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In memory of
THOMAS WILLIAMS,
1926–1990:
poet, novelist, and
great American storyteller.

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Myth, Belief, Faith, and Ripley's *Believe It or Not!*

When I was a kid I believed everything I was told, everything I read, and every dispatch sent out by my own overheated imagination. This made for more than a few sleepless nights, but it also filled the world I lived in with colors and textures I would not have traded for a lifetime of restful nights. I knew even then, you see, that there were people in the world—too many of them, actually—who whose imaginative senses were either numb or completely deadened, and who lived in a mental state akin to color-blindness. I always felt sorry for them, never dreaming (at least then) that many of the unimaginative types either pitied me or held me in contempt, not just because I suffered from a number of irrational fears but because I was deeply and unreservedly credulous on almost every subject. “There’s a boy,” some of them must have thought (I know my mother did), “who will buy the Brooklyn Bridge not just once but over and over again, all his life.”

There was some truth to that then, I suppose, and if I am to be honest, I suppose there’s some truth to it now. My wife still delights in telling people that her husband cast his first Presidential ballot, at the tender age of twenty-one, for Richard Nixon. “Nixon said he had a plan to get us out of Vietnam,” she says, usually with a gleeful gleam in her eye, “*and Steve believed him!*”

That’s right; Steve believed him. Nor is that all Steve has believed during the often-eccentric course of his forty-five years. I was, for example, the last kid in my neighborhood to decide that all those street-corner Santas meant there was no *real* Santa (I still find no logical merit in the idea; it’s like saying that a million disciples prove there is no master). I never questioned my Uncle Oren’s assertion that you could tear off a person’s shadow with a steel tent-peg (if you struck precisely at high noon, that was) or his wife’s claim that every time you shivered, a goose was walking over the place where your grave would someday be. Given the course of *my* life, that must mean I’m slated to end up buried behind Aunt Rhody’s barn out in Goose Wallow, Wyoming.

I also believed everything I was told in the schoolyard; little minnows and whale-sized whoppers went down my throat with equal ease. One kid told me with complete certainty that if you put a dime down on a railroad track, the first train to come along would be derailed by it. Another kid told me that a dime left on a railroad track would be perfectly smooshed (that was exactly how he put it—*perfectly smooshed*) by the next train, and what you took off the rail after the train had passed would be a flexible and nearly transparent coin the size of a silver dollar. My own belief was that both things were true: that dimes left on railroad tracks were perfectly smooshed before they derailed the train, which did the smooshing.

Other fascinating schoolyard facts which I absorbed during my years at Center School in Stratford, Connecticut, and Durham Elementary School in Durham, Maine, concerned such diverse subjects as golf-balls (poisonous and corrosive at the center), miscarriages (sometimes born alive, sometimes malformed monsters which had to be killed by health-care individuals ominously referred to as “the special nurses”), black cats (if one crossed your path, you had to fork the sign of the evil eye at them quickly or risk almost certain death before the end of the day), and sidewalk cracks. I probably don’t have to explain the potentially dangerous relationship of these latter to the spinal columns of completely innocent mothers.

My primary sources of wonderful and amazing facts in those days were the paperba

compilations from *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* which were issued by Pocket Books. It was in *Ripley* that I discovered you could make a powerful explosive by scraping the celluloid off the backs of playing cards and then tamping the stuff into a length of pipe, that you could drill a hole in your own skull and then plug it with a candle, thereby turning yourself into a kind of human night-light (whether anyone would want to do such a thing was a question which never occurred to me until years later), that there were actual giants (one man well over eight feet tall), actual elves (one woman barely eleven inches tall), and actual monsters too horrible to describe...except *Ripley's* described them all in loving detail, and usually with a picture (if I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the one of the guy with the candle stuck in the center of his shaved skull).

That series of paperbacks was—to me, at least—the world's most wonderful sideshow, one you could carry around in my back pocket and curl up with on rainy weekend afternoons, when there were no baseball games and everyone was tired of Monopoly. Were all of *Ripley's* fabulous curiosities and human monsters real? In this context that hardly seems relevant. They were real to *me*, and that probably is—during the years from six to eleven, crucial years in which the human imagination was largely formed, they were *very* real to me. I believed them just as I believed you could derail a freight train with a dime or that the drippy goop in the center of a golf-ball would eat the hand right off your arm if you were careless and got some of it on you. It was in *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* that I first began to see how fine the line between the fabulous and the humdrum could sometimes be, and to understand that the juxtaposition of the two did as much to illuminate the ordinary aspects of life as it did to illuminate its occasional weird outbreaks. Remember it's *belief* we're talking about here, and belief is the cradle of myth. What about reality, you ask? Well, as far as I'm concerned, reality can go to take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut. I've never held much of a brief for reality, at least in my written work. All too often it is to the imagination what ash stakes are to vampires.

I think that myth and imagination are, in fact, nearly interchangeable concepts, and that belief is the wellspring of both. Belief in what? I don't think it matters very much, to tell you the truth. Or that a god or many. Or that a dime can derail a freight-train.

These beliefs of mine had nothing to do with faith; let's be very clear on that subject. I was raised Methodist and hold onto enough of the fundamentalist teachings of my childhood to believe that such a claim would be presumptuous at best and downright blasphemous at worst. I believed all that weird stuff because I was *built* to believe in weird stuff. Other people run races because they were built to run fast, or play basketball because God made them six-foot-ten, or solve long, complicated equations on blackboards because they were built to see the places where the numbers all lock together.

Yet faith comes into it someplace, and I think that place has to do with going back to do the same thing again and again even though you believe in your deepest, truest heart that you will never be able to do it any better than you already have, and that if you press on, there's really no place to go but downhill. You don't have anything to lose when you take your first whack at the *piñata*, but to take the second one (and a third...and a fourth...and a thirty-fourth) is to risk failure, depression, and, in the case of the short-story writer who works in a pretty well defined genre, self-parody. But we do go on, most of us, and that gets to be hard. I never would have believed that twenty years ago, or even ten, but it does. It gets hard. And I have days when I think this old Wang word-processor stopped running on electricity about five years ago; that from *The Dark Half* on, it's been running completely on faith. But that's okay; whatever gets the words across the screen, right?

The idea for each of the stories in this book came in a moment of belief and was written in a burst of faith, happiness, and optimism. Those positive feelings have their dark analogues, however, and the fear of failure is a long way from the worst of them. The worst—for me, at least—is the gnawing speculation that I may have already said everything I have to say, and am now only listening to the steady quacking of my own voice because the silence when it stops is just too spooky.

The leap of faith necessary to make the short stories happen has gotten particularly tough in the last few years; these days it seems that everything wants to be a novel, and every novel wants to be approximately four thousand pages long. A fair number of critics have mentioned this, and usually not favorably. In reviews of every long novel I have written, from *The Stand* to *Needful Things*, I have been accused of overwriting. In some cases the criticisms have merit; in others they are just the ill-tempered yappings of men and women who have accepted the literary anorexia of the last thirty years with a puzzling (to me, at least) lack of discussion and dissent. These self-appointed deacons in the Church of Latter-Day American Literature seem to regard generosity with suspicion, texture with dislike, and any broad literary stroke with outright hate. The result is a strange and arid literary climate where a meaningless little fingernail-paring like Nicholson Baker's *Vox* becomes an object of fascinated debate and dissection, and a truly ambitious American novel like Greg Matthews's *Heart of the Country* is all but ignored.

But all that is by the by, not only off the subject but just a tiny bit whimpery, too—after all, was there ever a writer who didn't feel that he or she had been badly treated by the critics? All I started to say before I so rudely interrupted myself was that the act of faith which turns a moment of belief into a real object—i.e., a short story that people will actually want to read—has been a little harder for me to come by in the last few years.

“Well then, don't write them,” someone might say (only it's usually a voice I hear inside my own head, like the ones Jessie Burlingame hears in *Gerald's Game*). “After all, you don't need the money they bring in the way you once did.”

That's true enough. The days when a check for some four-thousand-word wonder would buy penicillin for one of the kids' ear infections or help meet the rent are long gone. But the logic is more than spurious; it's dangerous. I don't exactly need the money the *novels* bring in, either, you see. If it was just the money, I could hang up my jock and hit the showers...or spend the rest of my life on some Caribbean island, catching the rays and seeing how long I could grow my fingernails.

But it *isn't* about the money, no matter what the glossy tabloids may say, and it's not about selling out, as the more arrogant critics really seem to believe. The fundamental things still apply. Time goes by, and for me the object hasn't changed—the job is still getting to *you*, Constant Reader, getting you by the short hairs and, hopefully, scaring you so badly you won't be able to go to sleep without leaving the bathroom light on. It's still about first seeing the impossible...and then saying *yes*. It's still about making you believe what I believe, at least for a little while.

I don't talk about this much, because it embarrasses me and it sounds pompous, but I still see stories as a great thing, something which not only enhances lives but actually saves them. Nor am I speaking metaphorically. Good writing—good *stories*—are the imagination's firing pin, and the purpose of the imagination, I believe, is to offer us solace and shelter from situations and life passages which would otherwise prove unendurable. I can only speak from my own experience, of course, but for me, the imagination which so often kept me awake and in terror as a child has seen me through some terrible bouts of stark raving reality as an adult. If the stories which have resulted from that imagination have done the same for some of the people who've read them, then I am perfectly happy and perfectly satisfied—feelings which cannot, so far as I know, be purchased with rich movie deals or multi-million-dollar book contracts.

Still, the short story is a difficult and challenging literary form, and that's why I was so delighted—and so surprised—to find I had enough of them to issue a third collection. It has come at a propitious time, as well, because one of those facts of which I was so sure as a kid (I probably picked it up in Ripley's *Believe It or Not!*, too) was that people completely renew themselves every seven years: every tissue, every organ, every muscle replaced by entirely new cells. I am drawing *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* together in the summer of 1992, seven years after the publication

Skeleton Crew, my last collection of short stories, and *Skeleton Crew* was published seven years after *Night Shift*, my first collection. The greatest thing is knowing that, although the leap of faith necessary to translate an idea into reality has become harder (the jumping muscles get a little older every day, you know), it's still perfectly possible. The next greatest thing is knowing that someone still wants to read them—that's you, Constant Reader, should you wonder.

The oldest of these stories (my versions of the killer golf-ball goop and monster miscarriages, you will) is "It Grows on You," originally published in a University of Maine literary magazine called *Marshroots*...although it has been considerably revised for this book, so it could better be what it apparently wanted to be—a final look back at the doomed little town of Castle Rock. The most recent, "The Ten O'Clock People," was written in three fevered days during the summer of 1992.

There are some genuine curiosities here—the first version of my only original teleplay; a Sherlock Holmes story in which Dr. Watson steps forward to solve the case; a Cthulhu Mythos story set in the suburb of London where Peter Straub lived when I first met him; a hardboiled "caper" story of the Richard Bachman stripe; and a slightly different version of a story called "My Pretty Pony" which was originally done as a limited edition from the Whitney Museum, with artwork by Barbara Kruger.

After a great deal of thought, I've also decided to include a lengthy non-fiction piece, "Head Down," which concerns kids and baseball. It was originally published in *The New Yorker*, and I probably worked harder on it than anything else I've written over the last fifteen years. That doesn't make it good, of course, but I know that writing and publishing it gave me enormous satisfaction, and I'm passing it along for that reason. It doesn't really fit in a collection of stories which concern themselves mostly with suspense and the supernatural...except somehow it does. The texture is the same. See if you don't think so.

What I've tried hardest to do is to steer clear of the old chestnuts, the trunk stories, and the bottom-of-the-drawer stuff. Since 1980 or so, some critics have been saying I could publish my laundry list and sell a million copies or so, but these are for the most part critics who think that's what I've been doing all along. The people who read my work for pleasure obviously feel differently, and I have made this book with those readers, not the critics, in the forefront of my mind. The result, I think, is an uneven Aladdin's cave of a book, one which completes a trilogy of which *Night Shift* and *Skeleton Crew* are the first two volumes. All the good short stories have now been collected; all the bad ones have been swept as far under the rug as I could get them, and there they will stay. If there is to be another collection, it will consist entirely of stories which have not as yet been written or even considered (stories which have not yet been *believed*, if you will), and I'd guess it will show up in a year which begins with a 2.

Meantime, there are these twenty-odd (and some, I should warn you, are *very* odd). Each contains something I believed for awhile, and I know that some of these things—the finger poking out of the drain, the man-eating toads, the hungry teeth—are a little frightening, but I think we'll be all right if we go together. First, repeat the catechism after me:

I believe a dime can derail a freight-train.

I believe there are alligators in the New York City sewer system, not to mention rats as big as Shetland ponies.

I believe that you can tear off someone's shadow with a steel tent-peg.

I believe that there really *is* a Santa Claus, and that all those red-suited guys you see at Christmastime really are his helpers.

I believe there is an unseen world all around us.

I believe that tennis balls are full of poison gas, and if you cut one in two and breathe what comes out, it'll kill you.

Most of all, I *do* believe in spooks, I *do* believe in spooks, I *do* believe in spooks.

~~Okay? Ready? Fine. Here's my hand. We're going now. I know the way. All you have to do is~~
hold on tight...and *believe*.

Bangor, Maine
November 6, 199

Revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

—Spanish proverb

I waited and watched for seven years. I saw him come and go—Dolan. I watched him stroll into fancy restaurants dressed in a tuxedo, always with a different woman on his arm, always with his pair of bodyguards bookending him. I watched his hair go from iron-gray to a fashionable silver while mine simply receded until I was bald. I watched him leave Las Vegas on his regular pilgrimages to the West Coast; I watched him return. On two or three occasions I watched from a side road as his Seda DeVille, the same color as his hair, swept by on Route 71 toward Los Angeles. And on a few occasions I watched him leave his place in the Hollywood Hills in the same gray Cadillac to return to Las Vegas—not often, though. I am a schoolteacher. Schoolteachers and high-priced hoodlums do not have the same freedom of movement; it's just an economic fact of life.

He did not know I was watching him—I never came close enough for him to know that. I was careful.

He killed my wife or had her killed; it comes to the same, either way. Do you want details? You won't get them from me. If you want them, look them up in the back issues of the papers. Her name was Elizabeth. She taught in the same school where I taught and where I teach still. She taught first graders. They loved her, and I think that some of them may not have forgotten their love still, although they would be teenagers now. *I* loved her and love her still, certainly. She was not beautiful but she was pretty. She was quiet, but she could laugh. I dream of her. Of her hazel eyes. There has never been another woman for me. Nor ever will be.

He slipped—Dolan. That's all you have to know. And Elizabeth was there, at the wrong place and the wrong time, to see the slip. She went to the police, and the police sent her to the FBI, and she was questioned, and she said yes, she would testify. They promised to protect her, but they either slipped or they underestimated Dolan. Maybe it was both. Whatever it was, she got into her car one night and the dynamite wired to the ignition made me a widower. *He* made me a widower—Dolan.

With no witness to testify, he was let free.

He went back to his world, I to mine. The penthouse apartment in Vegas for him, the empty trailer home for me. The succession of beautiful women in furs and sequined evening dresses for him, the silence for me. The gray Cadillacs, four of them over the years, for him, and the aging Buick Riviera for me. His hair went silver while mine just went.

But I watched.

I was careful—oh, yes! Very careful. I knew what he was, what he could do. I knew he would stoop on me like a bug if he saw or sensed what I meant for him. So I was careful.

During my summer vacation three years ago I followed him (at a prudent distance) to Los Angeles, where he went frequently. He stayed in his fine house and threw parties (I watched the comings and goings from a safe shadow at the end of the block, fading back when the police cars made their frequent patrols), and I stayed in a cheap hotel where people played their radios too loud and the neon light from the topless bar across the street shone in the window. I fell asleep on those nights and dreamed of Elizabeth's hazel eyes, dreamed that none of it had ever happened, and woke up sometimes with tears drying on my face.

I came close to losing hope.

~~He was well guarded, you see; so well guarded. He went nowhere without those two heavily armed gorillas with him, and the Cadillac itself was armor plated. The big radial tires it rolled on were of the self-sealing type favored by dictators in small, uneasy countries.~~

Then, that last time, I saw how it could be done—but I did not see it until after I'd had a very bad scare.

I followed him back to Las Vegas, always keeping at least a mile between us, sometimes two, sometimes three. As we crossed the desert heading east his car was at times no more than a sun-flare on the horizon and I thought about Elizabeth, how the sun looked on her hair.

I was far behind on this occasion. It was the middle of the week, and traffic on U.S. 71 was very light. When traffic is light, tailing becomes dangerous—even a grammar-school teacher knows that. I passed an orange sign which read detour 5 miles and dropped back even farther. Desert detours slow traffic to a crawl, and I didn't want to chance coming up behind the gray Cadillac as the driver babied it over some rutted secondary road.

DETOUR 3 MILES, the next sign read, and below that: BLASTING AREA AHEAD • TURN OFF 2-WAY RADIO

I began to muse on some movie I had seen years before. In this film a band of armed robbers had tricked an armored car into the desert by putting up false detour signs. Once the driver fell for the trick and turned off onto a deserted dirt road (there are thousands of them in the desert, sheep roads and ranch roads and old government roads that go nowhere), the thieves had removed the signs, assuring isolation, and then had simply laid siege to the armored car until the guards came out.

They killed the guards.

I remembered that.

They killed the guards.

I reached the detour and turned onto it. The road was as bad as I had imagined—packed dirt, two lanes wide, filled with potholes that made my old Buick jounce and groan. The Buick needed new shock absorbers, but shocks are an expense a schoolteacher sometimes has to put off, even when he is a widower with no children and no hobbies except his dream of revenge.

As the Buick bounced and wallowed along, an idea occurred to me. Instead of following Dolan's Cadillac the next time it left Vegas for L.A. or L.A. for Vegas, I would pass it—get ahead of it. I would create a false detour like the one in the movie, luring it out into the wastes that exist, silent and rimmed by mountains, west of Las Vegas. Then I would remove the signs, as the thieves had done in the movie—

I snapped back to reality suddenly. Dolan's Cadillac was ahead of me, *directly ahead of me*, pulled off to one side of the dusty track. One of the tires, self-sealing or not, was flat. No—not just flat. It was exploded, half off the rim. The culprit had probably been a sharp wedge of rock stuck in the hardpan like a miniature tank-trap. One of the two bodyguards was working a jack under the front end. The second—an ogre with a pig-face streaming sweat under his brush cut—stood protectively beside Dolan himself. Even in the desert, you see, they took no chances.

Dolan stood to one side, slim in an open-throated shirt and dark slacks, his silver hair blowing around his head in the desert breeze. He was smoking a cigarette and watching the men as if he were somewhere else, a restaurant or a ballroom or a drawing room perhaps.

His eyes met mine through the windshield of my car and then slid off with no recognition at all, although he had seen me once, seven years ago (when I had hair!), at a preliminary hearing, sitting beside my wife.

My terror at having caught up with the Cadillac was replaced with an utter fury.

I thought of leaning over and unrolling the passenger window and shrieking: *How dare you forgive me? How dare you dismiss me?* Oh, but that would have been the act of a lunatic. It was good that I

had forgotten me, it was *fine* that he had dismissed me. Better to be a mouse behind the wainscoting nibbling at the wires. Better to be a spider, high up under the eaves, spinning its web.

The man sweating the jack flagged me, but Dolan wasn't the only one capable of dismissal. I looked indifferently beyond the arm-waver, wishing him a heart attack or a stroke or, best of all, both at the same time. I drove on—but my head pulsed and throbbed, and for a few moments the mountains on the horizon seemed to double and even treble.

If I'd had a gun! I thought. *If only I'd had a gun! I could have ended his rotten, miserable life right then if I'd only had a gun!*

Miles later some sort of reason reasserted itself. If I'd had a gun, the only thing I could have been sure of was getting myself killed. If I'd had a gun I could have pulled over when the man using the bumper-jack beckoned me, and gotten out, and begun spraying bullets wildly around the desert landscape. I might have wounded someone. Then I would have been killed and buried in a shallow grave, and Dolan would have gone on escorting the beautiful women and making pilgrimages between Las Vegas and Los Angeles in his silver Cadillac while the desert animals unearthed my remains and fought over my bones under the cold moon. For Elizabeth there would have been no revenge—none at all.

The men who travelled with him were trained to kill. I was trained to teach third-graders.

This was not a movie, I reminded myself as I returned to the highway and passed an orange EMERGENCY CONSTRUCTION • THE STATE OF NEVADA THANKS YOU! sign. And if I ever made the mistake of confusing reality with a movie, of thinking that a balding third-grade teacher with myopia could ever be Dirty Harry anywhere outside of his own daydreams, there would never be any revenge, ever.

But *could* there be revenge, ever? *Could* there be?

My idea of creating a fake detour was as romantic and unrealistic as the idea of jumping out of my old Buick and spraying the three of them with bullets—me, who had not fired a gun since the age of sixteen and who had never fired a handgun.

Such a thing would not be possible without a band of conspirators—even the movie I had seen as romantic as it had been, had made that clear. There had been eight or nine of them in two separate groups, staying in touch with each other by walkie-talkie. There had even been a man in a small plane cruising above the highway to make sure the armored car was relatively isolated as it approached the right spot on the highway.

A plot no doubt dreamed up by some overweight screenwriter sitting by his swimming pool with a piña colada by one hand and a fresh supply of Pentel pens and an Edgar Wallace plot-wheel by the other. And even that fellow had needed a small army to fulfill his idea. I was only one man.

It wouldn't work. It was just a momentary false gleam, like the others I'd had over the years—the idea that maybe I could put some sort of poison gas in Dolan's air-conditioning system, or plant a bomb in his Los Angeles house, or perhaps obtain some really deadly weapon—a bazooka, let us say—and turn his damned silver Cadillac into a fireball as it raced east toward Vegas or west toward L.A. along 71.

Best to dismiss it.

But it wouldn't go.

Cut him out, the voice inside that spoke for Elizabeth kept whispering. *Cut him out the way a dog experienced sheep-dog cuts a ewe out of the flock when his master points. Detour him out into the emptiness and kill him. Kill them all.*

Wouldn't work. If I allowed no other truth, I would at least have to allow that a man who had stayed alive as long as Dolan must have a carefully honed sense of survival—honed to the point of paranoia, perhaps. He and his men would see through the detour trick in a minute.

They turned down this one today, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth responded. *They never even*

hesitated. They went just like Mary's little lamb.

~~But I knew—yes, somehow I did!—that men like Dolan, men who are really more like wolves than men, develop a sort of sixth sense when it comes to danger. I could steal genuine detour signs from some road department shed and set them up in all the right places; I could even add fluorescent orange road cones and a few of those smudge-pots. I could do all that and Dolan would still smell the nervous sweat of my hands on the stage dressing. Right through his bullet-proof windows he would smell it. He would close his eyes and hear Elizabeth's name far back in the snake-pit that passed for his mind.~~

The voice that spoke for Elizabeth fell silent, and I thought it had finally given up for the day. And then, with Vegas actually in sight—blue and misty and wavering on the far rim of the desert—spoke up again.

Then don't try to fool him with a fake detour, it whispered. Fool him with a real one.

I swerved the Buick over to the shoulder and shuddered to a stop with both feet on the brake pedal. I stared into my own wide, startled eyes in the rear-view mirror.

Inside, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth began to laugh. It was wild, mad laughter, but after a few moments I began to laugh along with it.

The other teachers laughed at me when I joined the Ninth Street Health Club. One of them wanted to know if someone had kicked sand in my face. I laughed along with them. People don't get suspicious of a man like me as long as he keeps laughing along with them. And why shouldn't I laugh? My wife had been dead seven years, hadn't she? Why, she was no more than dust and hair and a few bones in her coffin! So why shouldn't I laugh? It's only when a man like me stops laughing that people wonder if something is wrong.

I laughed along with them even though my muscles ached all that fall and winter. I laughed even though I was constantly hungry—no more second helpings, no more late-night snacks, no more beer, no more before-dinner gin and tonic. But lots of red meat and greens, greens, greens.

I bought myself a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

No—that's not quite right. *Elizabeth* bought me a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

I saw Dolan less frequently; I was too busy working out, losing my pot belly, building up my arms and chest and legs. But there were times when it seemed I could not go on with it, that recapturing anything like real physical fitness was going to be impossible, that I could not live without second helpings and pieces of coffee cake and the occasional dollop of sweet cream in my coffee. When those times came I would park across from one of his favorite restaurants or perhaps go into one of the clubs he favored and wait for him to show up, stepping from the fog-gray Cadillac with an arrogant, icy blonde or a laughing redhead on his arm—or one on each. There he would be, the man who had killed my Elizabeth, there he would be, resplendent in a formal shirt from Bijan's, his gold Rolex winking in the nightclub lights. When I was tired and discouraged I went to Dolan as a man with a raging thirst might seek out an oasis in the desert. I drank his poisoned water and was refreshed.

In February I began to run every day, and then the other teachers laughed at my bald head, which peeled and pinked and then peeled and pinked again, no matter how much sun-block I smeared on it. I laughed right along with them, as if I had not twice nearly fainted and spent long, shuddering minutes with cramps stabbing the muscles of my legs at the end of my runs.

When summer came, I applied for a job with the Nevada Highway Department. The municipal employment office stamped a tentative approval on my form and sent me along to a district foreman named Harvey Blocker. Blocker was a tall man, burned almost black by the Nevada sun. He worked

jeans, dusty workboots, and a blue tee-shirt with cut-off sleeves. BAD ATTITUDE, the shirt proclaimed. His muscles were big rolling slabs under his skin. He looked at my application. Then he looked at me and laughed. The application looked very puny rolled up in one of his huge fists.

“You got to be kidding, my friend. I mean, you have *got* to be. We talkin desert sun and desert heat here—none of that yuppie tanning-salon shit. What are you in real life, bubba? An accountant?”

“A teacher,” I said. “Third grade.”

“Oh, *honey*,” he said, and laughed again. “Get out of my face, okay?”

I had a pocket watch—handed down from my great-grandfather, who worked on the last stretch of the great transcontinental railroad. He was there, according to family legend, when they hammered home the golden spike. I took the watch out and dangled it in Blocker’s face on its chain.

“See this?” I said. “Worth six, maybe seven hundred dollars.”

“This a bribe?” Blocker laughed again. A great old laugher was he. “Man, I’ve heard of people making deals with the devil, but you’re the first one I ever met who wanted to *bribe* himself into hell. Now he looked at me with something like compassion. “You may *think* you understand what you’re tryin to get yourself into, but I’m here to tell you you don’t have the slightest idea. In July I’ve seen the temperature go a hundred and seventeen degrees out there west of Indian Springs. It makes strong men cry. And you ain’t strong, bubba. I don’t have to see you with your shirt off to know you ain’t got nothin on your rack but a few yuppie health-club muscles, and they won’t cut it out in the Big Empty.”

I said, “The day you decide I can’t cut it, I’ll walk off the job. You keep the watch. No argument.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

I looked at him. He looked back for some time.

“You’re *not* a fucking liar.” He said this in tones of amazement.

“No.”

“You’d give the watch to Tinker to hold?” He cocked his thumb at a humongous black man in a tie-dyed shirt who was sitting nearby in the cab of a bulldozer, eating a fruit-pie from McDonald’s and listening.

“Is he trustworthy?”

“You’re damned tooting.”

“Then he can hold it until you tell me to take a hike or until I have to go back to school in September.”

“And what do *I* put up?”

I pointed to the employment application in his fist. “Sign that,” I said. “That’s what you put up.”

“You’re crazy.”

I thought of Dolan and of Elizabeth and said nothing.

“You’d start on shit-work,” Blocker warned. “Shovelling hot-patch out of the back of a truck and into potholes. Not because I want your damned watch—although I’ll be more than happy to take it—but because that’s where everyone starts.”

“All right.”

“As long as you understand, bubba.”

“I do.”

“No,” Blocker said, “you don’t. But you will.”

And he was right.

I remember next to nothing about the first couple of weeks—just shovelling hot-top and tamping

down and walking along behind the truck with my head down until the truck stopped at the next pothole. Sometimes we worked on the Strip and I'd hear the sound of jackpot bells ringing in the casinos. Sometimes I think the bells were just ringing in my head. I'd look up and I'd see Harvey Blocker looking at me with that odd look of compassion, his face shimmering in the heat baking off the road. And sometimes I'd look over at Tinker, sitting under the canvas parasol which covered the cab of his 'dozer, and Tinker would hold up my great-granddad's watch and swing it on the chain so it kicked off sunflashes.

The big struggle was not to faint, to hold onto consciousness no matter what. All through June I held on, and the first week of July, and then Blocker sat down next to me one lunch hour while I was eating a sandwich with one shaking hand. I shook sometimes until ten at night. It was the heat. It was either shake or faint, and when I thought of Dolan I somehow managed to keep shaking.

"You still ain't strong, bubba," he said.

"No," I said. "But like the man said, you should have seen the materials I had to start with."

"I keep expecting to look around and see you passed out in the middle of the roadbed and you keep not doing it. But you gonna."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. If you stay behind the truck with a shovel, you gonna."

"No."

"Hottest part of the summer still coming on, bubba. Tink calls it cookie-sheet weather."

"I'll be fine."

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was my great-granddad's watch. He tossed it in my lap. "Take this fucking thing," he said, disgusted. "I don't want it."

"You made a deal with me."

"I'm calling it off."

"If you fire me, I'll take you to arbitration," I said. "You signed my form. You—"

"I ain't firing you," he said, and looked away. "I'm going to have Tink teach you how to run a front-end loader."

I looked at him for a long time, not knowing what to say. My third-grade classroom, so cool and pleasant, had never seemed so far away...and still I didn't have the slightest idea of how a man like Blocker thought, or what he meant when he said the things he said. I knew that he admired me and held me in contempt at the same time, but I had no idea why he felt either way. *And you don't need my care, darling*, Elizabeth spoke up suddenly inside my mind. *Dolan is your business. Remember Dolan*

"Why do you want to do that?" I asked at last.

He looked back at me then, and I saw he was both furious and amused. But the fury was the emotion on top, I think. "What is it with you, bubba? What do you think I am?"

"I don't—"

"You think I want to kill you for your fucking watch? That what you think?"

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you are. Sorriest little motherfucker I ever saw."

I put my great-granddad's watch away.

"You ain't *never* gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die. You dyin. You know you are, and still you won't move into the shade. Why? Why you pulling this crap on your system?"

"I've got my reasons."

"Yeah, I bet you do. And God help anyone who gets in your way."

He got up and walked off.

Tinker came over, grinning.

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