fry cook, a shoe salesman?~~”

“You know it’s none of that.”

“Tell me. I’d like to hear you say it.”

I close my eyes and see in memory the card that came out of a fortune-telling machine in a carnival arcade six years earlier, when with Stormy at my side I had bought a precious promise for a quarter.

“Ma’am, you know what the card said—‘You are destined to be together forever.’ ”

“And then she died. But you kept the card. You continued to believe in the truth of the card. Do you still believe in it?”

Without hesitation, I reply: “Yes. I’ve got to believe. It’s what I have.”

“Well then, Oddie, if the hope that drives you is the truth of that card, might not the acceleration that frightens you be what you actually want? Might you be quickening toward the fulfillment of the prediction? Could it be that the avalanche coming at you is nothing more than Stormy?”

Opening my eyes, I meet her stare once more. The fluttering wings reflected on her face and in her dark eyes might also be the flicker of golden flames. I am reminded that fire not only consumes; it also purifies. And another word for purification is *redemption*.

Annamaria cocks her head and smiles. “Shall we find a castle with a suitable room where you can do your version of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy to your heart’s content? Or shall we just get on with this?”

I am not out of smiles, after all. “We’d best be getting on with it, ma’am.”

Our only luggage is a hamper of food for us and the golden retriever, which was packed by our friend Blossom Rosedale in Magic Beach. After Raphael finds a patch of grass in which to pee, I follow the dog and Annamaria to Cottage 6, which she has taken for herself, and I leave the hamper with her.

On the stoop, delivery made, as I turn away, she says, “Whatever happens here, trust your heart. It is as true as any compass.”

The white German shepherd, Boo, has been with me for several months. Now he accompanies me to Cottage 7. Because he is a ghost dog, he has no need to pee, and he walks through the door before I can unlock it.

The accommodations are clean and cozy. Sitting area, bedroom alcove, bath. The unit seems to have been remodeled and upgraded within the past few years.

There’s even an under-the-counter fridge that serves as an honor bar. I take a can of beer and pay the tab.

I am exhausted but not sleepy. Now, two hours before dawn, I’ve been awake twenty-two hours; yet my mind spins like a centrifuge.

After switching on the TV, I sit with the remote in an armchair, while Boo explores every cranny of the cottage, his curiosity as keen in death as in life. Satellite service provides a huge smorgasbord of programming. But nearly everything seems stale or wilted.

As far as I can tell from the cable-news channels, the thwarted nuclear terrorists in Magic Beach have not made the news. I suspect they never will. The government will decide that the public prefers to remain ignorant of such disturbing near disasters, and the political class prefers to *keep* the public ignorant rather than arouse in them suspicions of corruption and incompetence in high places.

On NatGeo, in a documentary about big cats, the narrator informs us that panthers are a variety

leopard, black with black spots. A panther with golden eyes stares directly at the camera, bares its fangs, and in a low, rough voice says, "Sleep."

I realize that I am less than half awake, in that twilight consciousness where dreams and the real world sometimes intersect. Before I drop off and spill the beer, I put the nearly empty can on the table beside the armchair.

On the screen, a panther seizes an antelope with its claws, pulls the prey off its feet, and tears out its throat. The graphic violence does not shock me awake but instead weighs on me, wearies me. Lifting its head, the triumphant cat stares at me, blood and saliva drizzling from its mouth, and says "Sleep ... sleep."

I can feel the words as well as hear them, sound waves issuing from the TV speakers, pulsing through me, a kind of sonic massage that relaxes my tense muscles, soothes the taut fibers of my nerves.

Several hyenas test the panther as it drags the antelope into a tree to feed on it in higher branches where neither these wolfish rivals nor lions—which also do not climb—are able to follow.

A hyena, wild-eyed and loathsome, bares its ragged teeth at the camera and whispers, "Sleep." The rest of the pack repeats the word, "Sleep," and the sonic waves quiver through me with a most pleasing narcotic effect, as does the voice of the panther in the tree, while the head of the antelope lolls on its ruined neck, its fixed eyes glazed with the most perfect sleep of all.

I close my eyes, and the panther of the waking dream follows me into slumber. I hear the soft but heavy padding of its paws, feel its sinuous form slinking through my mind. For a moment, I am disquieted, but the intruder purrs, and its purring calms me. Now the big cat is climbing into another tree, and although I am not dead, the creature carries me with it, for I am powerless to resist. I am not afraid, because it tells me that I should have no fear, and as before, not just the meaning of the words but also the sound waves of which they are formed seem to oil the waters of my mind.

This is the tree of night, black branches reaching high into the starless sky, and nothing can be seen but the panther's lantern eyes, which grow in size and brightness until they are owl-like. In that low, rough voice, it says, *Why can't I read you?* Perhaps it is neither owl nor panther, because now I feel what seem to be fingers, as if I am a book of countless pages that are being turned, pages that prove to be blank, the fingers sliding across the paper as if seeking the raised dots of a biography in braille.

The mood changes, the would-be reader's frustration is palpable, and in the darkness, the eyes are suddenly green with elliptical pupils. If this is a dream, it's also something more than a dream.

Although a dream shapes itself and can't be consciously scripted by the dreamer, when I wish for light, I have the power to call it forth. Darkness begins to recede from the tangled black limbs of the tree, and the shape of the would-be reader begins to coalesce out of the gloom.

I am *thrust* awake, as if the mysterious figure in the nightmare has thrown me out of it. I scramble to my feet, aware of movement to my right, at the periphery of vision, but when I pivot toward it, I find myself alone.

Behind me, something thrums, as if a pair of practiced hands are strumming arpeggios from a harp with only bass strings. When I turn, no origin of the sound is obvious—and now it arises not from where it had been but from the alcove in which stands the bed.

Seeking the source, I am led into the alcove and then to the bathroom door, which is ajar. Darkness lies beyond.

In my exhaustion and emotional confusion, I have forgotten my pistol. It's tucked under the front passenger seat of the Mercedes.

The gun once belonged to the wife of a minister in Magic Beach. Her husband, the reverend, had shot her to death before she could shoot him. In their particular denomination of Christianity, the faithful are evidently too impatient to wait for prayer to solve their problems.

I push open the bathroom door and switch on the lights. The thrumming swells louder, but no one comes from behind me.

Turning, I discover that Boo has returned, but he is not the primary point of interest. My attention is drawn to what has also transfixed the dog: a quick transparent *something*, visible only by the distortion that it imparts to things as it crosses the alcove, enters the sitting area, seems to spring into the TV screen without shattering it, and is gone.

That presence is so fast and shapeless, I half suspect that I have imagined it, except that the wildlife documentary on the TV ripples with concentric rings, as if the vertical screen is a horizontal body of water into which a stone has been dropped.

Blinking repeatedly, I wonder if what I'm seeing is real or if I have a problem with my vision. The phenomenon diminishes gradually until the images on the screen become clear and stable once more.

This was no ghost. When I see one of the lingering dead, it is the very image of the once-living person, and it doesn't move quicker than the eye can follow.

The dead don't talk, and neither do they make other sounds. No rattling of chains. No ominous footsteps. They have no weight to make the stair treads creak. And they certainly don't strum arpeggios from a bass-string harp.

I look at Boo.

Boo looks at me. His tail doesn't wag.

TWO

I am now wide awake.

The dream of tree and panther lasted less than five minutes. I am still suffering serious sleep deprivation, but I am as alert as might be a man in a foxhole when he knows the enemy will charge any moment.

Leaving the lights on rather than return to a dark cottage, I step outside, lock the door, and retrieve the pistol from under the passenger seat of the Mercedes.

I am wearing a sweatshirt over a T-shirt, and I tuck the pistol between them, under my belt, in the small of my back. It isn't an ideal way to carry a weapon, but I don't have a holster. And in the past when I have resorted to this method, I have never accidentally shot off a chunk of my butt.

Although I don't like guns and do not usually carry one, and although killing even the worst of men in self-defense or in defense of the innocent leaves me sickened, I am not so fanatically antigun that I would rather be murdered—or watch a murder be committed—than use one.

Boo materializes at my side.

He is the only spirit of an animal that I have ever seen. An innocent, he surely has no fear of what he might face on the Other Side. Although he is immaterial and cannot bite a bad guy, I believe that he lingers here because there will come a moment when he will be Lassie to my Timmy and will save me from falling into an abandoned well or the equivalent.

Sadly, most kids these days don't know Lassie. The media dog that they know best is Marley, who is less likely to save children from a well or from a burning barn than he is to barf on them and accidentally start the barn fire in the first place.

The oppressive mood infecting me since recent events in Magic Beach seems to have lifted. Curiously, nothing restores my common sense and puts me back on the firm ground of reason like this creepy encounter with something apparently supernatural.

In the lighted branches of the trees, the weak breath of the night makes the leaves quiver as if in anticipation of an approaching evil. On the ground around me, trembling patterns of light and shadow create the illusion that the land is unstable underfoot.

In the arc of cottages, no lamps brighten any windows except those in my unit and Annamaria's, although five other vehicles are parked here. If those guests of the Harmony Corner motor court are sleeping, perhaps a secret reader pages through their memories and seeks ... Seeks what? Merely to know them?

The reader—whoever or whatever it might be—wants something more than to know me. As surely as the antelope in the documentary is a few days' worth of meals to the panther, I am prey, perhaps not to be eaten but in some way to be used.

I look at Boo.

Boo looks at me. Then he looks at Annamaria's lighted windows.

At Cottage 6, as I rap lightly on the door, it swings open as though the latch must not have been engaged. I step inside and find her sitting in a chair at a small table.

She has taken an apple from the hamper, peeled and sectioned it. She is sharing the fruit with

Raphael. Sitting at attention beside her chair, the golden retriever crunches one of the slices and licks his chops.

Raphael looks at Boo and twitches his tail, happy that there's no need to share his portion with ghost dog. All dogs see lingering spirits; they aren't as self-deluded about the true nature of the world as most people are.

"Has anything unusual happened?" I ask Annamaria.

"Isn't something unusual always happening?"

"You've had no ... no visitor of any kind?"

"Just you. Would you like some apple, Oddie?"

"No, ma'am. I think you're in danger here."

"Of the many people who want to kill me, none is in Harmony Corner."

"How can you be sure?"

She shrugs. "No one here knows who I am."

"I don't even know who you are."

"You see?" She gives another slice of apple to Raphael.

"I won't be next door for a while."

"All right."

"In case you scream for me."

She appears amused. "Whyever would I scream? I never have."

"Never in your whole life?"

"One screams when one is startled or frightened."

"You said people want to kill you."

"But I'm not afraid of them. You do what you need to do. I'll be fine."

"Maybe you should come with me."

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"Here and there."

"I'm already here, and I've *been* there."

I look at Raphael. Raphael looks at Boo. Boo looks at me.

"Ma'am, you asked if I would die for you, and I said yes."

"That was very sweet of you. But you're not going to have to die for me tonight. Don't be in such a hurry."

I once thought Pico Mundo had more than its share of eccentric folks. Having traveled some, I now know eccentricity is the universal trait of humanity.

"Ma'am, it might be dangerous to sleep."

"Then I won't sleep."

"Should I get you some black coffee from the diner?"

"Why?"

"To help you stay awake."

"I suppose you sleep when you need to. But you see, young man, I only sleep when I want to."

“How does that work?”

“Splendidly.”

“Don’t you want to know why it could be dangerous to sleep?”

“Because I might fall out of bed? Oddie, I trust your admonition isn’t frivolous, and I will remain awake. Now go do whatever you have to do.”

“I’m going to snoop around.”

“Then snoop, snoop,” she says, making a shooing motion.

I retreat from her cottage and close the door behind me.

Already Boo is walking toward the diner. I follow him.

He fades away like fog evaporating.

I don’t know where he goes when he dematerializes. Maybe a ghost dog can travel to and from the Other Side as he pleases. I have never studied theology.

For the last day of January along the central coast, the night is mild. And quiet. The air smells faintly, pleasantly, of the sea. Nevertheless, my sense of impending peril is so great that I won’t be surprised if the ground opens under my feet and swallows me.

Big moths caper around the sign on the roof of the diner. Their natural color must be white, because they become entirely blue or red depending on which neon is closer to them. Bats, dark and changeless, circle ceaselessly, feeding on the bright swarm.

I don’t see signs and portents in everything. The voracious yet silent flying rodents chill me, however, and I decide not to stop first at the diner, as had been my intention.

Past the three eighteen-wheelers, at the service station, the Jaguar is gone. The mechanic is sweeping the floor of the garage.

At the open bay door, I say, “Good morning, sir,” as cheerfully as if a gorgeous pink dawn had already painted the sky and choirs of songbirds are celebrating the gift of life.

When he looks up from his work with the push broom, it’s a *Phantom of the Opera* moment. A grisly scar extends from his left ear, across his upper lip, through his lower lip, to the right side of his chin. Whatever the cause of the wound, it appears as if it might have been sewn up not by a doctor but instead by a fisherman using a hook and a length of leader wire.

With no apparent self-consciousness about his appearance, he says, “Hello there, son,” and favors me with a grin that would make Dracula back off. “You’re up even before Wally and Wanda have thought about goin’ to bed.”

“Wally and Wanda?”

“Oh, sorry. Our possums. Some say them two is just big ugly red-eyed rats. But a marsupial isn’t a rat. And ugly is like they say about beauty—it’s in the eye of the beholder. How you feel about possums?”

“Live and let live.”

“I make sure Wally and Wanda get the throw-away food from the diner each and every night. It makes ’em fat. But their life is hard, what with mountain lions and bobcats and packs of coyotes with a taste for possum. Don’t you think possums they have a hard life?”

“Well, sir, at least Wally has Wanda and she has Wally.”

Abruptly his blue eyes glimmer with unshed tears and his scarred lips tremble, as if he is nearly undone by the thought of possum love.

He appears to be about forty, though his hair is iron gray. In spite of the horrific scar, he has a ~~avuncular quality suggesting that he's as good with children as he is kind to animals.~~

“You’ve gone right to the very heart of it. Wally has Wanda, and Donny has Denise, which make anythin’ tolerable.”

Stitched on the breast pocket of his uniform shirt is the name DONNY.

He blinks back his tears and says, “What can I do for you, son?”

“I’ve been up awhile, need to stay awake awhile longer. I figure anyplace truckers stop must sell caffeine tablets.”

“I’ve got NoDoz in the gum-and-candy case. Or in the vendin’ machine, there’s high-octane stuff like Red Bull or Mountain Dew, or that new energy drink called Kick-Ass.”

“They really named it Kick-Ass?”

“Aren’t no standards anymore, anywhere, in anythin’. If they thought it would sell better, they call the stuff Good Shit. Excuse my language.”

“No problem, sir. I’ll take a package of NoDoz.”

Leading me through the garage to the station office, Donny says, “Our seven-year-old, he learned about sex from some Saturday-mornin’ cartoon show. Out of nowhere one day, Ricky he says he don’t want to be either straight or gay, it’s *all* disgustin’. We unplugged our satellite dish. No standards anymore. Now Ricky he watches all them old Disney and Warner Brothers toons on DVD. You never have to worry if maybe Bugs Bunny is goin’ to get it on with Daffy Duck.”

In addition to the NoDoz, I purchase two candy bars. “Does the vending machine accept dollars or do I need change?”

“It takes bills just fine,” Donny says. “Young as you look, you can’t have been drivin’ a rig long.”

“I’m not a trucker, sir. I’m an out-of-work fry cook.”

Donny follows me outside, where I get a can of Mountain Dew from the vending machine. “My Denise, she’s a fry cook over to the diner. You got yourself your own private language.”

“Who does?”

“You fry cooks.” The two sections of his scar become misaligned when he grins, as if his face is coming apart like a piece of dropped crockery. “Two cows, make ’em cry, give ’em blankets, and make ’em with pigs.”

“Diner lingo. That’s a waitress calling out an order for two hamburgers with onions, cheese, and bacon.”

“That stuff tickles me,” he says, and indeed he looks tickled. “Where you been a fry cook—where you had work, I mean?”

“Well, sir, I’ve been bouncing around all over.”

“It must be nice seein’ new places. Haven’t seen no new place in a long time. Sure would like to take Denise somewhere fresh. Just the two of us.” His eyes fill with tears again. He must be the most sentimental auto mechanic on the West Coast. “Just the two of us,” he repeats, and under the tenderness in his voice, which any mention of his wife seems to evoke, I hear a note of desperation.

“I guess with children it’s hard to get away, just you two.”

“There’s never no gettin’ away. No way, no how.”

Maybe I’m imagining more in his eyes than is really there, but I suspect that these latest unshed tears are as bitter as they are salty.

When I wash down a pair of NoDoz with the soda, he says, “You jolt your system like this a lot?”

“Not a lot.”

“You do too much of this, son, you’ll give yourself a for-sure bleedin’ ulcer. Too much caffeine eats away the stomach lining’.”

I tilt my head back and drain the too-sweet soda in a few long swallows.

When I drop the empty can in a nearby trash barrel, Donny says, “What’s your name, boy?”

The voice is the same, but the tone is different. His affability is gone. When I meet his eyes, they’re still blue, but they have a steely quality that I have not seen before, a new directness.

Sometimes an unlikely story can seem too unlikely to be a lie, and therefore it allays suspicion. So I decide on: “Potter. Harry Potter.”

His stare is as sharp as the stylus on a polygraph. “That sounds as real as if you’d said ‘Bond. James Bond.’ ”

“Well, sir, it’s the name I’ve got. I always liked it until the books and movies. About the thousandth time someone asked me if I was really a wizard, I started wishing my name was just about anything else, like Lex Luthor or something.”

Donny’s friendliness and folksy manner have for a moment made Harmony Corner seem almost as benign as Pooh Corner. But now the air smells less of the salty sea than of decaying seaweed, the pump-island glare seems as harsh as the lights of an interrogation room in a police station, and when I look up at the sky, I cannot find Cassiopeia or any constellation that I know, as if Earth has turned away from all that is familiar and comforting.

“So if you’re not a wizard, Harry, what line of work do you claim to be in?”

Not only is his tone different, but also his diction. And he seems to have developed a problem with his short-term memory.

Perhaps he registers my surprise and correctly surmises the cause of it, because he says, “Yeah, I know what you said, but I suspect that’s not the half of it.”

“Sorry, but fry cook is the whole of it, sir. I’m not a guy of many talents.”

His eyes narrow with suspicion. “Eggs—wreck ’em and stretch ’em. Cardiac shingles.”

I translate as before. “Serving three eggs instead of two is stretching them. Wrecking them means scrambling. Cardiac shingles are toast with extra butter.”

With his eyes squinted to slits, Donny reminds me of Clint Eastwood, if Clint Eastwood were eight inches shorter, thirty pounds heavier, less good-looking, with male-pattern baldness, and badly scarred.

He makes a simple statement sound like a threat: “Harmony doesn’t need another short-order cook.”

“I’m not applying for a job, sir.”

“What *are* you doing here, Harry Potter?”

“Seeking the meaning of my life.”

“Maybe your life doesn’t have any meaning.”

“I’m pretty sure it does.”

“Life is meaningless. Every life.”

“Maybe that works for you. It doesn’t work for me.”

He clears his throat with a noise that makes me wonder if he indulges in unconventional personal grooming habits and has a nasty hairball stuck in his esophagus. When he spits, a disgusting wad of mucus splatters the pavement, two inches from my right shoe, which no doubt was his intended target.

“Life is meaningless except in your case. Is that it, Harry? You’re better than the rest of us, huh?”

His face tightens with inexplicable anger. Gentle, sentimental Donny has morphed into Donny the Hun, descendant of Attila, who seems capable of sudden mindless violence.

“Not better, sir. Probably worse than a lot of people. Anyway, it isn’t a matter of better or worse. I’m just different. Sort of like a porpoise, which looks like a fish and swims like a fish but isn’t a fish because it’s a mammal and because no one wants to eat it with a side of chips. Or maybe like a prairie dog, which everyone calls a dog but isn’t really a dog at all. It looks like maybe a chubby squirrel, but it isn’t a squirrel, either, because it lives in tunnels, not in trees, and it hibernates in the winter but isn’t a bear. A prairie dog wouldn’t say it was better than real dogs or better than squirrels or bears, just different like a porpoise is different, but of course it’s nothing like a porpoise, either. So I think I’ll go back to my cottage and eat my candy bars and think about porpoises and prairie dogs until I can express this analogy more clearly.”

Sometimes, if I pretend to be an airhead and a bit screwy, I can convince a bad guy that I’m no threat to him and that I’m not worth the waste of time and energy he would have to expend to do bad things to me. On other occasions, my pretense infuriates them. Walking away, I half expect to be clubbed to the ground with a tire iron.

THREE

The door to Cottage 6 opens as I approach it, but no one appears on the threshold.

When I step inside, closing the door behind me, I find Annamaria on her knees, brushing the golden retriever's teeth.

She says, "Blossom once had a dog. She put an extra toothbrush in the hamper for Raphael, and a tube of liver-flavored toothpaste."

The golden sits with head lifted, remarkably patient, letting Annamaria lift his flews to expose his teeth, refraining from licking the paste off the brush before it can be put to work. He rolls his eyes at me, as if to say *This is annoying, but she means well.*

"Ma'am, I wish you'd keep your door locked."

"It's locked when it's closed."

"It keeps drifting open."

"Only for you."

"Why does that happen?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I ought to have asked—*how* does that happen?"

"Yes, that would have been the better question."

The liver-flavored toothpaste has precipitated significant doggy drool. Annamaria pauses in her brushing and uses a hand towel to rub dry the soaked fur on Raphael's jaws and chin.

"Before I went snooping, I should have warned you not to watch television. That's why I came back. To warn you."

"I'm aware of what's on TV, young man. I'd as soon set myself on fire as watch most of it."

"Don't even watch the good stuff. Don't switch it on. I think television is a pathway."

As she squeezes more toothpaste onto the brush, she says, "Pathway for what?"

"That's an excellent question. When I have an answer, I'll know why I've been drawn to Harmon Corner. So how does the door open just for me?"

"What door?"

"This door."

"That door is closed."

"Yes, I just closed it."

"You lovely boy, pull your tongue in," she instructs the dog, because he's been letting it loll.

Raphael pulls in his tongue, and she sets to work on his front teeth as just the tip of his tail wags.

The caffeine has not yet begun to kick in, and I have no more energy to pursue the issue of the door. "Up at the service station, there's this mechanic named Donny. He has two personalities, and the second one is likely to use a lug wrench in ways its manufacturer never intended. If he comes knocking at your door, don't let him in."

"I don't intend to let anyone in but you."

“That waitress you spoke to when you rented the cottages—”

“Holly Harmony.”

“Was she ... normal?”

“She was lovely, friendly, and efficient.”

“She didn’t do anything strange?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Like ... she didn’t pluck a fly out of the air and eat it or anything?”

“What a curious thing to ask.”

“Did she?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Did she keep almost breaking into tears?”

“Not at all. She had the sweetest smile.”

“Maybe she smiled too much?”

“It isn’t possible to smile too much, odd one.”

“Did you ever see the Joker in *Batman*?”

Finished with Raphael’s dental hygiene, Annamaria puts the toothbrush aside and uses the hand towel to mop his face once more. The retriever grins like the Joker.

As she picks up a grooming comb and begins to work on Raphael’s silky coat, she says, “The little finger on her right hand ended between the second and third knuckles.”

“Who? The waitress? Holly? You said she was normal.”

“There’s nothing abnormal about losing part of a finger in an accident. It’s not in the same category as eating a fly.”

“Did you ask her how it happened?”

“Of course not. That would have been rude. The little finger on her *left* hand ends between the first and second knuckles. It’s just a stump.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Two chopped little fingers is *definitely* abnormal.”

“Both injuries could have happened in the same accident.”

“Yeah, of course, you’re right. She could have been juggling a meat cleaver in each hand when she fell off the unicycle.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, young man.”

I don’t know why her mild disapproval stings, but it does.

As though he understands that I have been gently reprimanded, Raphael stops grinning. He favors me with a stern look, as though he suspects that if I’m capable of being sarcastic with Annamaria, I might be the kind of guy who sneaks biscuits from the dog-treat jar and eats them himself.

I say, “Donny the mechanic has a huge scar across his face.”

“Did you ask *him* how it happened?” Annamaria inquires.

“I would have, but then Sweet Donny became Angry Donny, and I thought if I asked, he might demonstrate on *my* face.”

“Well, I’m pleased that you’re making progress.”

“If this is the rate of progress I can expect, we better rent the cottages by the year.”

As she makes long, easy strokes with the comb, the teeth snare loose hairs from the dog's glorious coat. "You haven't already stopped snooping for the night, have you?"

"No, ma'am. I've just begun to snoop."

"Then I'm sure you'll get to the truth of things shortly."

Raphael decides to forgive me. He grins at me once more, and in response to the tender grooming that he's receiving, he lets out a sound of pure bliss—part sigh, part purr, part whimper of delight.

"You sure do have a way with dogs, ma'am."

"If they know you love them, you'll always have their trust and devotion."

Her words remind me of Stormy, the way we were with each other, our love and trust and devotion. I say, "People are like that, too."

"Some people. Generally speaking, however, people are more problematic than dogs."

"The bad ones, of course."

"The bad ones, the ones adrift between good and bad, and some of the good ones. Even being loved profoundly and forever doesn't necessarily inspire devotion in them."

"That's something to think about."

"I'm sure you've thought about it often, Oddie."

"Well, I'm off to snoop some more," I declare, turning toward the door, but then I don't move.

After combing the long, lush fringe of fur on the dog's left foreleg, which retriever aficionados call feathers, Annamaria says, "What is it?"

"The door is closed."

"To keep out the mercurial mechanic, Donny, about whom you have so effectively warned me."

"It only opens itself when I'm approaching it from outside."

"Your point being—what?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying."

I look at Raphael. Raphael looks at Annamaria. Annamaria looks at me. I look at the door. The door remains closed.

Finally, I take the knob in hand and open the door.

She says, "I knew you could do it."

Gazing out at the night-shrouded motor court, where the trees discreetly shiver, I dread the possibility of bloodshed that I suspect I will be required to commit. "There's no real harmony in Harmony Corner."

She says, "But there's a corner in it. Make sure you're not trapped there, young man."

FOUR

In case I am being watched, I don't immediately continue my snooping, but return to my cottage and lock the door behind me.

Not many years ago, nearly 100 percent of people who thought they were being constantly watched were certifiable paranoids. But recently it was revealed that, in the name of public safety, Homeland Security and more than a hundred other local, state, and federal agencies are operating aerial surveillance drones of the kind previously used only on foreign battlefields—at low altitudes outside the authority of air-traffic control. Soon, the bigger worry will not be that, as you walk your dog, you are secretly being watched but that the rapidly proliferating drones will begin colliding with one another and with passenger aircraft, and that you'll be killed by the plummeting drone that was monitoring you to be sure that you picked up Fido's poop in a federally approved pet-waste bag.

Having returned to my cottage, I consider switching on the TV to a channel running classic movies to see if Katharine Hepburn or Cary Grant will suggest that I should sleep. But the caffeine will soon pin my eyelids open, and I suspect that I need to be at least on the brink of nodding off before the invader—whoever or whatever it might be—can access me through the television.

I switch off most of the lights, so that from outside it might appear that I'm finished exploring Harmony Corner and am leaving one lamp aglow as a night-light. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I eat a candy bar.

One of the benefits of living in almost constant jeopardy is that I don't need to worry about things like cholesterol and tooth decay. I'm sure to be killed long before my arteries can be closed by plaque. As for dental cavities, I tend instead to lose my teeth in violent confrontations. Not yet twenty-two, I already have seven teeth that are man-made implants.

I eat the second candy bar. Soon, thanks to all the sugar and caffeine, I should be so wired that I'll be able to receive the nearest tower-of-power radio broadcast through the titanium pins that lock those seven artificial teeth into my jawbone. I hope it won't be a greatest-hits station specializing in seventies disco tunes.

I switch off the last lamp, which is on a nightstand.

Beyond the bed, in the back wall of the cottage, one crank-operated casement window offers a view of the night woods. The two panes open inward to provide fresh air, and a screen keeps out moths and other pests. The screen is spring-loaded from the top and easily removed. From outside, I reinstall it with little noise.

The final aspect of my sixth sense is what Stormy called psychic magnetism. If I need to find someone whose whereabouts I do not know, I keep his name at the forefront of my thoughts and his face in my mind's eye. Then I walk or bicycle, or drive, with no route intended, going where whim takes me, although in fact I am being drawn toward the needed person by an uncanny intuition. Usually within half an hour, often faster, I locate the one I seek.

Psychic magnetism also works—although less well—when I'm searching for an inanimate object and occasionally even when I'm searching for a place that I can name only by its function. For instance, in this case, wandering behind the arc of cottages and through the moonlit woods, I keep in mind the word *lair*.

A unique Presence is at work in Harmony Corner, someone or something that can travel by television and push a drowsy man into deep sleep, entering his dreams with the expectation that, while he sleeps, his lifetime of memories can be read, his mind searched as easily as a burglar might ransack a house for valuables. That entity, human or otherwise, must have a physical form, for in my experience no spirit possesses such powers. This creature resides somewhere, and considering its seemingly predatory nature, where it resides is best described as a lair rather than a home.

Soon I arrive at the end of the woods, beyond which the grassy land descends in pale, gentle waves toward the shore, perhaps three hundred yards distant. Incoming from the west, dark waves of a more transitory nature ceaselessly disassemble themselves on the sand. The declining moon silvers the knee-high grass, the beach, and the foam into which the breaking waves dissolve.

I am overlooking a cove. On the highlands to the north are the lights of the service station and the diner. A black ribbon, perhaps a lane of pavement, unspools from behind the diner, through the moon-frosted grass, diagonally over the descending series of slopes and along the vales, to a cluster of buildings just above the beach, near the southern end of the cove.

They appear to be seven houses, one larger than the other six, but all of generous size. In two of the structures, a few windows glow with lamplight, but five houses are dark.

If the extended Harmony family, including sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, staff the enterprise just off the coast highway, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, they will live nearby. There must be their private little enclave of homes, a picturesque and privileged place to live, though somewhat remote.

Although this is a mild January, snakes are most likely not as active in these meadows as they will be in warmer seasons, and especially not in the coolness of the night. I particularly dislike snakes. I was once locked overnight in a serpentarium where many specimens had been released from the glass viewing enclosures. If they had offered me apples from the tree of knowledge, I might have hoped to cope with that, but they wanted only to inject me with their venom, denying me the chance to undo the world's disastrous history.

I wade down through the sloping meadows, grass to my knees, until I come, unbitten by lurking serpents and unscathed by plummeting drones, to the blacktop lane, which I follow toward the houses.

They are charming Victorian homes graced with generous porches and decorative millwork—some call it gingerbread—exuberantly applied. In the moonlight, they all appear to be in the Gothic Revival style: asymmetrical, irregular massings with steeply pitched roofs that include dormer windows, other windows surmounted by Gothic arches, and elaborately trimmed gables.

Six houses stand side by side on big lots, and the seventh—which is also the largest—presides over the others from a hilltop, thirty feet above them and a hundred feet behind. Lights are on in a second-floor room of the dominant residence, and also in several rooms on the ground floor in the last of the six front-row dwellings.

At first I feel pulled toward that last house on the lane. As I reach it, however, I find myself continuing past the end of the pavement and down a slope, along a rutted dirt track on which broken seashells crunch and rattle underfoot.

The beach is shallow, bordered by a ten-foot bank overgrown with brush, perhaps wild Olearia. About three feet high, the waves crest late, collapsing abruptly with a low rumble, as if slumbering dragons are grumbling in their sleep.

Thirty feet to the north, movement catches my eye. Alert to my arrival, someone drops to a crouch on the sand.

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