

DEAD MAN'S CURVE

By Terry Bisson

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"You're not going to believe what I'm going to tell you," Hal said.

"Probably not."

"But I'm going to tell you anyway."

"Probably are."

"There is another world."

"Probably is."

"Camilla, quit acting silly. If you could see me over the phone, you'd know that I was serious. Another world! Besides this one."

"Like Lechuguilla," I said. "Like the Ruwenzori."

"No. Really different."

"Like the Moon?"

"The Moon is part of this world. I'm talking about something much, much more amazing. Get your clothes on, I'm coming over."

"The Moon is not part of this world. And I don't walk around the apartment with no clothes on. And I'm watching Unsolved Mysteries, so don't come over until nine unless you can keep your mouth shut."

Hal was my best friend, is my best friend, all the way from grade school, on and off. We were the only ones from our class, eleven years after graduation, who weren't married. The only halfway normal ones, anyway.

Hal went to Bluegrass Community College in Frankfort, and sold dope. I worked at the KwikPik and watched Unsolved Mysteries.

Joke.

Hal didn't arrive until 9:07. I was sitting on the front steps of the Belle Meade Arms, smoking a cigarette, waiting for him. My last boyfriend wouldn't let me smoke in the apartment, and I kept the prohibition (along with the apartment) after I got rid of him. It was a warm July night and I could hear Hal's 85 Cavalier a block away. The transmission had a whine. It's probably the worst car ever made and I ought to know; my last boyfriend worked for a Chevy dealer.

But enough about him.

"There is another world," I said, trying to sound mysterious like Robert Stack on *Unsolved Mysteries*.

"Once you see it you won't laugh," Hal said.

"Patagonia?" I said. "Tibesti? Macchu Picchu?" We knew all the neat places. As kids we had shared stacks of *National Geographics*. I was looking for Oz. Hal was looking for where his father had gone. We never found either.

"Not the Moon. Not Lechuguilla. Not Machu Picchu. This is really different."

"Where did you read about it?"

"I didn't read about it. I found it. I've been there. This is serious, Camilla. I'm the only one who knows about it. It's not even like a real place. It's another world."

"I thought you said it was real."

"Come on. Get in the car. We're going for a ride."

We drove out Old 19 to Dead Man's Curve. It's a long hairpin near the top of Caddy's Bluff, over the Kentucky River. Nobody gets killed on it anymore. In the old days, before the interstate, they say people made a living stripping parts off the wrecks at the bottom of the bluff. The ones that didn't go into the river.

"I never come here that I don't think of Wascomb," I said. In high school, Johnny Wascomb had taken Dead Man's Curve at fifty-nine mph. It was still the record as far as I knew. Ironically, he didn't get killed driving but in an accident in the Navy. He was the only dead person I knew.

"Funny you should mention Wascomb," Hal said. "I was seeing if I could take the curve as fast as him when it happened."

"When what happened?"

"You'll see." Hal drove up the bluff, around the curve, and turned into an old logging road. It was dark back in the trees.

"Is this a Stephen King thing?" I asked, alarmed.

"No, Camilla. I'm just turning around." Hal backed out onto the highway and started down the hill, around the curve. Going down, we were on the outside; that's what made it Dead Man's Curve.

"I drive home from Frankfort this way twice a week. As an experiment, I started taking the curve at forty, forty two, forty four. In two mph increments. The way Wascomb did."

"I never knew he did it that way."

"He was very scientific."

"He went fifty-nine in his GTO," I said. "Not some dinky Cavalier."

"I'm not even going to go fifty," Hal said. "Watch what happened to me at forty-two."

Hal set the Cavalier on forty-two as we went into the curve. From where I was sitting it looked like thirty-nine. The white guard posts along the road flickered past, low in the headlights. The curve tightened but Hal kept his speed up. A third of the way around, the big trees gave out and I knew we were over the cliff.

The tires squealed but only a little. The posts flickered past one by one by one. They were all the same distance apart, and we were at a steady speed, so it looked like nothing was moving. The cable that connected the posts undulated in the headlights like a white wave; then the wave seemed to open, and suddenly the world turned inside out like a sock, and we were in a room.

Not in the car. A white room. We were sitting on a sort of bench, side by side. I sensed Hal beside me on my right but I didn't see him until he stood up.

He stood up and I stood up with him. He turned and I turned with him. In front of us was a wall. No, it was a window. Beyond it I could see endless rows of hills, white, but dark, like snow in moonlight. Then Hal turned again and I turned with him. Another wall. I wanted to see through it but Hal stepped back. We stepped back. I saw stars and the white room was gone. What I had thought was stars were leaves in the headlights, across the road. Through the windshield. The world had turned inside out again, or outside in, and we were back in the car, stopped at the bottom of the hill where Old 19 connects with River Road. I recognized the stop sign with the bullet holes.

Hal was on my left again, not my right. He was looking at me. "Well?" he said.

"Well?! What the hell was that?" I said.

"You saw it too, right?"

"Saw it? I was there. We were there!"

"Where?" Hal was suddenly like a lawyer or a cop, interrogative. "What was it? What was it for you?"

"A--white room. Like a waiting room."

"Then it's real," he said, putting the Cavalier into gear and turning onto River Road back toward town. "I had to know if it was real. I almost wish to hell you hadn't seen it too. Now I don't know what to do."

Two

The next day Hal picked me up at the KwikPik after work. He was twenty minutes late. I sat out front and waited for him.

"Sorry I'm late, Camilla," he said. "I wanted to tell my professor about it."

We both knew what it was. "What did he say?"

"He didn't have time to talk about it. He had to run out. He has two jobs. He said it might have something to do with the white posts flickering in the headlights. Hell, I had already figured that out. My theory is, they set up a resonance and open a portal into another universe."

Hal reads science fiction. I never could get into it.

We headed out Old 19. "I tried it faster and slower," Hal said. "I tried it with the radio on and in low range, etcetera. It only works at forty-two, only in this Cavalier, and only at night. Last night was my third time. I had to take you with me to be sure I wasn't a hallucinating or something."

Hal pulled into the logging road. "Wait," I said. "How do we know for sure we can always get back?"

"One wall leads back. You step back into it. It's the easiest part. It breaks the spell or something."

"Spell. That's not very scientific. What if we get trapped?"

"You've been trapped in this world all your life, Camilla."

"It's not the same and you know it. It's bigger, for one thing."

"You want to chicken out?" he asked.

"Do you?" There it was; we both grinned. How could we? How often do you get a chance to go to another world?

Hal backed out onto the highway and started down the bluff.

"Should I fasten my seat belt?"

"Gee, I don't know, Camilla. I never thought about it."

I fastened my seat belt.

Thirty-seven. Forty. Forty-two (which looked like thirty-nine). The tires were squealing just barely. The transmission whined. "How do we know this speedometer's accurate?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter. Haven't you ever heard of relativity? Just sit tight. Look straight ahead."

I kept my eye on the hood ornament, a little chrome cavalier in tights with a plume on his hat. Little buns like raisins. The white posts started flickering in that wave motion, the cable started undulating, and this time I saw the wave turn the world inside out, like a sock. And there we were, in the white room.

It was easier than walking into a movie theatre. Or out of one. Nothing was there unless I looked at it directly. Then it sort of drew itself in. I looked down and saw the bench, white. The floor, white. I looked at my hands and at my feet. I looked like a video character or a cartoon. I was flat and I only existed when I moved. When I held my hand still it was gone. But when I moved it or looked at it hard, it was there.

I tried running my tongue around the inside of my mouth. There was nothing there. No spit. No teeth.

But I could talk. I looked at Hal and said, "Here we are." I couldn't tell where the words came from. Hal said the same words back: "Here we are."

I wanted to stand up. Suddenly I was standing and Hal was standing beside me. It was easy, like a piece of paper unfolding. It was all beginning to seem normal.

"Let's look around," I said. "Okay," Hal said.

The light was like the light in the Kwik-Pik. The longer I looked at things, the more normal they became. But never "normal" normal. The white room was not really white. I could see through the wall to the hills, arranged in endless rows.

"See those hills," I said.

"I think they are clouds," Hal said. I looked at him and suddenly I felt scared. You never look directly at people in dreams. I had been hoping this would turn out to be some kind of dream. But it wasn't.

"Here we are," Hal said again. He reached down and touched the bench behind us. I touched it at the same time. I was doing what he did now. The bench felt normal. But not "normal" normal. "Time to back," Hal said.

"Not yet," I said. I turned and he turned with me. It seemed that one of us decided what to do for us both, and now it was me again.

We were facing another white wall. Now that I was looking at it, I could see through it. There were endless rooms, like in a mirror. Only they never got smaller. All the rooms were empty except the first one.

"There's a person there," Hal said.

The person in the other room turned toward us.

I felt myself stumble backward, even though I couldn't move. We must have fallen through the wall because we were at the stop sign, in the car. Bullet holes, seat belt and all.

"How'd we get here?" I asked.

"I stepped back," Hal said. "I must have panicked."

"You should have waited till I was ready!"

"Camilla, what are we arguing about!?! Did you see what I saw? Did you?"

"Of course. But don't talk about it. No theories. Let's just go back."

"Tomorrow night."

"No. Tonight. Right now."

We turned around and drove to the top of the hill, and went around Dead Man's Curve again. It was like stepping back into (or out of) the theater. It was getting easy. This time I stood and Hal stood with me, and I turned toward the wall (it was on our right) and there he was, right where we had left him, looking through from the other room.

"Wascomb?" Hal whispered.

Three

"Harold," Wascomb said. It wasn't a question or a greeting. He didn't seem surprised to see us.

"Camilla is here too," Hal said.

"Camilla who?"

"A friend--"

"Forget it," I said. I had sat next to him in two classes. He had dated my cousin, Ruth Ann, all through senior year.

"Where are you?" Wascomb asked. Like Hal, like myself, he was only there if I looked at him hard. There were no details. But when he talked I could hear his voice in my head like a memory.

"We're here where you are," Hal said. "Wherever this is. Where are we?"

"I don't know. I'm dead."

"I know. I'm sorry," Hal said.

"I don't remember how I died. Am I supposed to remember?"

"It was a steam explosion," Hal said.

"You were in the Navy," I said. "You lost your life on the flight deck of the carrier Kitty Hawk."

"You're Ruth Ann's cousin," Wascomb said. "Tamara. I always thought you were cute."

"Camilla." But I forgave him everything. Wascomb didn't have many details. Just enough to talk to. But he seemed more solid than Hal or I. I had the feeling that if I reached out, I could touch him through the wall.

I didn't want to reach out.

"Are you all dead?"

"No," Hal said. "We're just--visiting. We came in a car. Sort of."

"I know. Dead Man's Curve. I discovered it when I was a teenager," Wascomb said. "You go around at a certain speed, at night, and you end up here. You're the only ones since me. I've been here forever. Are you all still teenagers?"

"At heart," I said.

"I'm in Community College," Hal said.

"Be glad you're not dead. It's all over then."

"But it's not!" I said. "You were dead, but here you are."

"I'm still dead," said Wascomb. "It's still all over."

"But it means there is life after death!" I said.

"Sort of." Wascomb said. "It doesn't amount to much. It's just for people who go around the curve at the certain speed, in a certain car maybe. I think the posts in the headlights set up a wave pattern that flips you through into another Universe. I studied electronics in the Navy."

"What was your speed?" Hal asked.

"Fifty one," said Wascomb. "In my GTO. I wanted to bring Ruth Ann. But I had sold my GTO. It was a classic already, even then. How long's it been?"

"Ten years."

"Think what it would be worth now. Does Ruth Ann know I'm dead?"

"It's been ten years," Hal said. "She's happily married."

"How would you know that?" I said. Actually, Ruth Ann was getting a divorce but I didn't see any point in going into it.

"I never should have sold that GTO," Wascomb said. "It wouldn't work in any other car. How'd you make it work?"

"A Cavalier," Hal said.

"Cavalier?"

"It's a kind of a Chevy."

"Is it any good?"

"I can't believe you're dead and still talking about cars," I said.

"Actually, I don't talk about anything usually. It's not much different from being dead. A little better, I guess. I never thought I'd come back here, when I died I mean. What did you say it was?"

"Steam explosion," I said. "The Kitty Hawk. You were in the Mediterranean."

"What's the Mediterranean?"

"It's time for us to go," Hal said. "It was--nice seeing you."

"See, you're not dead. You can go back but I can't. I'll be here forever, I guess. Will you come back and see me?" "Sure," I said. I was just humoring him. Like Hal, I was ready to go.

"And bring Ruth Ann."

"What?" We both turned back around.

"She's married, Wascomb," I said.

"I thought you said she was getting a divorce."

"Did I say that?"

"I think you started to."

"She thinks you're dead, Wascomb."

"I am dead. That's why I want to see her. I never get to see anybody."

Four

Ruth Ann was surprised to see me at her door the next day. "How about asking me in?" I said. I should explain that I have short hair and wear a motorcycle jacket. Ruth Ann is the opposite type.

Still, I was her cousin and she had to ask me in. Blood's thicker than water. She brought me a canned ice tea and set it on the table.

"Is this about Aunt Betty?" she asked. My mother, her aunt, is sort of a drunk.

I had rehearsed how to tell the story, even going over it out loud in the car, but I could see now that it wasn't going to work. It was too bizarre.

"No, it's about Wascomb, but I can't tell you here," I said. "I came by to see if we could-- go for a drive."

"Johnny Wascomb? Camilla, are you smoking something?"

I was smoking a cigarette but I put it out. "It's about Wascomb, and it concerns you," I said. "It's about a--message from him to you."

Her face went white. "A letter?"

"A message," I said. "Not a letter."

She looked relieved. "You know, he used to write me from the Navy. I never answered his letters. Johnny Wascomb. But what could it be about him? Never mind. Don't tell me. I will go with you."

"I talked to my professor" said Hal, when he met me at the KwikPik after work. "He thinks it's probably some kind of artificial universe created by the wave motion of the lights on the posts. Very rare."

"I should hope," I said. I couldn't imagine swapping worlds every time you went around a curve.

"He says the reason everything looks sketchy is that our brains are wired for this universe. Whatever they see, they have to make it a version of this one. No matter how different it is. Do you think Ruth Ann will show?"

At 9:06 Ruth Ann pulled up in her Volvo. She motioned me over to her window. "What's he doing here?"

"He's part of the deal," I said.

"I can't be seen with him. Isn't he some kind of a dope dealer?" Ervin, her husband, was a state senator. (Not the state senator, a state senator.)

"Was," I lied. "Besides, I thought you were getting a divorce. Anyway, you have to come. I promised."

"Promised who?"

"Don't make me say it. It'll sound too crazy. Get in the front seat. I'll get in the back."

We got into the Cavalier. "Long time no see," Hal said. "Guess we run in different circles."

"I wouldn't know, I don't run in circles," said Ruth Ann. I had forgotten how obnoxious she could be.

Hal drove out Old 19, toward Dead Man's Curve. I felt like I should prepare Ruth Ann but I didn't know where to start. She didn't give me time to figure it out. "Camilla, tell me what's going on," she said as we were heading up the bluff. "Right now or I'm getting out of the car." I had forgotten how bossy she could be.

Hal turned into the old logging road at the top of the bluff. "Last night we talked to Wascomb," I said. "I know it sounds weird."

"Is this some kind of Stephen King thing?" Ruth Ann said. "If it is, I'm getting out of the car right now!"

Hal leaned over and opened her door. "Be my guest! Camilla, I'm warning you, she's going to mess up everything."

"No!" I leaned up over the seat and shut her door. "It's not a Stephen King thing," I said. "It's--more like a love story."

That shut her up. Hal backed out and turned around.

"True love," I said. "The kind where love conquereth death."

"Conquereth?" Hal was staring at me in the rear view mirror. I realized I had gone a little too far. "Put your seat belt on," I said.

Hal drove down the hill at thirty, thirty-five. Ruth Ann started up again. "Dead Man's Curve? Are you two trying to scare me?"

"Ruth Ann--"

"If this is your idea of a thrill, it's totally pathetic," Ruth Ann said. "Johnny Wascomb took this curve at seventy-five, lots of times."

"Ruth Ann, shut up," I said. "Just watch the hood ornament. The little cavalier."

"It was fifty-nine," said Hal. Muttered Hal.

Forty two. There was the wave, the undulating stream of white posts, and the world turned inside out like a sock, and there we were, in the white room. I would have breathed a sigh of relief except I wasn't breathing. If this wouldn't shut her up, nothing would.

"Where are we?" Ruth Ann asked.

"It's another world," Hal said.

"Is this some weird Navy thing? Were they lying about the accident?" To shut her up, I stood and pulled her and Hal with me. I knew they would stand when I did. Through the wall we saw the endless ranges of hills.

"Who owns all this?" Ruth Ann asked.

I turned and, again, they turned with me. We faced the other wall and the endless rooms. Wascomb was standing there as if he had been waiting for us.

"Omigod," said Ruth Ann. "Johnny. Is it really you?"

"Not exactly. I'm dead. Who are you?"

"It's me!"

"You told us to bring her," I said.

"Who told who what?"

"You told us to bring her," Hal said. "Don't you remember?"

"I told you, I'm dead," Wascomb said. "It's hard for me to remember things. It's not hard exactly. I just don't do it."

"Do you want us to leave?" Hal asked. I could tell he was hoping. "We can take her back with us."

"Back where?"

"Johnny, stop it!" screamed Ruth Ann. Her scream shook the whole universe.

"Ruth Ann?" said Wascomb. "I wanted to bring you here but I sold my GTO. You got mad because I showed the guys your bra in the glove compartment. I can't believe I sold that car."

"Johnny, are you really dead? The casket was closed at the funeral. I'm sorry I didn't answer your letters."

"What letters?"

"You sent me one a day for weeks. Or was it one a week for months? Don't you remember?"

"I can remember how to unhook your bra with one hand. But I can't remember you. All I remember is being dead. Once you're here, you've been here forever. Once you're dead you're always dead, forward and back. I think."

"Let's get out of here," Hal said. I had to agree. He and I both turned back toward the other wall. Ruth Ann turned with us. The sky was dark and yet bright, like a negative. The hills were white, but dark.

"What happened to Johnny?" Ruth Ann asked.

"I don't know," I lied. I looked at Hal beside me and he leaned back toward the bench, but it was a wall, and we slipped through it into a darkness that turned out to be leaves, and trees, and we were stopped again at the stop sign. Bullet holes and all.

"Take me home," said Ruth Ann. I couldn't tell if she was mad or what, the way she was blubbing. "Right this minute!"

Five

The next day was Sunday, the day I work twelve hours straight. When I got to the KwikPik at 7:00 a.m., Hal was there, looking worried.

"I told you she was crazy," Hal said. "What do you think she'll do?"

"Ruth Ann? She won't do anything."

"Are you kidding? She was sobbing all the way home, then like a zombie when she went into the house. You don't think that husband of hers will notice? He could get me kicked out of school."

"They're getting a divorce anyway," I said. "And how can you get kicked out of school when you're only taking one class?"

"Two."

I could see he was irrational, so I changed the subject. "Speaking of school, did you talk to your professor?"

"Yes, I told you, he says it's probably a pocket universe. They twist off the main universe, like bubbles."

"The main universe?"

"He's calling in sick on his other job so he can come with us tonight."

"Tonight?"

"He's afraid to wait. He's afraid it might disappear or something. He wants to check it out first-hand. I might get extra credit."

"What does this guy teach? I thought you were studying business."

"His course is called Non-Spatial Strategies. It's a marketing course. He just throws in a little physics, because that was his minor. He wants to make a video."

"Don't turn around," I said.

Ruth Ann had just driven up, or rather her husband had driven her up, in their new Volvo 740 Turbo with Intercooler. Whatever that is. "Ruth Ann's getting out of the car," I said. "From the way she's dressed, they're on their way to church. She's coming in the door."

"Camilla," she said. "And you. Are you everywhere? I told Ervin I was just coming in to get some cigarettes." She burst into tears.

"Good lord, Ruth Ann," I said. "What's the matter?" Ervin waved from the car and I waved back. He's a state senator. They wave at everybody.

"The matter? Do you realize I spoke to my only true love last night? I found him in the land where love never dies."

"Ruth Ann, you're talking like a song on the radio," I said. It wasn't intended as a compliment.

"It's just a pocket universe," Hal said.

"There just happens to be a guy in it who just happens to be my first love."

"You dumped him, remember?" I said. "Besides, Ruth Ann, he's dead." Ruth Ann burst into tears again. This time she dropped her money all over the floor. Hal bent down to pick it up. Always the gentleman. "I told you she was crazy," he said. Muttered.

"Is he talking about me? Camilla, I can't let Ervin see me crying. Act like we're laughing. Let him see you smile. Good."

All the time she was ordering me around, she was crying. Hal handed her her money and she said, "Now, tell me, when are we going back? Tonight?"

"We're not going back," Hal said. "It's been declared off-limits. By the Navy."

"Let me handle this, Hal," I said. He left, not bothering to speak to Ervin. They lived in two different worlds. Ruth Ann lit a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in the store," I said. She ignored me.

"Camilla, where is Johnny? How do I get back there?"

I explained the pocket universe theory, as best I could. "It's some sort of artificial universe," I said. "Apparently if you have ever been there, you are always there; or you go back there after you are dead. Or something. Wascomb's the only one there. It's his universe, I guess."

"Does that mean we'll go back there after we're dead?"

"I don't know," I said. I hoped not. "You get there by going around Dead Man's Curve."

"No, you don't, I tried it," she said. "I tried every different speed in the Volvo last night."

"After we dropped you off?"

"Of course. I went back. I wanted to be alone with Johnny. I tried both directions. Up, down."

"It only works in certain cars," I said. "It has to do with the lights, and maybe the sound. Hal's Cavalier has a bad transmission whine. I don't remember Wascomb's GTO."

"I do," said Ruth Ann. "I never told anybody this, Camilla, but I lost my virginity in that car."

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't such a big secret. Those Wascomb hadn't told, had figured it out on their own.

"Would Hal loan me his Cavalier? I could buy it from him. I have my own money."

"Ruth Ann, this is crazy."

"Camilla, did you ever dump somebody and then want them back? Well, answer me. Did you ever think you would give anything to--"

"Ruth Ann, Wascomb is dead."

"Camilla, are you trying to make me scream? If you think I won't scream because I'm in a store--"

"All right, all right," I said. "Hal is picking me up after work at eight. Be here and I'll work it out somehow."

Six

"What's she doing here?" Hal asked. "That's the professor?" I asked him in turn. An enormous fat man in a Geo Metro had just pulled in behind the Cavalier. He looked familiar.

"Come over here, I'll introduce you. Professor (he said some name), this is my colleague, Camilla Perry."

"And that's my cousin Ruth Ann Embry in the Volvo," I said.

"She's not going with us," Hal said to the professor. "There's not room for four."

"Hal, she's as much a part of this as I am," I said. "It's Wascomb's universe, after all. He asked for her."

"Wascomb's universe?" That got him mad. "If it's Wascomb's universe, how come I own the only car that goes to it?"

Ruth Ann got out of the Volvo. She was wearing a denim jacket. I had to admit she looked good, whatever she wore.

"Not room for four?" the professor said. "Are you talking about the car, or the universe? Theoretically, a pocket universe can hold any number of people. The problem is getting into it."

His problem was getting into the Cavalier. He looked into the back seat uncertainly. "Ruth Ann and I will get in the back," I said. He got in the front with Hal. We drove out of town on Old 19.

"Did Hal explain my pocket universe theory?" the professor said.

"Tell us again," Ruth Ann said.

"My theory is that they are accidental wave forms, generated by aural and visual interference patterns and pinched off like bubbles from this universe. About the size of a basketball."

"Now I know where I've seen you," I said. "Didn't you used to manage the driving range out on Oldham Road?"

"Still do,"

My last boy friend was a golf nut. I still had his clubs under my bed. But enough about him. "If it's the size of a baseball, how are we all going to fit in it?" Ruth Ann asked.

"Basketball," the professor said. "And that's just from the outside. On the inside, it can be as big as it needs to be. Our Universe is about the size of a basketball too, from the outside. If we could get outside it to take a look at it. The problem is getting outside one universe without immediately getting into another one. Do you follow me?"

"No."

"According to the professor, everything's about the size of a basketball," Hal said.

That makes him the biggest thing in creation, I thought.

We were heading up the bluff. "Why are you putting on lipstick?" I whispered to Ruth Ann. "And why are you filming her?" I asked the professor.

"Videotaping," the professor said. "This is a scientific experiment. I have to document everything." He was turned around in his seat with his camcorder on his shoulder. Ruth Ann was combing her hair. Hal pulled into the logging road to turn around. It was dark back in the trees.

"Why are we stopping?" the professor asked. "Is this some kind of Stephen King thing?"

"I'm beginning to think so," Hal said. Muttered. I could tell he was angry that Ruth Ann was along.

"Here we go," Hal said. The professor turned around and started videotaping through the windshield. We started down the bluff, around Dead Man's Curve at forty-two. The posts started flickering past. Ruth Ann started to fool with the buttons on her denim jacket. The wave started flickering, and the world turned inside out like a sock, and there we were. In the white room.

"Where's the professor?" I wondered. I stood. Hal and Ruth Ann stood with me. There were only the three of us.

"Maybe he couldn't fit through," Ruth Ann said.

I wanted to look out the window at the hills but I was turning instead, toward the other room. Ruth Ann was turning us with her. Wascomb waited exactly as we had left him.

"Mother?" he asked.

"Ruth Ann," Ruth Ann said. "Don't you remember me? Never mind. I came to take you back."

"Back where?"

"There is another world," Hal said. "The real world."

"Hal," I said. "He's dead. Why rub it in?"

"You both stay out of this!" Ruth Ann said.

"What's so real about it?" Wascomb asked. "Are you guys in the Navy?"

"Johnny, I brought you something," Ruth Ann said. "Two friends of yours."

I thought she meant Hal and I. Then I realized she had finished unbuttoning her jacket. I tried to see her body but there was nothing there. When I stared long enough it sketched itself in, but it was too vague.

"Remember them?" she said again. "You used to call them Ben and Jerry."

"Ruth Ann!" I said.

"Ruth Ann, I've been dead for a long time," Wascomb said.

"I'll make you remember me," Ruth Ann said. She stepped forward, toward the other room--and as one person Hal and I both pulled back, alarmed. We fell through into darkness.

"Hooonnnnk! Hoooooinnnk!"

A car sped by, barely missing the front of the Cavalier, which was sticking out past the stop sign onto River Road. "What happened?" Ruth Ann asked. She was buttoning her denim jacket. The professor was leaning over the back of the seat, videotaping her every move.

"What happened was, you almost got us killed!" Hal said. Yelled. Screamed.

We took Ruth Ann back to the KwikPik to get her Volvo. She got out of the car without a word. I offered to drive her home but she just shook her head and drove off.

"What happened to you?" Hal asked the professor.

"I didn't go through," he said. "But I got what I wanted. I have it documented."

We went to Hal's and played the tape on his VCR. It showed Ruth Ann putting on her lipstick. It showed Hal driving and looking annoyed. Then there were the posts in the headlights, flickering past. There was another shot of Hal driving. Then of me and Ruth Ann in the back seat. Ruth Ann was unbuttoning her denim jacket. She wasn't wearing anything underneath it, not even a bra. The camera zoomed in on her breasts. The screen flickered, then showed the stop sign.

"Pretty average tits for a Homecoming Queen," Hal said.

"Knock it off," I said. "She may be a lunatic but she's my cousin. Anyway, I thought this was a scientific experiment."

"It was," the professor said. "And it worked." He rewound to where Ruth Ann unbuttoned her jacket. "Watch the numbers this time, at the bottom corner of the screen." The camera zoomed in on Ruth Ann's breasts again. The whole sequence lasted eight seconds. Three of them were blank.

8:04:26 (breasts)

8:04:27 (breasts)

8:04:28 (blank)

8:04:29 (blank)

8:04:30 (blank)

8:04:31 (breasts)

8:04:32 (breasts)

"She disappeared for three seconds," the professor said.

"That means we disappeared too," I said.

"I wasn't documenting that. The point is, she was gone and the video proves it, at least to me. It implies the existence of the pocket universe, at least indirectly. I'll need more documentation, though. The next problem is, how do I get through personally?"

"Just follow the bouncing boobs," Hal said.

"Knock it off, I said," I said. "You have to be watching the white wave. The posts. The little cavalier on the hood. That's what you should have been filming."

"Videotaping."

"Whatever. Anyway, how could it have only lasted three seconds? It sure felt like a lot longer than that."

"Haven't you ever heard of relativity?" Hal asked.

"Time in a pocket universe doesn't really connect with time here," the professor said. "The pocket universe could have just squeezed off a microsecond here, then divided it up into a million parts there, which would seem like twenty minutes to you. It's all

subjective. That's why it seems like eternity to your friend in there, whereas it's probably only been only two or three minutes altogether. See what I mean?"

"No. You mean there's life after death but it only lasts a couple of minutes?"

"Tops. But it seems like eternity. Meanwhile, can we try again tomorrow night?"

I was game. So was Hal, as long as Ruth Ann didn't come along. I left Hal and the professor watching reruns of Ruth Ann's tits and walked home to watch Unsolved Mysteries. After, I sat outside and smoked a cigarette. I wondered if my last boyfriend was ever coming back. I wondered what Wascomb was doing. Probably the same thing I was. I decided one more trip would be enough for me.

Seven

I got off at 8:00 and Hal was waiting for me, in the lot of the KwikPik. At 8:04 the professor rolled in in his Geo Metro. At 8:05 guess who rolled in in her Volvo.

"No way!" said Hal from the back of the Cavalier. He sent me out to deal with her. He was taping a foam cradle for the camcorder to the shelf behind the back seat.

The professor began the process of getting out of the Geo Metro. Ruth Ann was already out of her Volvo. She was wearing her denim jacket again. Plus toreador pants and eyeliner. I felt like arresting her.

"You're not going!" I said.

"Camilla, don't even try to stop me," she said. "Besides, you're supposed to be my cousin. Blood's thicker than water."

"Everything's thicker than water," I said.

"We'll see!" She stomped off and helped the professor out of his car, bending over, probably to let him know what she was wearing under her jacket. Or wasn't.

"Why shouldn't she go?" the professor said. "She's the one who actually knows somebody there."

"We all know somebody there," I said. "That's because there's only one person there."

"Well, she's going," said the professor. "And she's riding up front with me."

"Three in the front? And since when do you decide things around here?" I looked at Hal, waiting for him to speak up. Instead, he was looking at his shoes. The professor held out

his hand and Hal put the keys to the Cavalier in it. I was suddenly beginning to get the picture.

"Hal," I said, "you are an absolute moron." I walked into the store to get a V-8. I always drink a V-8 when I am disgusted. It's the only thing that helps.

When I came back out, the Cavalier was gone. So were Ruth Ann and the professor. Hal was sitting in the Metro.

"They decided it would be better without either one of us," he said. "How do you like my new car?"

It's not like we didn't know where they were going. We headed out Old 19 toward Dead Man's Curve. We were going up the bluff on the inside when they were coming down, so we saw the whole thing. The white posts broke off like bad teeth and the Cavalier sailed right through. It seemed to hang for a minute in the air, and I thought--hoped--that the world was going to turn inside out like a sock and catch it. But it didn't.

The Cavalier started sliding down the bluff, through the little saplings and brush, then bounced off the rocks with a crunch, then dropped out of sight. We didn't hear it hit for a long time.

Then we heard it hit.

"Sweet fucking Jesus," said Hal. He pulled over and we got out of the car. I could lean over the bluff, holding onto the broken cable that had run through the white posts, and see the Cavalier wedged between a rock and a sycamore, the front end just over the water.

Hal was standing with one hand on the door of the Metro like he was paralyzed.

"Go get help!" I said. I started down the cliff. The broken cable helped me far enough so that I could slide the rest of the way. The doors to the Cavalier were wedged shut and the professor was dead. So was Ruth Ann. I buttoned her denim jacket through the window. I took the camcorder from the shelf behind the back seat, and hid it in the bushes for later. I waited up on the road for the police to come. Even though it was summer it was cold.

The police came by to interview me at work the next day. KwikPik only gives days off for immediate family. I told them I didn't know anything. They said they would be back. I went by to see Ervin that night and told him, "They were doing some kind of experiment. The professor was convinced that the wave patterns helped him see into the future or something. You know how Ruth Ann loved that stuff."

"She did?" It must have been Ervin who called off the cops. The only real inquest was held by Hal and me after Ruth Ann was buried. We waited two nights so as not to seem callous. (Or get spotted.) We retrieved the camcorder and took it to his apartment.

The video was shot from the shelf behind the back seat. It showed them starting around the curve. The professor had the speed exactly right at forty-two. It showed Ruth Ann unbuttoning her jacket. The professor was looking down at her. The car veered and she grabbed the wheel, either to save them or to run them off the cliff, there was no way of knowing.

Hal and I watched it again and again. It was our black box. Our flight recorder. I could see Ruth Ann's breasts in the rear view mirror, but not her face.

She disappeared just as the car was going over. The professor never did.

"Does that mean he never got to see the pocket universe?" I asked.

"Beats me," said Hal. "I don't see how we'll ever find out. Even if I could find the exact car with the exact sound and everything, the white posts are gone."

Ervin was remarried within four months. Hal moved to Louisville as soon as he got his two year degree. I'm still at the KwikPik working two shifts on Sundays. My boyfriend never showed up again. I didn't actually expect him to. But enough about him. And Ruth Ann? Even though we were never exactly close, I hope she's safe in her pocket universe with Wascomb. Living happily ever after. Or whatever they do there.

the end