

# **Skimming the Gumbo Nuclear**

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## **SKIMMING THE GUMBO NUCLEAR**

by

M. F. Korn

*"Facilis DescensusAverno"*

For my daughter Savannah Hart Korn, the late Patricia Ann Korn Mestayer- Endres, and especially for two huge Depression-era families from whence I came eventually out of thriving multitudes: the massive Sibille Family of the Acadiana area of Louisiana, rich in heritage and lineage, and the massive, rugged Korn family, also rich in heritage and lineage, whose sons picked cotton every day before school which ennobled each of them. These large families and numerous others like them crested at a time of Integrity, where these families held on strong during tough times in the hot Louisiana sun.

## **Mutant in the Mirror: An Introduction by Jeffrey Thomas**

Toward the climax of M. F. Korn's SKIMMING THE GUMBO NUCLEAR, he mentions, "man's

godlike charm at creating his own hell." This is in reference to the ecological horrors wrought in this apocalyptic novel, but there is also a more personal hell implied in this passage. Self-destruction on a more intimate scale. It is the book's greatest fascination for me; that, while encompassing the potential destruction of all humankind, it also chronicles the downward spiral of one particular man. Indeed, though there is a potent cautionary fable at the heart of this story, a warning shouted out in great earnestness and real anger, this apocalypse is almost a symbolic externalization of the protagonist's own meltdown. Thus, we have both an exciting horror thriller with thought-provoking subtexts and impassioned social commentary, and also a work that has a candid autobiographical feel...as uncomfortably real and courageously honest as the poetry of Anne Sexton.

The threat in *SKIMMING THE GUMBO NUCLEAR* is the pollution of the body of Nature, ...and the pollution of the body of Ricky Harrison, our protagonist. Name your poison, and as Poe said, "what disease is like alcohol?" Ricky is a lost soul, haunted by personal demons and masochistically summoning forth even more of those from the genie's lamp of a bourbon bottle. When he cloisters himself with his own pain, his frat brothers cry, "Where the hell is Harrison?", and we say, "Where indeed?" Edward Fitzgerald wrote: "Drink! for you know not whence you come, nor why; Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where." But Ricky will ultimately strive for, reach toward a personal redemption – and love – even as the world begins overdosing on its own overindulgence around him.

Ricky Harrison's family is referred to as a "nuclear family", and the term can't be accidental. As nuclear and chemical plants infest the environment with carcinogens, Ricky's own mother wastes away with cancer. Mutants are created from radiation, and radiation is used to treat Mrs. Harrison.

Again and again, Korn takes us from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from the large-scale crisis to the suffering individual. Even an unflushed toilet becomes an effective metaphor for apathy and self-contempt. Even an episode of vomiting becomes poetic and suggests greater meaning: "his ralphing in porcelain was his barbaric yawn from the rooftops of the world." The character's discomfort here is more than physical in this novel of desolation, dissolution and pollution. There is a conflict between matter and the soul, between technology and spirituality. There is the struggle, as Korn puts it in his unique, idiosyncratic style, of "the twilight of man trying to live peaceably with carcinogens, roentgens, and Reddy Kilowatt stomping on his very ass." The conflict is nearly between heaven and hell, and a mutated eel encountered at the start of the book – a forerunner of worse things to come – is three-headed, like Cerberus at the gate of Hades.

There is a strong sense of place and time in this book; Ricky feels a "sense of eras coming and going." The novel begins in Louisiana in the 70's, the time of Reaganomics and yuppies, but there is an even broader sense of the American experience here, detailed in a dazzling stream of consciousness (more like rushing flood waters of consciousness) carrying along a profuse flotsam and jetsam of cultural references. Poising his microscope over a sample of blighted humanity, Korn comments on the "obnoxiousness and arrogance befitting their generation." He shows us the very real homophobia and xenophobia of the locals, akin to their fear of the mutants spawning amongst them. But there is also a warm humanity, as white Ricky is befriended by his African-American coworkers. There is a great deal of humor in the book, particularly centering around these coworkers, to offset the sense of encroaching doom. Korn's writing style intrigues endlessly; in the opening sequence, an old man's Cajun slang entwines itself with the third person narrator's own voice. The author's presence suffuses this book, so that he wears his words like a suit around him...and where so many novels feel soullessly manufactured (perhaps in plants like those described in the book), this is a refreshing dose of in-your-face subjectivity.

In Korn's view of the world, beauty and ugliness become combined.

The ominous refineries and the chemical plant Ricky works for are appropriately painted in hellish hues,

but can also be described as, "beautiful like the Land of Oz or the pleasure domes of Kublai Khan." Sex becomes as grittily real as it is alluring: Ricky's date pukes on him during an intimate encounter, and a centerfold pins her labia back "like a dissected frog with her dingy little fingers". It is this kind of layering and complexity that gives Korn his unpredictability, with the result that the novel doesn't feel like a standard "end of the world" exercise in cliché. Not even when he rolls in the zombies. And I'm a sucker for a good living dead story.

Though Korn's canvas is large, and grows more expansive as the plot progresses, we never stray far from the intense humanity that forms its nucleus. In *SKIMMING THE GUMBO NUCLEAR*, M. F. Korn reminds us that a planet can live under harrowing threat and even stars die unmourned in the universe every day...but there is no tragedy more profound than the anguish of a solitary soul.

– Jeffrey Thomas, 7/26/01

## Chapter One

It was not even noon this time.

The college boys were gorging themselves on cheap draft. "Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother" resounded from the perched deejay's stereo. The White Horse Tavern was an unassuming college bar with no redeeming values.

"Harrison! Alright!" his fraternity brothers yelled at him.

A cacophony antiphonal. Twelve-tone dissonance. Ricky Harrison sidled up to the bar next to his big brother in the fraternity, Atkinson. The guy was a basketball wonder, but much more, a deft womanizer.

Atkinson, whose free arm draped about an aquiline Tri-Delt, pushed Ricky's first draft into his hand. She was raven-haired, gorgeous, and high on cocaine. She had that neon look in her eyes and a glowing visceral beauty that seemed enhanced by the drug. Karrie Capshaw was being snaked at the moment. She was someone else's girlfriend; the someone else was a beast of a man, covered in hair. No one knew exactly what year he was. Ricky remembered, at one of the Tigerland bars, this boyfriend downed a pitcher of beer in one gulp. They had watched in amazement as he did it.

But now, Ricky was driven by "Do it! Do it! Do it!" which they chanted drunkenly. Ricky looked at Atkinson's bronzed countenance. His blond bangs flopped in his clown face.

"You got a lot a catching up to do, Harrison!" He raised the beer and killed it in three gulps.

The milling crowd stood, chattering about the most interesting tidbits known to modern man. The pinball machines rocked back and forth.

Lights flashed crazily. The pool tables were stacked with quarters.

Many more beers were drunk by these students just finishing final exams.

Atkinson's best friend, Tomer, haggled over two freshman girls whose problem was how to explain to daddy that they were flunking out of college in the worst way. A Theta girl grappled a Kappa Alpha guy while he was trying to sink the eight ball.

Karrie sipped a fresh brew and smiled beautifully at Ricky. "Is she vaguely attracted to me?" he thought. "Or is the alcohol being taken into her system and the edge of the cocaine is wearing down smooth, molli- fying this gorgeous creature into some lulling relaxation? Or she could have downed a Quaalude?" Atkinson had informed him she liked those. Ricky looked at her cream complexion and thought, "the genitals of the Divine." If only Ricky could take for his own that smoldering charm she was thrusting his way—outside the comprehension of Atkinson, who was busy trying to order five more beers.

There was nothing more fulfilling than to get raucously plastered and sleep off the dulcet sweet afternoon of semesters that meant rites of passage for many of his disco-death generation. Rock and roll blasted out carrion in decibel belches of sound. What was her name again? Carrie?

Carrie Capshaw? Or was it Karrie?

Atkinson made his way to the troughs through the hall leading to the condom machines. One fellow was crapping in the sink. A Deke from New Orleans who casually sipped his draft while the other men were at the troughs.

A few months earlier, Ricky had gone to class, the collegiate circus in which to wallow in his languid anonymity, through the miasma of the quadrangle and the hoards of lovely students, to electrical engineering courses which he loathed with a passion unparalleled in the history of the race of Man. He was not a Frat Rat, not an intellectual, at least he didn't think so, but a number, a social security code in the magnum opus mainframe computer in one of the looming structures of a campus in Louisiana where things were happening for others but not him. His life was unsatisfying.

He knew he was only twenty years old, but he felt the dying of his insides when he thought about the dissipation of his old gangs from high school. The rigors of prep Catholic school under the tutelage of the brothers of the Sacred Heart. Here, he was knowing not one iota was spent to urge him to higher grades. No one but his family cared whether he dropped out, resigned, or even dropped off the face of the Earth. He was a sophomore with blond hair, rakishly good looking but much too sensitive and shy.

Too aesthetic to be understood by the collegiate mindset. He was rooming in the South Stadium. There under the bowels of the roman coliseum he had often studied while the football games played on. The Fighting Tigers of LSU screamed on to victory while he was interested in playing ragtime and Science Fiction.

He couldn't wait for summer break, even though there were problems at home in the manicured suburbs of Sherwood Forest. He had grown up shrouded from the real world. The white bread existence of going to the country club with his friends every day to play nine holes, though no one could really ever brag about hitting a decent shot. Or playing touch football on people's lawns and basketball until one was swooning with heart palpitations.

All this in the motherly security of the quiet streets of Sherbrook Drive. But his brother, a national merit finalist, had had a heart attack and summarily quit high school. He often stayed locked up in his room like a quiet somnambulist martyr, a hermit. The mystery of the neighborhood.

The old gang had broken up. The neighborhood parties, the high school camp outs, the activities had

gone, like ether in a strong wind.

He had lost his bearings and was self-destructing. Ricky Harrison, son of Richard and Marlene Harrison. Amway high rollers and purchasing agent at Dow Chemical for the last twenty years. A nice house, a dachshund named Schroeder, two sisters, one older, one younger. The brother who was in terminal decline, leading to his mother's instability and heartache. Why was he, Ricky, the middle boy, bothering to go to college?

He had worked construction a couple of summers before, once at Dow Chemical and once at Exxon. Baton Rouge was purported to have the cleanest water in the state, because of a water ledge. The whole of the Mississippi River banks from below New Orleans down south to way above Baton Rouge all the way to St. Francisville, were a huge conglomeration of refineries, oil and chemical companies. The purveyors of pollution and smells and bad air of noxious chlorine spills, oil leakage. Devil's Swamp was the big sewage dump here. Murky leagues of tepid, caustic Mississippi water.

The winding marvelous river that Mark Twain once wrote about, dotted and closely edged by these places for more than fifty years. That Mississippi mud was now full of petrochemicals and napalm probably, Ricky thought.

But he felt free out at the tank farms. The miles of tanks and pipe and steel and valves and men who didn't care that anybody was a college boy and all that. It was a long stretch from prep school with young men being built into behemoths both spiritually and mentally — to the hot broiling Louisiana sun in the various chemical blocks of mind-boggling pipe bent to right angles and the leather-necked welders and pipe fitters of the unions.

The north Baton Rouge men, the Denham Springs rednecks, were closer to God down there in the mazes of steel and rust and what man hath wrought in his quest for making plastics.

Ricky remembered good times. Taking girls up on the levee right there in the pastures of brown and gold, near the LSU practice fields. There wasn't much stench in the air then. But there was a distance between the liberal atmosphere of cigar-smoking philosophy professors and the leatherneck denizens toting lunch buckets through iron gates. In the heart of each man, they had their own story to tell; each was busy going about the business of getting that elusive degree. And here Rick used to stay in his dorm late at night underneath 80,000 screaming drunken fans in purple in gold. Trying to write a science fiction story. He had looked many times out the window and seen masses of cars in the parking lot. He had thought about his exgirlfriend that had dumped him for no good reason, and that she was dating other guys. He was alone and had threads of sentimentality. Now he was dating little coeds with gullets enabling them to imbibe beers along Tigerland bar hops; thriving in the social circles of the campus. Everyone was represented: the Asians, Germans, Africans, and the estranged hippies who still harangued about the campus pitching forth their views on anarchism. He wallowed in the backwash of the milling crowds who moved ahead, while he stood still.

He didn't want to be anywhere in particular. He had lived in this bustling industrial city all his life. He knew there was a world out there. He felt dwarfed by the muscle bound mature men whom he dwindled under so mercilessly. The girls were all well evidenced in their Seventies ways. The intelligentsia of the colleges was rampant with idealism, free thought, free love, anarchy. This didn't flow with the heartbeat of the suburban and segregated city. North Baton Rouge had the generations of old and young, all working the refineries. It also had suburbs of Yuppies, upper middle classes stretched all the way to the AmiteRiver. Beyond that lay the rednecks who didn't want to be a part of the city whatsoever.

Where had his life gone? He lost his true love. He fought against every principle that he believed in; he was a mess. A chaotic maelstrom engulfed his hubris.

He was on his own. Every once in a while he traipsed over gnarly oak tree roots beyond the quadrangle and library to fulfill his earnest interest in attempting to play ragtime; his anachronistic piano studies kept that one spark in him alive. He was young and full of dreams, but he realized he might be slowly squelching them.

Finally the semester was almost over and he could once again strive to get gainful employment at those stinking holes of plastics and chemicals.

Go down in there and make seven dollars an hour, righteous bucks for a man with jumbled up ideas in his head.

His days of finals were over; he wandered through them without remembered a syllable later. His days of learning stuff like that were probably over. He went through the motions of studying the circuits and electromagnetism.

There were whizzes that memorized circuit designs far better than he could.

They called this state a sportsman's paradise, but Ricky had seen suburbs transposed alongside malls and urban blights. And ugly streets that made up the smallish Baton Rouge metro area. There was a garden district, but there was also a pollution quotient of immeasurable proportions.

There used to be a time when there were only a couple of high schools; now there were quite a few. Now they pushed forth seventies wastrels in packs, legions, and throngs of cliques that would basically intermix in the large university. Now, Ricky was missing the breakup of the old gang.

The few friends he really hung around with were now pairing off with the girl of their choice; creating lives for themselves. But Ricky Harrison was a long figure struggling to pass classes, though he was once promising. The beer drinking in the morning and pot smoking days with fraternity members was sure sign of a total turnaround. Rebellion was quite evident. He pushed against the current, the eddies of students. He could feel himself lost in the crowds of students walking through the quadrangle going from class to class. The collegiate days were supposed to be the happiest. They weren't. He had a lot of deep emotional problems and he didn't know quite how to deal with them. He lost his beautiful raven-haired girlfriend. Now he hopped around and squeezed the sweaters of certain sorority girls. He hung around with Lady-killers like his frat brother Atkinson. He hadn't been initiated yet; his grades were so low he had to pledge again this last semester. He was lost and didn't feel too privileged about it.

Well, it would be soon off to another construction sight or refinery, where he would swell over with happiness. He hated college and the autonomy of professors. In a word, he was at once enthralled by the rite of passage of leaving high school behind, and attending college.

He seemed to excel in whatever he didn't need to further his chances of making a living. He guessed that he could get an English degree or Music degree and a twenty thousand dollar job would be handed to him. But reality set in like the fog banks on the Mississippi levee before the sun dispersed them like phantom swamp gas.

He had some wild times in college. As far as girls were concerned.

He was stupid enough to break up with his steady girlfriend through the remainder of his years at Catholic High. He was on the downward path and he had a way to go. There was an endless procession of keg parties and mixers with the sororities who graced the frat houses with gaiety for a few hours of slurred speech and beer slipping games. The house always reeked rank with a film of sticky beer only to be housed down like the hovel it was; that's why the drain plugs were there. The sorority houses lined a picaresque road and CollegeLake was immaculate. They would always descend to the hellishness of

Izod shirts and topsiders and clean-cut boys on the brink of Manhood. Most had a gainful knowledge that they were heading towards the business world. Ricky was the unassuming sensitive youth. His eyes were still gaping from the trickling of liberal doses of knowledge and mindblowing perpendicular doctrines. He was attracted to those Science Fiction courses and lured to purchase esoteric books. To wander to the music building only to be snubbed by them. He was alone in his narrow world of eclectic ruin, from which he could not exit.

So he bounced from frat house to pothead apartments in Tigerland to classes. He had been seen and smelt with alcohol on his breath in circuits and semiconductor classes, much unlike the serious, technically oriented clientele then. This university was taking on another more unclassifiable form; his problems melted like phantasies when he took to drink. He was a philistine in Whiteface. A hybrid of sensitive studious application from the most elite prep school to a wastrel with below average grades. His parents in the manicured suburbs had done all they could; the rest was up to him.

Nobody cared who was present when those mandatory rolls were called in Calculus, Chemistry lab. He couldn't handle this careening around like a child's top, wobbling aimlessly around.

He had needed to get through finals and also from his dope smoking frat brothers; that phalanx of righteous beer guzzling ne'er-do-wells.

Get his mind back squarely upon his shoulders. Get that sensitive countenance and flaxen hair back in to a bronzed facsimile of a broiled-in-the toiling-sun quality. So befitting girls favor accorded him. This was all a legendary tale told with bright intensity. The infamies that were committed.

Endless social pathos and girl chasing. Men-boys rambling around with a collegiate look about them: the topsiders, Izod shirts and a beer can grafted to the left hand. Where the term "dropping trow" would become the mainstay and touchstone of the small bygone era. The students bisected by gender were too much for Ricky Harrison, wide-eyed sensitive youth.

He didn't have courage to talk to girls at the White Horse Tavern on Fridays, when the frat boys would literally start drinking at 12 noon and be sloshed veritably well by five in the afternoon. He had a persistent wail quietly flitting about in his thoughts; unsatisfactory family life, brother still quite screwed up.

The family outward seemed fine; inward, rotting malignantly. A household who read Vonnegut, full of ascetic Catholics whose attendance did not mostly include the Harrison household.

The corduroy, Earth tones, long hair and waste-oids paraded in these bars of iniquity, these watering holes. It was their prerogative, their civil duty to get levelly faced at all mixers. To dog and snake as many women as possible. To lie to them, get in the sack with them, then dump them like a sack of coal abruptly and move on. A frat rat's work was never done. The boys were giving it their all.

Nietzsche and the hellishness of Pireaus and Plato's Republic. Where did he fit in? In this vast amalgam of pretty coeds and rakish handsome upstarts with an obnoxiousness and arrogance befitting their generation.

So he was on an eternal quest of how many refineries could he work at until he would be truly lost in the milling of the Everyman? Mislaid at fraternity outings, the cry could be heard in a rebel yell: "Where the hell is Harrison?" and then soon quite forgotten. It wouldn't be long before he went off to the tank farms and refineries; probably Exxon this time. That refinery was what made Baton Rouge.

Just yesterday in the fraternity house, where the sunlight of the midmorning pierced the high tinted windows, the television blared out the noon news: A pompadour-gargoyle bleated out something that rang in Ricky's ears: "Four different Chlorine spills occurred at Dow Chemical Plant in Plaquemine today,

this morning. The OSHA representatives are considering filing a lawsuit in the name of the state environmental agency, spokesman Paul Grandit says.

"And at another plant construction is still stopped by the litigation of officials from the environmental protection agency and the construction companies bided to do jobs this is at the new Nuclear Power plant near St. Francisville.

Spokesmen for the Nuclear Plant say it will still open before the year is out." Ricky had nodded and went back to his studies of rhetorical diagrams and symbols for which he hadn't the faintest notion the meaning therein. There was various stimulating short-jerked conversation between the aesthetes and the skankmongers concerning whether or not Tim Bergeron got any last night from that Byronic vision of a coed from A O Pi Sorority.

"I talked to him, he said he got it, he screwed her." They laughed.

"That lucky son of a bitch; that girl was so fine. I would suck her daddy's dong for the chance at that." More cherubic clarion of laughter pealed out.

The campus free bus full of sorority women and fraternity rats always stopped right in front. They carted these aesthetes to their various destinations for the retched finals. The "Day of the Dead" for studying now long gone and the semester almost over. Ricky always waited his turn, scanning the bus for various perfumed and powdered female, but not too ostentatiously—rather conspicuously. The ride was not ever invigorating.

He had taken his final with abysmal reserves; he was the second person to leave, amidst the Asian refuges, the Korean wonders, the Chinese yellow peril. The calculus-ridden breeds and the others would suffer the fate of some brilliant genius blowing the curve all to hell. Ricky loved the celebrations accorded the reversing of migraine-inducing finals. The subsequent death of the semester. Of life, soon the campus would be devoid of all of them, just the eternally hibernating foreigners who had no particular place to go and certainly couldn't afford a ticket to the side of the world they lived on, never rotating back to their worlds.

He knew that soon he would be out with acrid skies above him, the large ironclad tanks on the horizon. He would be kowtowing to black foremen telling him to police the area. Not bums of calculus teachers and twanged-accented types telling him how many volts go across a capacitor.

There was a whole world out there beyond the miasmic hub of refineries looming onto the winding muddy Mississippi River.

## **Chapter Two**

This was the time for Rick Harrison, but he was too shy and paralyzed by drink. In this bar room, he knew his phraseology could turn the stomach of any ingratiating coed. He asked Karrie now: "Would



you be interested in taking a drive?

She looked away for a second. She blushed. Then smiled and that little left smile line creased. Those beautiful pearls of teeth were sexy.

On her nicely rucked t-shirt were the words "ASPEN SKI LODGE." "Okay." She smiled again. Ricky was fortified. He had conquered his fraternity brother. Snaked the ultimate snaker himself.

The rest of the afternoon they drank until almost anything was funny. The chicken joint next door had plenty of business Friday afternoon after finals. Ricky ate two jalapeno peppers with his chicken. Atkinson left with a tall girl with a large beak from one of the doggie sororities. She had been smooth-talked into bedding him down for the night from the guile of his baser instincts barking at her.

Atkinson's friends, Tomer and Franklin took off for Florida with four Lambda Zeta girls and eighteen cases of beer. Their love was God and Sixers and perhaps they should have taken along a dialysis machine in their whiz-bang adventure along Interstate 10 with hurricane warnings in the offing and radar detector blinking at will at every supermarket and speed trap.

After indulging in a burping session at the Chicken Shack next door, talking jive with the homeboys, a simple message rang in Ricky Harrison's inner ear, that of a much more sublime taste of the better things in life. In a few hours he would pick up Karrie Capshaw and whoosh her off to the levee.

Outside, the fleecy Cajun skies bordered the swampy pits of the outer regions of the parish. Inside, were endless conversations. Descriptions of the more important things that red-blooded young American males dilate on were bantered around like stock market tips.

Ricky Harrison lost himself in the flowing crowd. Now he was outside between the White Horse Tavern and the Brass Rail. He talked to the cops who showed up. He enlightened them on American literature.

Breezy coeds, blue-jeaned men were in the throng. It was a meeting of the rich at play and the less fortunate who plunked down their spare change for sloshed brew. The same as they did every time St. Patrick's day came around and everyone bled green.

He drove down Highland Road through the gates of LSU until his bleary eyes saw the campus where he was just a social security number. He had championed himself in having gone to the bathroom over six times, at least once for every two glasses of beer. Lots of vitamins in the swill. And now he would catnap at a friend's dorm bed at the frat house, until he picked up Karrie.

There she was, waiting in the foyer of the Tri-Delt house. This cracker box, three and one-half stories high, was filled with Daddy's little rich girls. Every twenty-year-old in an Ocean Pacific jacket.

She was there. She smiled at him with those smile lines again.

They went, both randy from beer still ventilating in their systems. Her loveset eyes had a sweet weave to them. From cocaine and a Quaalude that just hit, and beer.

They drove along fraternity/sorority row. Ricky thought about making the Sign of the Cross at the Catholic Church. They strung through the campus. The turbaned foreigners were making their way not to the river. To the second floor of the library. Not to read the graffiti etched in the study cubicles, but to glower at their fine-printed textbooks and etch every syllable into their heads.

He held his arm around her. She seemed to like him. Shy in this campus of aquatint brick. He was fascinated with her and these halcyon days. This was their double-soliloquy of nothing very important being said in particular. Nothing had to be said. They smiled. They crossed over the railroad tracks and

headed away from Knowledge, Power, Education and keg parties in an endless stream of swilling duds. She winked at him coyly and her lithe frame eased over and nestled next to him. This was the miracle of the age; that they hardly knew one another. He didn't know her major and she didn't know anything about him. She took a pill out of her purse and gulped it down her soft throat.

They went down to where Nicholson Drive pointed to the levee.

Past the track field of golden-brown weeds and the veterinary building. Now on the river road that went all the way up and all the way down.

"I really find you foxy," he said. She smiled. She was numb all the way down. Imponderable mixtures; pills of myriad colors, powders and alcohol in liberal doses.

They drove the incline upwards in the shiny mud.

There was a smell about this region that was sickly sewn. The refineries were cauldrons of chemicals. Domes of hell's own half-acre. The Mississippi delta stuck its rich fingers into the muck nightmare of Man taking nature and raping it. And never quite getting enough. Monolithic corporations with slogans and fetid land beneath, rotting into layer after layer of soil and land, until strange things would happen. Nature would mix with it. Then add nuclear power and Godzilla mutations and four-legged frogs were found in ponds, glowing like a GE light bulb every night. Sterilizing Reddy Kilowatt in roentgens of radioactive glow in a dark playhouse.

The Buick sat atop the levee in the darkness of drizzling skies. The river was out there. They kissed. Their clothes came off.

She nodded her head a little as he thrust into her miniature rich body. She was perfect and white and wet with excitement. She smelled good and she was adorable like a silent movie queen. He was aroused and she was too. She hiccupped and then while they were in coitus she had to vomit. He managed to get the heavy door of the Buick opened. She leaned over, naked on top of him. She puked and the dome light came on.

Her breasts shone in the light. She wiped her mouth. Her black raven hair was dreadful. He was so drunk he couldn't come inside her. He thought of exactly what he was doing and then she woke from her somnambulist Quaalude wonderment and found her sensibilities, too. She kissed him passionately and with her little petite hands put them into his back. His skinny body bent as he came in her loins. The Genitals of the Divine, he thought as he rested. The windows were fogged up. An Allman Brothers song came on the radio. The air-conditioner blew on them as he started the car for a second. She blanked out again as he pulled his lithe body from beneath her little frame.

Across the river lay Dow Chemical, the Gottleib Chemical Company, Kaiser Aluminum with its constant haze of stench. Texaco was on this side in St. Gabriel Parish where all the Coon-asses coon hunted with only one headlight beaming. Ricky had worked at Texaco with men that couldn't even write their own name. He had also worked at Exxon in North Baton Rouge with its flames atop towers as if Olympian games went on. Huey Long, the Kingfish himself, had them build the old Mississippi River bridge right below the refinery because the ships wouldn't be able to pass under and go further North. So that's where the pipes lay, and pipes were laid on top of those. They hired a hardy breed of men before the Depression and there was work for everybody. Everybody had a populist's time for themselves and a free lunch from Uncle Earl Long.

But now there were rumors. Baton Rouge had more incidence of cancer death and other related health hazards; there were people dying like flies. Baton Rouge was voted the second to last place that anyone wanted to live. Door-to-door refineries. All this was going through Ricky's mind. He looked over at

her loveliness. A peach she was in all her glory. Her upper lip curled upwards as she slept now, naked.

Ricky Harrison sighed at the Quaalude quandary and whispered, "I'm going to take a walk." She nodded her head slowly. The drizzle had stopped and it was pitch dark. The fog banks cropped out over the array of barges sitting a good eight of a mile from the ridge of the levee. He groped his way out the door and thought again of her body supple on top of him, bouncing around in joyous ecstasy. The slow nodding off that her head went in time. And then the opening of the right car door and her charming vomit in the mud. The sky was gray as he plodded down the flank side of the grassy mound across hard tractor mud splits caked all over the place. He was still elated from coupling with that darling little pain pill and drug rich girl whose tiny body was paradise. "The genitals of the Divine" was all certainly true. Raven haired, sculptured face. But weren't all Tri Delt's like that? Little cherubs and nymphs with aquiline profiles and the best prescriptions in town. Who said that isn't the way it should be? They are at their prime. They are wallowing in credit card allowances and stipends of incredulity. And cars furnished by their sugar daddies back in oil field country, or New Orleans new or old money.

She looked elegant even in her retching. His legs carried him into the mucky ground with puddles shimmering.

He descended to the river. The barges of rust-brown sitting patiently like sentinels of massive volume against the starry river scape. He got closer; he could smell chlorine mixed with a small dose of Exxon Refinery's valley of ashes and rendering of aluminum from Kaiser.

He blazed a trail through the flat low ground until he got to the water's edge. It was eerie and melancholic. The mixture of surreal landscape in fluorescent shadowy mist. The blending of the water's west bank on the horizon with blinking lights from the refineries and the Coffee factory way across. Trace elements of unclassifiable origin, seeping in the low windage; oily holy unction on his forehead from the ruinous plastics plants. He scanned the swampy cypresses and greenish moon bogs slimy and cholera-ridden.

There was nobody in sight, and he looked back at the red Buick and thought about his recent course for the future. Off to Exxon or Dow again, to refurbish his repository of experience.

There was something unknown down the way. A splash of frightful magnitude to his left, down twenty yards. He was startled. He thought it was a nutria rat, a big one. Or even an alligator, that was possible. Maybe a Gar swishing around in the shallow brown water. He was afraid to get any closer. He knew several people habitually drown here in the monstrous undercurrents and undertow of the massive omniscient and unforgiving river.

He got closer and couldn't see very well in the haze and his own lack of sobriety; he wasn't exactly thinking clearly either. He was a bit shaken up now. The feeding frenzy was still going. Something was out there in the lolling trees and undergrowth. Something silvery listed like the side of a bass, something long and thick and brownish purple, mangy scales, and muscular torso and a huge wicked mouth. It was chewing a half-alive nutria rat, and it was as he could see now, with incredulity, not an alligator, though it was about as long. It was some sort of thing like those lamprey eels. He gawked at it in the shadowy realm definition of the layout of this hellishness of a swamp, laying out into the actual riverbank. He was not sure what it was. All he tried to do was discern and remember what it was he saw, and embroil it within.

Then it looked at him and slithered with the now dead carcass of dirty rat, its eyes cold like a reptile, evil penultimate, it seemed.

It hissed like a whistling steam pipe and its teeth extended outward, from lips of skin. It's dorsal fin from

its sinewy back stuck out of the mud now, as it slithered back into the river, having devoured its prey in a few gulps. It vanished.

He galloped back towards the rise of the levee where the Buick was. He breathed heavily as he stomped through the grayish mud splattering his dress jeans all to hell.

He climbed into the Buick housing his concubine Leonardo, his Venus on the Half Shell with a puddle of sick in the levee dirt. He revved the engine and fishtailed over the iron bar cattle grating. She was blearyeyed, gaping and squinting in the drizzle that had reappeared. He looked at her lovely pale body, and she methodically began to put her clothes on: bra, little flock shirt, panties, jeans. It was a reverse strip tease, and then she appeared to awaken.

"Hey Ricky." She madly squeaked, though with a twinge of sultry- something.

"Yes, how are you feeling?" "Well." She cleared her lovely throat. "I woke up because it felt like the car was spinning around in circles" "Well, I kinda made us go on a deathride".

"Deathride?" She smiled. Those teeth sparkled. "I took YOU on a deathride." She meant the sex. She was straightening up.

"Honey, that was a life ride, you were a Sister of Mercy. You saved my life you" She laughed little coed bleats of good times.

"I've got to get back to the Sorority House" "Sure, that's coming right up here." He slowed the car down.

He wasn't going to tell her about the thing-a-ma-jig. His curiosity was piqued. For once, he didn't think about his mother. His somnambulist martyr brother was not getting to him now. He was with a girl who could change his life. This might have been nothing to her. It was everything to him.

"I really enjoyed tonight," he said, now shuffling a bit in his hesitation.

Showing signs of ill confidence again, right on cue.

Karrie diddled the FM radio dial.

"Oh, I love this song. 'Beast of Burden'." She brushed her hair while they listened.

"We heard that first on spring break to Pensacola. The other girls wanted to go to Panama City, but I told them that everybody we knew was in Pensacola." Ah yes, he thought. He was there. He remembered the Tiki House, the Hojo's (Howard Johnston), the Gulf-Aire motel across the street. The wild excursions into the discos brimming with shorn navy cadets out to kick frat butt who stole their women.

"I remember seeing you there. You were with . . . your boyfriend, Don. At Rosie O'Grady's when Atkinson danced with the waitresses after they sang him Happy Birthday and it wasn't even his birthday." "Oh. You were there? I guess I wasn't paying any attention . . . I was sick during the trip. We got the Howard Johnston's fried clams special." She laughed.

"Speaking of getting sick, are you alright?" She swallowed.

"You mean when we were making love?" she laughed.

"Yeah, I though you were a little out of it." "I don't even remember, to tell you the truth. There's the

house, I'm late . . . Thanks for the ride." She smiled as the car stopped right out front on the curving drive around the campus lake. He smiled at her as she got out.

"I'll see you around. On the bus to class. Or the next mixer we have" "Okay, I really enjoyed . . ."

Too late, she was gone. The car door slammed with a mighty thud and he waited and turned inward on himself once again. Back to the problems. The frat house with interrogations like the Nuremberg trials.

He drove onward in the abysmal mist. How loathsome his remorse and sorrow that came back took him by surprise and the coital bliss receded into memory. He parked near the stadium, went into his dorm room, and lay on the bed half the night pondering the plight of his pathos.

In his fevered dreams, there was a slim finned leviathan that was animated, spiteful, and dangerous, and it swallowed him up, bit by bit. He woke in the middle of the night to relieve himself and zipped back to reality. Now the stolid campus was turning into nightmarish grotesques of reptiles of unknown origin. Photoflashes of the nutria rat being severed into chunks of blood red in the dark of the swamp were the etched image that hounded him all until the next morning.

## Chapter Three

Mr. Langlois pushed his pirogue off the bank and put his can in with a little container of crickets chirping in the early morning air. He went "ouuwweeee" to himself as he adjusted his Swisher Sweet in his mouth. His frail old arms struggled to adjust his balance as he climbed into the boat. He had packed smoked oysters, ham sandwiches, all that good stuff, yeah.

He rowed out into the swamp where knobbed cypress knees and squatted in the algae-ridden soup of primordial nature. He was going to his favorite spot in a little jetty back where only he knew about dos good fishes.

He caught way too many trash fishes, yeah! Them choupiques and ugly alligator gar done wanted to snap his damn hands off when he pulled them in the boat. What he did all the time now was pull that hook off, and then whack them ugly-ass fishes and throw them, shocked, back in the brackish pea soup.

He done seen two water moccasins already this morning. Them is satanical serpents! His brother got bitten by one, or was that a copperhead?

In WhiskeyBay. He didn't listen to his wife and put some juju whammyhealing potion on him. Cajun magic took hold of his brother, and he was saved!

He was in a bit of shadowy paradise. The moss hung like draperies.

The fiery sun pierced through, streaky beams flitting through like a voyeur down into the murky water, and his little boat. He smelled and inhaled both. The water, the trees' knobby knees, smooth driftwood. Spider webs twitched in the gentle breeze. Little flits of splashes from turtles, snakes, fish

underneath the surface. The whole of the swamp was one congenial sentient and symbiotic being. He was in a cathedral of sorts; he had been raised in these waters. His memory pulled him back with every second glance, familiar territory indeed.

He hadn't been able to fish in quite a while. Madeleine Langlois had been sick and he loathed that sitting around watching television when he could have been out on the water.

He munched on a ham sandwich. He put it down, gripped the smoked oysters, wrenched them open, and plucked them out one by one into his mouth. The cane pole was sitting still on the bow of the wooden pirogue. Not too many nibbles yet. Then the line lurched and he knew he had something. The pull was unusually hard. It was almost like a trash fish, like a Triggerfish in the gulf. He gripped the pole and tugged on it, curious as to exactly the nature of the fish.

The thing came out of the water. Its death heads were three in number. Its three mouths were open in angry reptilian gnarledness, a monstrous freak mutant thing. Mr. Langlois's heart raced and he was aghast at its very nature, eel-like with a dorsal fin on the back. With no real fishtail, just a thin end. Mr. Langlois pulled it into the boat, all the while praying Hail Mary's in Creole French. Asking for the intervention of the Saints in his effort to be brave against this monstrous trinity of six-eyed mean-faced crazy eel. That word stuck in his gullet, crazy-eel. He put it in a cooler. He surely wasn't going to put it on a stringer.

There were no darned gills to run the line through! It was a sign from the Virgin Mary, telling him to stay at home with Madeleine. He sat still in the boat once it was in the cooler. The line still hung from the central head. Its three-foot length was too big and creepy to keep going with fishing.

He sat there in the quiet, the boat rippling against the balance of weight as he tried to sit and think about his supernatural thing.

In all his years, he had never seen anything like this. Church in Grand Coteau was going to be on his agenda now. He would attend regularly.

He sat there and then decided to row away a bit. There were probably other creatures like that around. The sun went behind an ominous rain cloud hovering like a vaporous omen. Wayne Langlois prayed and rowed knowing he had a shrieking little monster in his holy vessel. Doused once with holy water from the Catholic Church two hundred and fifty years old. He stopped momentarily, his whispered chants to the Blessed Mother.

He heard little muffling cries. There were different little mewlings and small shrieks from the three mouthed thing that fused into one further down.

It was inappropriate in its quite unholy trinity of three gangly heads.

Slithering around, wrapping their sinister neck and grayish whitish heads.

The underbelly like that of a whitish-bottomed perch. The little sounds emitting from the three heads was certainly monstrous in this little pirogue.

An implement of Satan, he wondered, as the creature whined and gasped.

The middle mouth bled a bit from the hook. The thing was in pain, its teeth baring themselves from the agony of its newfound captivity. It struggled to slither out of the little ice cooler. Mr. Langlois doubted the strength of the styrofoam.

That's it. He couldn't take it no more. He commenced to rowing his Cajun ass back to Grand Coteau,

that thing shrieking the whole way in three-voiced chorus. Down there in the inner sanctum of the shady and dark melting fronds and lilies, he was striving to climb out of the disorder.

A veritable circus of mutant things: multiple-legged frogs, two-headed snakes, snakes with split tails. All part of some weird Hieronymous Bosch painting that was animated in freaky splendor. He could contain himself no further.

He began coughing, shrieking in nervous spasms. He began babbling in cackling Cajun cussing and prayer together. The bayou water was dark and incessant. No depth was determinable. He threatened a two-headed snake with his paddle and cried out to the Holy blessed Mother. Above him, a four-headed water moccasin fell suddenly into the boat and two or three heads with fangs sunk into his trousers. He lurched, gave a painful cry, grabbed his knife finally, and stabbed the thing as it hit him again and then finally it went over the side. Five or six minutes later, he keeled over unconscious.

Stiff a little after that. The boat became an ark of mutant creatures slithering over his carcass.

He rose horizontally and started packing up his dorm room into a few boxes and a suitcase.

He drove through the campus.

He got to the low door of the frat house. He went inside. The hallway was dank. Most had departed. The parking lot normally would have been full. The semester was truly over now. The place was dead. He walked past the trophy room, glanced in. He walked into the dimly lit den where he had been yesterday morning. He glanced at the hardwood ceiling, its corners askance. He saw a cluster of the boys, over at the pinball machine.

The pings and bells dinning echoed in the grand ballroom. There was a dimly lit haze over the pool table. The pinball machine tilted.

"Man. Mother!" someone said.

"Harrison!" Brian said.

"You got anything good, Ricky? Old friend, old chum?" Brian asked with a cracked grin. His sweet queer eyes shone in the dark, the lashes bowing and flitting.

"No. I don't smoke anymore." They went on playing. Ricky saw the finesse of the New Orleans boy bouncing the side here, flitting the flippers there. This in tandem, made the magic happen and thud went the clicker that indicated the sweetest notion, a free game.

"That makes five free games, all with your quarter," Ronny said to Brian, who had stopped flitting now.

Brian absolutely glowed with a sudden brilliance to his countenance.

"I heard who you were with last night. You whore!" he said and laughed.

"What?" "You know what you did. Come on!" He goaded with that scandal sheet look about him.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Harrison said.

"Karrie Capshaw's roommate is a good friend of mine. Remember that fine girl from Lafayette that I introduced you to? The gorgeous brunette with the muff this wide?" He gazed into Harrison's shrunken face.

"She told me all about it." "I really don't want anybody to know. Especially . . ." He stopped.

"Don doesn't care. He's after a Lambda Theta anyway. He doesn't care who she sleeps with. Hell I've slept with her." He said it as though it didn't mean anything.

Harrison loathed and despised him, and then shrugged it off. The low door in the tomb of love was shutting with senility. Maybe Karrie Capshaw wasn't his true love as it could have been other wise. It was shutting in on him. He would mope about the disconcerting information that sang its noisy tune in his ears. The pinball game finished, and clicked four more free games. They went back to their pinball and Ricky Harrison walked out. He didn't even get to say goodbye to his big brother in the frat, Atkinson, that hound of the deep. He remembered that look Brian's face, that grin that said Karrie had slept with the whole fraternity. That enabled her to be sweetheart probably.

He had seen enough pinball. The steel ball continuously bouncing like a quark in an atom, much like this winded conversation with Brian.

Before he left, Brian added, "And her roommate said that you threw up while y'all were doing it. Hah." Ricky Harrison nodded and smiled. That wasn't what he was worried about. In fact, he wasn't worried about anything now.

He had to face the Harrison household strung together by threads of familiar neuroses. He drove past the empty churches, past Chimes Street and the punk rockers of the future, the pool hustlers with stick in hand, the Bayou bar with several Harleys parked outside, into reality.

No one would be home probably. He knew he only had to stay a night or two. Then he could flop at one of the frat brother's digs somewhere out past the campus.

He parked on the median, next to the fire hydrant that he had mowed around with a push mower for all his childhood. The endless groom- ing of the manicured lawn. Around the subdivision, it was mid-afternoon haze. He heard the dachshund barking. He walked through to the back gate. The family cat was installed on the porch in the back. He made his way out of the direct sunlight. With the dachshund underfoot, the door shut behind him. Marleine Harrison was talking on the phone with a neighbor "Are you through with finals, Ricky?" she asked him.

"Yes ma'am. I took the last one yesterday." "Look. I don't know how much money you're spending at the fraternity. How many meals were you eating out there?" she wondered, already into it.

"I got rid of my meal ticket, mamma; schools out." "I know, but I got a bill from them, and it's just too much." "Yes ma'am." "Are you glad school's over?" she asked. Then before letting him answer again, she said, "Do you think you made good grades?" He shrugged. "The grades aren't posted yet." She looked back at the phosphor image on the television. It was news about the nuclear facility, River Bend. She turned up the volume: "Officials have made sporadic nuclear fission tests. The plant, fraught with problems in the past few years, is officially open. Readings were determined safe by the environmental protection agency of the state government. Over the last four months they had been increasing the size of the fuel to run the facility, slowly increasing it until it is now officially on full power" She shook her head. "They are so corrupt. That Governor Thibodeaux; he's in so deep." She shut her eyes once, and turned her head to her son.

"Mamma. The girl I am interested in lately. . .her father just about ran the whole construction part. She's a Tri-Delt." "Well her father is just a friend of Thibodeaux's. Those filthy rich people are taking bribes and kickbacks. That plant is not up to government standards. Tell her dad is a crook. I bet she didn't know that!" she said.

Ricky just shrugged. "I'm not going to say anything like that." He thought about telling to her about the apparition of a reptile monstrosity he had seen that last night. "I brought all my stuff home from the dorm



room." He paused. "I'm glad to get away from studying." "You haven't been smoking again have you?" she gave him with both barrels.

"I haven't mamma. The boys in the frat don't smoke." She nodded her head again with the afghan quilt swaddled about her on her station of the cross.

He went into his room, but not before stopping before the shunted room. The martyr's room, eternally hermetically sealed. Depression's odor was rampant throughout the hall. The Dachshund went over into its bed. It was at least sixteen years old, a senior partner in the family.

He went in the room and fell into a lull of autosuggestion. He wondered about the fraternity; was it helping him any? He thought about last night. He thought about a lot of things. What exactly was the nature of that reptilian thing shimmering past the levee? The blurry date was all mixed up in his head.

Karrie in the car, naked to the touch, unconscious. One day she probably wasn't going to wake up. One white wafer of Quaalude too many for her. Her cherubic paleness with just a hint of chubbiness, and overall luster. That marvelous little miniature coed sorority Suzie that he would fall for, real hard.

He sprawled out on the bed that he had wet as a kid for an endless series of nights, a long time ago. The filtered piercing sunlight made it through to his chaos. He only had to endure this for a while. A day and a half at the most, and then someone like Atkinson would be a good fellow and let him flop over at an apartment. He would have to check on his upcoming job: laborer in the valley of the ashes (Exxon), or NapalmCity (Dow Chemical). Dad would tell him tonight.

In his lyrical waxing of past streams of events, something reminded him of a trip to Pensacola. The whole tribe of LSU campus nuts cascading down the interstate 10 pike past Mobile. Through the Mobile tunnel and desecrating the not-so-pristine habitat in Gulf Breeze, right across the spanning bridges of Pensacola. The tradition of getting sloshed from K & B tequila shots. Eating salt and lemon before and after respectively. Being quietly unconscious before they even made the Mobile tunnel. A descent into the hellishness of Pensacola. He remembered topping off the gas tank with a brief stopover in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The quest was for Mickey Mouse plastic sunglasses, the more absurd, the better chances in those times of getting further into the social milieu on the beach. The righteous Technicolor Hawaiian shirts were also snatched up. The stringy K-Mart ladies had remained censorious throughout the purchases. Everyone had begun quaffing lots of PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon, now considered water like the lost cause of Schlitz) 12 ounces. There had been several cases of Louisiana beer in the trunk because Florida was noted for 3.2 beer. The Tiki House, Gulf Aire, the Dunes Motel, and Hojo's were where the lost legends were created. Ricky remembered a grinning Atkinson, tanned beyond human capacity, his blond locks hanging low in his face like the dog in flip flops he really was.

His meandering patterns of remembrance waned and he fell into a great slumber.

He was thrust out of his fever dream about brackish watery waves and swimming out way past the markers still holding a Budweiser when he heard his brother's door open. The martyr had emerged from the shrine to go to the bathroom. The dog barked at the mailman. Hell had erupted in this languor of mourning time for the death of this nuclear family. Wielded badly by a melancholic dizzy mother laid out like a cadaver on the sofa with afghan swaddling.

Ricky heard the toilet flush and sighed. Was he going to face him today? He thought not. Better to dream about Tri-Delts and Quaaludes in their pristine state than this walking zombie he had for a brother. Ricky reached over and called Atkinson. As soon as he heard the click of a call received, he heard Led Zeppelin metallically transcending above all other noise pollution.

"Hello?" "Yankee Stadium. Second base, can I help you?" Riotous laughter pealed like stygian night

shrieks. "Turn down the stereo! God damn!" It was Atkinson, manhandling a party that was probably escalating into an armed incursion from the entire apartment complex in Tigerland.

"Who is this?" "Huh I can't hear you?" On one end of the phone.

Orgiastic feast there, and on this end a funeral pyre.

"This is Harrison." "Who?" Atkinson queried.

"Ricky Harrison, your little brother. In the frat." The music was turned down finally, but only for the duration of the call probably. The orgy must go on.

"Hey, it's Harrison!" he shouted to whomever was there.

"Yeah, I was wondering if I could stay with you or the other guys for the next few days until I can get my own apartment?" He thinks he got it across.

"Yeah. Come on over. We got a serious party going on!" Atkinson had put the phone down, not hung up. Then a lovely voice was heard on the other end. "Hi there. Who is this?" Ricky heard through the receiver. A dulcet sweetness of womankind, a little miniature cutie and he was frozen with anxiety. What should he say?

"This is Rick. I'm Atkinson's little brother." "Oh." Pause. "I gotta go. You're the one that was with Karrie? I know you!" She laughed.

"What did you say?" Ricky said, perilously. The stereo had gone back to noise pollution.

"See ya later, Ricky Harrison." She hung up. What was he to think now?

He lay back down and took a nap during the afternoon, there in the manicured subdivisions. A full-blown invitation to Atkinson's apartment was not that big a deal. He was known for inviting his professors.

Grad assistants that he bribed with liquor and fun in exchange for them refusing to flunk him, no matter how much of a bad student he was. LSU had outstanding students and then they had the dregs like Atkinson.

He passed the shadowy interlocutor, his brother who gave him the continuous blank stare. He told his mother where he was going to be and patted the dachshund Schroeder on the head. He gripped the key chain off the rack and left. He lasted all of three hours there in the shunted house.

The brother who acted like a vampire all these days of the world was just too much for him. It didn't matter how many Tri-Delts he had. He was living with a discord in his aching psyche.

He sped from the house on haunted hill to the Jr. Food Mart, a convenience store filled with the coldest beer in town. He grabbed two tenounce Budweisers. He couldn't even wait until he got to the soiree.

He sat in the parking lot of the apartments. The occasional turban head, or shrouded Iranian female garbed in violet were wandering around.

He saw a contest going against the dumpster. It was Karrie's boyfriend. Word certainly must have got to him. Ricky just sat in his car. His temples bulged; nerves started to fire off signals of dread and doom. They paced backwards in half steps until both were a full fifteen feet from their targets.

Radio crackled, "You win. You got more bladder than me." "Just remember I drink whole pitchers. I'm

the King," he chimed.

They saw Ricky in the car. Ricky got out of the car. Not looking at Don's countenance, not wanting to read the hatred and vile intensity.

But that wasn't it at all. Don came over and shook Ricky's hand. It was okay. That was the brotherhood of it all. Share your concubine with your brother like the Eskimos bedded down in arctic circles.

Radio and Don both gave him the secret handshake of Delta Epsilon.

Just hours ago he had made love with this ape's woman. The genitals of the Divine. They pressed a beer into his hand as he tossed away the two Budweiser ten ounces in the dumpster wall.

He could smell barbecue in the air. In the den, three girls danced near the sliding glass door. Three cherubs sidestepped drunkenly to Led Zeppelin. Then Radio put on some Beatles; it wasn't a bad choice. At first the girls went uh no, but then Paul McCartney's voice came through and the walls of the Townhouse were vibrating in harmonic overtones created from a quadraphonic stereo.

Atkinson's girlfriend of the week was gushing forth at every gesture he made. Ricky sucked back the beer in one hand raised to his gullet.

Radio suddenly lurched out of the kitchen after swigging from a bottle of Jack Daniels. He needed a chaser of something in the worst way. He started to make for the bathroom; if it went down it would come back up. Somebody handed him a beer to swig.

He held the bottle up in a gesture of friendliness to Ricky standing idly. He took the half empty bottle of JD and suddenly realized they were in the midst of side one of Led Zeppelin IV. There was a Hindu on the couch.

One of Atkinson's teachers from the BusinessCollege. Once again, he had triumphed in that statesmanship of the common dishonest bribe. He would at least pass this one course. Tomer, Radio and Atkinson stood outside with the steaks. Ricky went out through the sliding glass door.

"Well, Harrison, did you bring a steak?" Atkinson said, fending off the coed. "Fire's almost out," he added. The girl lunged forward and grabbed a piece of sirloin off the grill with her little fingers. Atkinson burped in accordance with Boyle's law. She did the same, except with ebullient salient charm.

She grabbed Atkinson. They put the steak between their teeth and chomped their way toward each other's lips. They gobbled the meat with carnality. Then she tugged on him. They went inside. His bedroom door locked.

There was a rule, Ricky noticed in the bathroom. The seat remained up even though girls were present.

Tomer was going to go back soon to be a bricklayer's assistant.

Atkinson was going to follow on his coattails. Radio was going somewhere far away, off on the oilrigs, down in the Gulf of Mexico.

That night Harrison watched Saturday Night Live with a room full of mongrels. Karrie Capshaw arrived on the doorstep. She had that look of uncontrolled substances in those helter-skelter eyes. The aquiline face of a silent screen siren, and the bodice of a B-movie bimbo.

Ricky tilted on the couch, eyeing Don the hairy haunch beast and Karrie Capshaw. He managed to

chuckle at Belushi's antics and pratfalls and dunce of the cosmos. Karrie slapped Don and he stormed out of the apartment. It was just them two, Ricky and Karrie, looking at each other.

She obviously had been hurt to some unknown degree. Over in the corner was Aknahd Azzurred, the mad Arab. This assistant professor was unconscious.

Ricky walked over to her and looked into her petulant little eyes, little nuggets of brilliance. He found himself being pulled away from live television. He and Karrie smiled at each other as they had done for twenty minutes. She took his large arm in her hand and led him into the room.

They found themselves in a pitch-dark room with a single dartboard and a poster of Jim Morrison staring into space. They frolicked away, thrusting and rolling about and around like passionate nymph and cavalier. She was feverish with amphetamines. She pranced with him, jumping around like a small creature of the universe. They were in the last throes on the mattress on the floor. With Jim Morrison staring away wistfully on the wall the phone rang. Ricky nudged Karrie and answered it, found underneath a pile of dirty laundry festooning the vacant room.

"Hello?" Harrison said.

"Ricky? This is Dad. I have been trying to call this number you left your mother this afternoon. You could have stayed until I got home from the office to at least find out where you are going to be working!" "Sorry," "Look. Mr. Cospers at Exxon Chemical said there was a job waiting for you to work at the new Naptha Cracker block." "Okay." He paused, trying to summon all his sobriety back. He started to say, "When should I show up?" when his father continued.

"Show up bright and early Monday. Time to start making some money." "Okay Dad, sure will." Click. No goodbye. The dominant father disenchanted with this fraternity business.

Karrie kissed him on the neck, biting into him, and he immediately felt good, warm, full of whimsy and other scant emotions. He sat up. She sat perked, lovely, arching her back.

"Is there any liquor left?" Atkinson asked. "I think Aknahd drank all the bourbon. Karrie and Ricky and Atkinson and the other girl sat in the kitchen, shooting tequila from a Mescal con guzano bottle of demonic origin.

How much liquor could one drink in a night? Finally, they all went to bed, and Karrie snuggled up against Ricky Harrison and he didn't even ask her about Don.

Vast petrochemical industries loomed in his fever dreams about being a laborer in the valley of the ashes. In his easy sleeping next to Karrie on that sprawled out mattress, the purity of a large Quaalude came into focus like a shimmering moon.

He looked around the dark room. There was Karrie's pristine bodice.

She lay still in the light coming through the window.

He got up, making sure not to wake the little pharmaceutical wonder and took two shots of mescal that sat on the cluttered bar. He felt sustenance of brilliant metaphysical splendor. He tiptoed back to the bedroom after urinating in the communal toilet. He snuggled up to the little princess. He was with his wood nymph, and was worshiping at her altar.

The morning went by, and everyone was still sleeping. Then Radio and started rummaging around in the kitchen. Karrie put her bra and hadn't yet managed to find her little white panties with matching cotton socks.

The tarts were making their way to the restrooms; it was going to be a hangover morning.

The Lost generation never really left. It just cloned itself and disguised itself. The world spun and the lost generation happened in great synchronicity all around.

Eggs cackled in the iron skillet. Atkinson was going nowhere fast; he already had two beers. He had the constitution of a Chevy Malibu.

Dawn came up, and Atkinson laughed in peals like a crazy man suffering DT's. And Tomer had dropped his brain on the floor. He looked at Ricky Harrison.

Karrie popped an upper. She kissed Ricky on the forehead.

"Call me sometime." Atkinson threw up in the communal toilet. His ralphing in porcelain was his barbaric yawn from the rooftops of the world. Tomer was in the corner smoking wog hemp he had gotten from his own stepfather. Atkinson's girl was in her Atkinson-sized t-shirt. Her breasts peeked through. They were quietly aware of her ambiance. There was a bird dog trail left from the Hindu grad professor. He had blacked out on the rum pot and blindly trod to where he thought the GangesRiver was or something.

Tomer inhaled every tubular ball of smoke in its sour sickly scent.

All were catching a contact high from the opium den of the cheap end table.

There was a lid of Mexican pot and rolling papers there. The girl cracked an egg into the skillet.

"You know Shakespeare called that Pullet sperm," Tomer said and giggled.

"That sounds sick!" she said. The blonde-trussed goddess bent over.

Her open-topped t-shirt gaped wide at the breach. The loveliness of her cleavage went all the way down. She looked in the cabinets for something.

"All y'all got is white bread?" she asked, and she looked down at her t-shirt. Tomer was recording all this mentally in his mind. Ricky Harrison didn't exist; he wasn't even there to Tomer now.

"You're not here, man." He said this to Ricky.

"Okay, Tomer." Ricky realized he had forgotten Tomer's first name.

All this time he had been regarded by his last name as if they were all in the army or something. That's the way it was in the ranks of the frat rat.

"No, I don't think we have any wheat bread, baby," Tomer said, trying to sound real cool.

"Dead man's bread," "Dead man's Bread," she said over and over.

Whispering in quiet desperation, her right breast was visible from the flapping of the large shirt. Tomer honed right on it.

Atkinson emerged.

He had just slung Rib eye all over.

"Give me a pull on that," Atkinson said with his mouth hanging open. Atkinson took it between his long fingers and tugged on it and it lit up on the end and smoldered like a yellow jewel. His lungs filled with

the vile stuff. Ricky managed to finally avert his eyes away from the peep show in the kitchen unit. The girl in t-shirt adjusted herself. The eggs started to turn into some form of carbon and Atkinson went to turn the stove off.

"You trying to torch this place?" Atkinson said. Tomer started to zone himself out of reality.

"All y'all got is dead man's bread, dead man's bread," she continued on that line of thinking.

"What the hell is Dead man's bread, dude?" Tomer said with a kind of gravity.

She smiled, as she kissed Atkinson. Her five-foot-even bodice wrapping around Atkinson's basketball mutant frame. Atkinson looked down at his concubine, and his blonde hair flopped in his tanned-orange face. His grin must have won her over; Tomer was at a loss.

"White bread, silly basketball man," she said, lending a sort of comedy air to the hangover. With that Atkinson lunged for the refrigerator door, where beyond the luncheon meat lay, were single twelve ounce sudsy beers. It wasn't any light beer either that Atkinson gulped down his mouth, to wash away the puddle of sick, that taste in his mouth of gastric juices with a slight trace of fatal hard liquor. Ricky Harrison shrugged when Tomer offered the peace pipe of friendship. "Okay, Harrison, you exist." Ricky smiled at Tomer and Tomer smiled back so hard it looked like his face swallowed itself.

He got busy rolling another illegal joint, a tight double thick one, and Atkinson said, "Harrison, he said you didn't exist before?" "It's a long sort of story," Ricky shrugged, welcoming Atkinson's arrival of freshness, the stench of muck gone, the stereo turned on. Ricky decided to participate in the renewal of that wondrous feeling of the night before. It was his eyes mellowing out from the chemicals slowly being added to himself. Tomer was given a beer, as well as Ricky, who waited all of thirty whole seconds before popping the top of the Pabst Blue Ribbon, and then sipped long and hard, and miraculously his headache went away.

"So tell us about the eel thing monster..." Ricky's eyes lit up from his dazed death knoll. He must have ranted and raved about the monstrosity, and then he remembered the nightmare.

"You saw something? Karrie said you and her were out on the levee . . . Oh," she stopped, as if top-secret confidential material was being disseminated.

The day had begun. The girl with the now-adjusted shirt tossed the eggs in the trashcan, where most radioactive waste should be cannistered, and they talked about Acknahd, his professor.

"He's gonna flunk me anyway, because he didn't get laid." Atkinson was truly in decline now.

"My dad called. I start working at Exxon Monday morning." "How much an hour?" they said, probably thinking about carrying loads of bricks for rednecks.

"I'm not sure. Maybe 7 bucks an hour." "Bucks." The girl laughed and bent over. With her back to them her rear lifted and monkeyshined them.

"So what is all this I hear about you with Tri-Delts on the levee?" Atkinson queried. It was already another day wasted. Outside were many normal monogamous Baton Rouge couples loading their Volvo station wagons, running to K-Mart and washing their infants soiled underclothes. This opium den ran amuck with incredulous fraternity bonds of iniquity.

In here was that foul dust of wog-hemp, ashes of illegal uncontrolled substances. People who were drunk in the middle of the mid-morning heading way out-of-control by noon.

"It's a story that nobody really wants to hear," Ricky said.

"Why, tell us." He laughed. "Hell, we already know the story.

You puked while you were. . ." "Hell, we already know about you snaking Karrie Capshaw. Tell us about the monster." Ricky looked at the girl trying to find some food.

"Okay," Ricky Harrison said, as he grabbed the little marvel of marijuana and bogarted it in his delicate but masculine mouth. He flicked his Bic and pulled way down deep where it hurts and then in one mighty heave he coughed like he was going to barf up a lung. Peals of laughter came from the boys.

They were loaded. This was enough to put him off his wog hemp and morning draft brew.

"Okay, I was walking on the levee (he would let the misnomer go unrectified as to which party puked, Karrie was absolved of the puddle of sick for the nonce) and I was way down there where all the barges were." They were listening and smoking dope and drinking beer and still listening. They had incorporated all that stuff into their lifestyles.

"Wow," Tomer said.

"Wait a minute . . . anyway, I heard something thrashing away and a squeal or sort of a bunch of squeals like death yelps" "Death yelps." "And it was like a big eel, like the ones you see on Jacques Cousteau." "And it wasn't a snake?" Atkinson said.

"It was like a muscular limb, sinewy." They didn't interrupt him now.

"It had the nutria in its mouth, and the nutria was big, about like a terrier." "And it was chomping down on that nutria?" Atkinson asked. The girl was now watching television.

"And then the thing swished in the water with some fins, like it was the Loch Ness Monster or something" he continued.

"Hell you might have been having flashbacks." "Whatever," sighed Ricky Harrison, and they finished what was left of the beer and started to dig in the foothold of the apartment.

The girl sat there stoned and a beer grafted to her dainty hand.

Harrison saw the dark of her as her legs were crossed. Now she was destined by succumbing to the mescal for the Damned. At any moment she would flee into the communal bathroom where many a social butterfly emoted.

## **Chapter Four**

The next day Ricky Harrison waited out in the morning sunlight where people were going to work in suit

and tie. He was dressed down in his blue jeans, long sleeved shirt to repel those chemicals. He toiled along I-110 north towards the airport. He got off at Choctaw and took a left and already the stench of the refineries was stinking to high heaven. He cruised by the tarpaper shacks and the soul food kitchens. He couldn't remember exactly which gate he was supposed to enter. Was this going to be a good job? He did feel that severing of the bare thread of a relationship between him and the manicured subdivisions of Sherwood Forest and elitist prep schools and golden gloves boxing brothers of the Sacred Heart and juvenile mongers like his friends. He shrugged and turned down the radio and found the parking lot. That petrochemical dynamo was too awesome and ugly to describe. If God was an infant and dropped some pixie sticks and they all came out of chaos into some rational order in the Universe, and God was the chairmen of the board, at least at his end of town, then that is what that huge mess was. It would be a great architectural ruin one day. Whoever laid the first pipe got some silly fool to lay the next. Then these college kids came up with their numbers and slide rules and John E. Rockefeller was born before that and that didn't help either. And there were plenty of working stiffes that weren't qualified to do a damned thing ever constructive on the face of the earth. So they organized a personnel division and hired these men who lived by the seat of their pants and had faces like old civil war photos. And the Depression was in their eyes at if Studs Terkel painted the whole panoramic mural. And here he was to contribute his two cents and broom sweeping where he would police the area under some foreman. Do anthropological studies on primitive cultures and be hated and despised by the workingmen because they knew he was just a college punk getting their sons' jobs. Hated by two different races; that was something altogether new.

He parked his car next to the endless rows of good times vans and Chevy and Ford pickups, and Dodge was there also to round out the field. He felt the sun beating down on him already. He would be the man of bronze by the time he got out of this triumph of the spirit. He was brand spanking new so he sat in the gate with coffee-drinkers until they decided which block of Exxon he was headed to. They discussed things that made Ricky think that the entire world was Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer. He was relieved of the bantering around like they owned the place. From the outside, they couldn't tell he despised them and what they stood for. He couldn't strike a sympathetic chord through body language or coughing or grimacing in a friendly way or drinking their muddy coffee. The flatbed truck took him to what he would now regard as F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Valley of the Ashes." Dow Chemical wasn't like this. This was now Exxon; he was in the belly of the beast. He jumped down off the truck trying to look real cool and calm as could be. There were young guys like himself, with different stripes on their hard hats. He went into a little T-building office where a young lady was giving him some forms to fill out. Hell, he had been to college he could make his mark. He was handed a respirator that probably didn't work worth a darn. And a couple of rules on mimeograph papers, and a friendly smile. He thought she must catch hell from these bastards. He was told his foreman was a Mr. Young.

He saw welders welding, pipe fitters fitting. The area was sprinkled with blacks and whites. They worked together under the premise that they hated each other with a passion. The area was an old section that needed spot welds and maintenance. There were pipe fitters climbing and walking across pipes way up there in the middle of the sky. With steel-toed boots, these urban cowboys risked their rugged little necks.

He was gruffly introduced to another, who handed him a broom.

They were to clean up some little strip of space with nothing but cigarette butts and other tremendously important remnants of human civilized living.

He scoped out his new environment for the next three months. He vaguely knew his salary; he didn't want to appear too much the blue-eyed college boy. These were boiler room beasts. All veterans, all grunts to the navy blue suited executives in the offices a distance away.



He swept and thought about Socrates, and Plato, and Themes in Science fiction, Robert Goddard, and various and sundry subjects one gets to muddle through whilst handling the end of a broom.

Alex was a nice fellow. He had made a friend already. They smoked a cigarette and Alex was quite the informant.

"Yeah, you'll probably be fire watching," Alex said.

"What's that?" "Holding a fire hose and a fire extinguisher where a welder is trying to weld. You gotta make sure the gas lines don't catch fire. They pick out their favorite spots. You got to get early to get the good equipment.

Don't eat around that shack, they got more flies there than the middle ages during the great plagues." Ricky laughed.

"You got your Born Again's, drugheads, and college boys. They got a woman working in the tool shack that'll show you her tits if she likes you." "Well, I guess I'm going to fire watch, too. Or they are goin' to make me sweep up this whole refinery." "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain, mother," Alex said.

Ricky couldn't tell where he was coming from.

"Are YOU born again?" "Well," Alex said. I'm from Port Vincent. I used to hang around with a rough crowd. I used to shoot Speedballs." He continued. "You know what speedballs are?" Ricky nodded no.

"Cocaine and speed mixed up. They are all in jail now. But there's a cherry picker operator here that I eat lunch with every day and he's trying to get me to love the Lord and be a good Christian. And not to hate the ni—, umh." He laughed. "I got a ways to go." It was lunchtime. Ricky had brought a couple of pieces of dead man's bread and slice of luncheon meat between with a spattering of mustard on each side. He bought a Shasta Orange Soda and didn't know where the hell to sit. This was like boot camp or something, or prison, and he was new meat. He lay under a cool tower after he saw about six guys under there, eating. It kept that inordinately hot sun out of his system for a while.

It felt like being under a battleship; claustrophobic. He was nodding off to sleep when he notice a Junior Samples looking welder. He had his welding cap perched on his head backwards like Ed "Kookie" Burns. He held a St. James Bible and mumbled scripture to himself. There were times when being Born Again was a good idea. Jimmy Carter was born again. Willie Nelson concerts were full of born-again good times vans and the guys who wore those silly looking cowboy hats with the feathers in them. They all ate meat and potatoes and went to the warehouse-looking Churches of God, and the only resistance to being Born Again was Johnny Paycheck.

The blacks were all ex-athletes and war vets. They all fought for America and were now in the valley of ashes. And all they cared about was the upcoming Commodores concert.

"You going to the 'doors?" was heard within earshot. The white factions held a delicate censoriousness to their colored comrades. It was a surprise that with the tension felt between the leatherneck rednecks and the dark anarchists with bandannas that race riots didn't erupt throughout.

There was a bunch of guys from Broadview High, all ex-athletes.

Their main objective was to get messed up during lunch. They had already dropped out of college. They were dangerous suburban characters ready to take on the world. Their stashes of marijuana were more cumbersome than the black ex-jocks from Scotlandville, where legendary football and basketball games

of Herculean proportion were played but now gone and forgotten.

There was a tall red haired Broadmoor guy who met Ricky that afternoon and introduced himself.

"Frank Stewart, how you doing'?" He asked.

"Fine." "You get high?" he queried.

"Not really. Lot's of my frat brothers do." "Man, we climb up into the sky at lunch." He pointed to a rusty spire far above the rest of the plant block. The filth and mud and wasted material and carpentry scraps below became invisible, Ricky thought, if one were to climb up there.

"That's where we go and get screwed up. It is nothing but a little piece of plywood and six of us go up there and get screwed up," he said with conviction.

"Hm, that's pretty wild." Ricky said.

"It swings in the wind. One time Marco almost fell off." "Huh." "And you know what else?" Frank added. "When you get high, this PLANT IS BULLSHIT!" He said it as he and Ricky walked across concrete to go back to sweeping and fire watching amongst the jungles of wire and insulation and pipes and pvc being bent across tailpipes of generators of joy juice.

Ricky noticed that his friend Alex was next to the Cherry picker operator, reciting scripture. He thought of these denizens of this rat ridden sulphite Hades. Frank and Alex, and all these men climbing off their soreridden haunches to their trades inside this inner circle of Dante's inferno. It was a valley of the ashes, an inner circle both.

The way Frank walked as he said that about the plant being bullshit.

He could see the cockiness of wild maniacs. Hell, his steel-toed boots almost sparked when he walked. The way he strode his big basketball frame to his little post of fire-watching amongst three silent blacks youthful and with a hatred in their eyes for the stoned red-haired ex-athlete.

Ricky went back to a periphery of the maze of pipes and baffles, corridors of hell to a little strip of weeds. There was a little ditch that Alex began digging out. As though he paced himself, he would grab a hitch of a clod with that shovel or backhoe and take a full twenty seconds to yank on it and pull it to the side. The black oozing chemical ridden mud of this place was evident all throughout the air. The ground was full of junk and sludge.

But here Harrison waxed philosophical about Socrates, and Plato's Gorgius, and his old Philosophy teacher, Dr. Cornell, a graduate of Yale who had a penchant for cigars and young collegiate men. It was better than Socrates getting a bunch of pansies to rent a house in Crete.

He had a wanderlust. He was free from the climate of thought and processes and education. That bare thread from his family in their stillborn capacity. And his bonehead frat brothers. He felt free here earning his 7.39 dollars an hour from National Maintenance, down among the dead men.

This was his ability to lose himself in epiphonal moments of splendor amongst the ruins of an ancient factory of noxious chemicals. Amongst the disinfecting of Venice or any other dying city. Thomas Mann would have been proud. Here he was, wandering the charcoal Carbonite corridors with his shovel in his delicate hands, absent of the calluses of the leathernecks, with their pudgy ham-fisted indelicacy.

He looked at the spire again. There were the ruffians of Broadmoor High, the basketball team drunk before every game, stoned out of their minds. Unafraid of heights like Art Linkletter's daughter on acid.

The most diluted myth of all was what they were trying to do.

Drink a fifth of bourbon, smoke two joints, play Purple Haze backwards, take a hit of windowpane, and you could see GOD. That was the ongoing delusion. The restless generation of corduroy in volumetric proportions. Middle-of-the-road Baby Boomers with sideburns, mustaches, and shirts of silk and leisure suits for their old man.

He had made it through the first day. He looked toward the river from the parking lot. Way down there was Devil's Swamp. Waste treatment centers and the nuclear plant were up the river.

He went home. The place was like a Roman bath house after a hot time at the coliseum. Tailgate parties with the Christians and the Lions afterwards. There were beer can casualties; empty rum bottles and condoms lay all around like little condiments. Party favors for the hedonistic. In a little while Tomer and Atkinson would be coming home where they would proceed to get drunk and then start getting feelings below their belt. Tomer had no feelings below his belt; he was in a fog bank constantly. And would start scaring up women, Byronic vision plenty. Ricky Harrison felt like a combat soldier with his long sleeved shirt, jeans weighing heavily, belt, army boots and all the accoutrements of the construction worker. Would he stay here and suffer outrageous Fratria? Snaking of women of all races and creeds?

Or find a bachelor pad and come up with all those deposits. And do without being awakened by howling by men with so much alcohol in their systems they should be declared legally dead. Or go home and endure the somnambulist martyrdom of the patron saint of Silas Marner, his brother, the unspeakable terror.

He thought about it, pulled a beer out without even thinking, and it was PBR and he sucked it back, and that was good. In loped Atkinson, surprisingly sans woman on either arm. Tomer a while later. He made up his mind. He would eventually find his own place. That would mean a thorough scouring of the classified for non-slum ghetto apartments with cheap rent. For now he would enjoy brain titillation and Jeopardy with Alex Trebek; such were the ways of Man.

He later locked himself in his room with a cabled but pirated small black and white television to mock his brother's sworn oath of secrecy and self-flagellation. He took a nap and thought about Karrie. He needed her wrapped around him whether she was peaking on Quaaludes or not.

There were constant news reports about that nuclear plant and kickbacks. Karrie's father was a big-time Louisiana patriarch, friend of Governors and crooked politicians. And how did eels fit in with this? There was something he remembered and didn't want to. It was when he was working at Dow Chemical Corporation, in Plaquemine. Down on the other side of the Mississippi river, opposite the bluffs of Baton Rouge. The sparrows were loaded with Chlorine out at that monolithic corporation. He might have seen the eel-ish things before out there. There were mutant things in the brushes he had seen. The nuclear plant was going full tilt now. He couldn't help thinking about Japanese Godzilla movies and radioactive mutation.

He got to know Alex pointer and pot-headed Frank, the basketball champ who knew that pot cut his wind. And Big John, the black guy who used to play football against the white boys in legendary games now long forgotten. He had met John who had a huge frame of an athlete's Aryan body. The man was young and directed only to smoking weed and making friends with suburban boys because he was a nice fellah. It was one morning.

Ricky came out of the portable toilet that had that fruity smell. It was equipped with everything but an accommodating crap-house rat. He exited the thing holding his breath from the noxious fumes of what was just a smaller version of this whole pile of soot and pipes and the vermin of youths and middle-aged

workers. He saw this strong dark guy with that curled up wrinkled smile of one who was feeling no pain. He promptly seemed to know Ricky well enough from their talks at sometime or another, to slip a crooked joint into his front pocket. He exclaimed, "Just a present from the mailman." He promptly went back into the Porta-potty and blew that joint.

He blasted himself into Willie Nelson Herbalife land. He climbed out of the Porta-Potty with that wrinkled smile and those blue eyes filled up with delight. It was indeed coming to pass what Frank had said: THE PLANT HAD BECOME BULLSHIT! Bullshit it was until he came down and the shuttle landed. He went to where Alex was still policing the area from a couple of days ago. If one was lucky, one could stretch a ten-minute job into a three-day detailed task. If he really tried, he could stretch a one-minute job into a week's worth of activity. The black foreman came around. He took one look at Big John, and then caught that reeking smell off this sensitive bronzed guy. John pitched forward and laughed, and then the foreman started laughing too. It was true: Ricky had in ten minutes turned into a clown prince. He stood there, unambiguous, his head bubbly, light, and effervescent, like the cheap malt liquor consumed by this clientele. The gangly blonde youth was now Frank and Big John's sidekick in this hellishness of descent into the Porta-potty, the ashcan of the valley.

He walked away to attempt and go do his job. He looked down to see if his heels were sparking on the concrete like Frank's heeled wonder shoes. Maybe if he took crystal meth that would be it. He saw Alex up ahead in the balmy shadows of the pipelines and the angelic choirs of pipe fitters and boilermakers and tin woodsmen or whatever trade held the hopes for this place. Alex was smoking like he was in a spaghetti western or something.

A smile bore on his face of undeniable goodness running through him, specifically of wog hemp syndrome. He concluded that Alex was smoking a joint. No, it was only a stub of a regular sotweed cylinder.

Alex saw the mania and looseness in his eyes and nodded.

"You got a joint from Big John, huh?" he asked.

"How did you know?" Ricky said with a bit of paranoia.

"You can tell. You smell like an opium den is all." He looked up and said a short version of the serenity prayer to Jesus. He thought he was hovering not twenty feet away, from what Ricky could discern. Now, Alex was praying over the little pixie stick conglomeration, above the towers of Olympian fire furnaces, above the stench, to the heavens, thinking about choirs of angels on high.

"You can't really tell, huh?" Ricky pursued the matter.

Alex reached into his vest pocket with the surety of a western folk hero born again, and grabbed a smoke from his kit bag of evangelistic possession.

He managed to get Alex off the subject of Bible times and older times, and Alex eased into a story about something strange he had seen a few times down by the docks where the Super-tankers docked.

"They sent a couple of us white boys on a little errand with a jackhammer. All they wanted was a hole dug in the docks." Alex was coughing up a tumor for Jesus, Ricky thought.

Over there the cherry picker Bible thumper and card carrying union man prayed for Republicans because he hated their guts. And prayed for the right-to-work laws to fail because that was God's will. He was looking at Alex pacing back and forth and gyrations of his authentically fevered rambling about something. The cherry picker was an instrument of God, and the Apostle was an instrument of God's

peace. Was he an apostle here where caustic coals and carbon streaks of war paint were on each and every marked man in sight? When the rains came, did it wash away the iniquity of their sins?

"So it was me and Cornbread, this old guy from Angola with no teeth. You probably seen him around. He's only got two teeth sticking out like Dracula or something. Anyway, old Cornbread, he thanks God for letting him stay out of those penitentiary walls." "What was at the docks of Exxon?" Ricky queried, having finished the cigarette that Alex maintained would camouflage the pot. A present from the mailman. Ricky the ambiguous had become the tubular gnarly surfer dude for a brief moment. For once, that bad confidence ten times around had turned around for him.

"We sat under there. We had done jack-hammered all of ten minutes on that hole they drew in the concrete. Dropped us off in a truck. I had to help old Cornbread off the truck myself. He was gone that day, just a body, a temple that Christ dwelled in. Cornbread was so happy he never could stop smiling and mumbling his rosary that they had taught him when he was at ANGOLA. Hell, all the black men take care of him. I was wondering if they thought I wasn't going to help Cornbread out. We walked over to the dock and I unwound that air hose and jackhammered me a perfect hole. And then I told Cornbread, 'I'm going to go under that big huge ass ship out there and take me a little nap.'" Ricky listened on, not knowing exactly where this was leading.

"I was under there and there was this glowing type stuff in the water. A whole pond of it if you looked way under the docks. And there were these things like those crazy trash fish in drainage ditches around Denham Springs. But they weren't fishes." This was beginning to freak stoned Ricky Harrison, who had been relaxing with his push broom holding him up, flicking away that camel stub. Now he was wondering to the ends of the earth.

Ricky interrupted and told him and asked him and told him and the eels were mentioned. The muscles with a mouth full of sharp teeth that feasted on nutria and glowed in the dark. Like monstrous nightmarish demons they were and Alex's and his story's both jived.

"What are they?" Ricky wondered.

"Probably some kind of weird Louisiana thing that everybody knows about but nobody gives a damn about." "But the damned things are too mutated looking to be in with all the other weird stuff that people eat in this state. Have you heard anybody in Acadiana say, 'Honey, I want you to make up that squid-with-teeth-eel-glow-in-the-dark-casserole tonight?' I don't think so," Ricky added.

Alex chuckled. Then he mumbled to the sky where he thought Jesus was. Had He put His arm around him like they were drinking buddies or something during transubstantiation, water into wine. Ricky's mind was agog.

He came down off the radical high. The pot had worn off but he had totally forgotten his problems: his brother the martyr, his girl that wasn't interested in hanging around much that she hadn't even called up these days.

## Chapter Five

Tool Room Johnston and Shorty Stevens were sleeping down at the nuclear plant above Baton Rouge, a lot closer to Angola Prison than any other cultural site. They were pulling a turnaround on a granddaddy whopping scale.

They hadn't slept in over 80 hours. The looming concrete terminal and futuristic was all off-white and ivory, with alabaster patches of caulking and etched circles of lines. In the huge towers were housed the little nuggets and pilings and cadmium rods in white-hot thermonuclear furnaces. The big modern charnel house, Exxon, up the river Styx had similar-looking leathernecks, but these men were depression-era faced and tired. Those college engineers and Japanese genius's, the same kind that were blowing all the exam scores at LSU to hell in an Easter basket told these grunts what to do. Man those controls like a good little nitwit, or you'll blow the Delta lands to little bits in the stratosphere.

"Wake up, you string-bean pieholin' SHIT!" Toolroom yelled at Shorty. The dials and levers and computer mainframes and networking and multi tasking and manuals were all about them like little children they had to tend to, or goats in a meadow.

"Shut yours, Mister!" Toolroom said in his lowdown voice.

"What time is it?" Shorty asked, after he yawned showing every tooth in his head. Ever alert to meltdowns and danger readings like he was the master of some galactic empire, not just an old fart who tooted around.

In here he was a created god. One little glitch and he was beaming back at you, glaring with roentgens. But this place was so safe it was scary. Nice offices. Operators had it good. They made something like 30 dollars an hour. That beat the shit out of losing your good hand in a roustabout's screw-up on some Dog-shit offshore rig puking your guts out over the side after eating a big sweet ham that the cooking steward had been screwing all month.

Louisiana industry was gossamer tidbits of apocryphal tales spun into the mainstream of the mega-millions that those Gashouses of refineries made. Sportsman's paradise turned into a chemistry set for mythological hellcats, gutless ward-heeling infidels and fat cats who blended into the woodwork of crooked Louisiana politics like white-on-rice. The one about the female fine-looking engineer lady who got screwed out at the tank farm at Dow. The tool shack woman who played titty peepshow at Exxon in the valley of the ashes. The homosexual antics of civil engineers or the plaster of Paris collectible casts of female vaginas that some offshore worker proudly displayed to his buddies. That some hippie pipe fitter took a hit of Yellow Sunshine and took a swan dive off one of those fire towers. The fellows whose anti-spark hammers somehow sparked in huge tank at Tenneco in New Orleans and blew them into little bitsy pieces of nothing. What about those guys who actually crawled into towers in body suits like Captain Nemo or some shit and the idiot up at the top pumping fresh air in their face masks accidentally went for a bite to eat and came back and the generator had pattered out and his buddies were now a part of some polymer or Glycol tank. That the teamsters were the butts of endless jokes; a box of jelly doughnuts sitting in the cab of their teamster trucks and a newspaper to read, cause they weren't worth a shit to have around. Not to mention the sex stories; these hard skinned guys were all future misogynists and/or sexual rapists of a freewheeling variety. The way they gestured and talked about women. They depicted them as genitals with legs, not the holy vessels that they were. But they were sons of the depression era men back during the Long administrations. And Uncle Earl Long was the last of the red-hot poppas hanging around strip joints in the seedy French Quarter or the nuthouse in Mandeville. A free lunch for every little brown body in the state. It was a legacy of ignorance. They were righteously

thankful of their own blissful ignorance that they felt blessed at the mysteriousness of their vocational beliefs. In one breath, they would talk about ripping off a piece of pink ass and then most reverent with the countenance however soil-streaked of Mississippi red clay, when someone of their klan had a misfortune. Maybe even if it was a good old black boy.

Toolroom Johnston was looking through Mr. Slater's stack of nudie books. Diagrams, dirty pictures, erotica for the ham fisted everyman of the slack-jawed variety. Most of these men collected their wages by sitting around waiting for disasters or semblances of said disasters to occur. As long as no one was doing nothing and it wasn't a turnaround, even here at the nuclear plant, then doing nothing cost a lot of salary wages. As long as those little lighted dials and readings and printouts (that Toolroom Johnston couldn't even read for Christ's sake) were not acting erratically, then they could peruse the Hustler magazines, Penthouse and Meat magazines as though they were galactic overloads. After all, they were working on a nuclear pile. And they thought and knew deep down in their heart they were good men.

"Hand me that Nugget nudie book," Shorty mumbled as he pulled his coffee thermos to his lips until they were inundated with boiling muddy Marine Corps coffee. He was in the process of jump-starting his heart at four in the morning, along with all the other rough neckers up and down the river. Operators in every plant talked about women, or screwing, or women, or cars, or screwing in cars. While the whole state was asleep, every critter in the Atchafalaya swamp was catching some redeye. Every little crawfish, every Egret, and up the food chain to these Cro-Magnon types who worked the night shift waiting for disaster like it was Death walking on the beach in a Bergman movie. There had been many disasters from the beginning of the century and many a good white man had lost his life for Standard Oil or whatever conglomerate was on their paycheck. They squinted, read dials, and did those operations taught to them in rote fashion and if something really looked even the slightest bit strange they had beepers and phone numbers and hot lines and all kind of safety shit. OSHA and Jimmy Carter were not to be screwed with. These animal mothers sat up and perused their boss's drawers of pornography and got well paid for it thank-you-very-much.

Shorty Stevens scratched his fat ass and tried to break wind. He ate some rabbit stew and shelved the nugget magazine for the nonce. Somebody had to pay attention while Toolroom Johnston was over there nursing a Woody in his high-pocket pants and lanky self. The room was fluorescent and yet crackling whitish dull and dim, like they were in some kinda spacecraft.

Hell, Shorty Stevens believed that if there was a meltdown that for one thing, a big long melting pile of nuclear shit would melt through the ground and pop up in a rice field on the other side of the planet. And the towers of pile drivers and cadmium cores would launch the whole nuclear plant somewhere in orbit between Mars and Venus. He didn't want to be no statistic.

Tool room wanted to take a walk around the grounds. Get some fresh air, not that piped in shit they called air that just about blew your buns blue in the face.

"I'm gonna go outside and talk to Security. Put that screwing magazine away. You want those supervisors to give us our severance pay? Mr. Slater said he didn't want anybody messing up his magazines." They were supposed to stare at the readouts and printouts and gauges until their eyeballs popped out. Even then, some more, until one felt like taking a swig of Jack Daniels that nobody was supposed to know about that Mr. Slater and those big shot contractors choked back, but one didn't dare.

"Alright, but don't be gone all screwin' night. You know I hate this screwin' control room. The thought of me in charge of the whole God damn Crapshoot!" He wheezed and craved a cigarette but he was out. Shorty had some. He would bum off him until tomorrow. This was the life.

Toolroom Johnston's gangly self walked out of the control room into a hallway that led to a few offices and more hallways. Where the business types did their college bullshit that they got a lot more money paid for.

He high-pocketed his high-water pants down the maze of corridors.

He looked around in the fluorescent light overhead, the smooth pastel colors of the walls, the various offices. The farther he got from the operations control center to the fringed departments, the neater in appearance it was overall.

He caught that emphysema thing from smoking and the time of year it was, and wriggled his gangly frame and face back to reality.

He walked past the security station and went down the elevator to the first floor; he felt privileged not to have to use the stairs in his descent.

He thought about his wife. How good it would be to be with her, after seeing the priggish foldouts gracing those meat magazines. It just whets his appetite for getting off this turnaround and sleeping next to Peggy Lou.

He could barely see anymore. He was woozy to the max and the Relief was coming. All those contractors had to come back and redo stuff: maintenance on walls and wiring. Spots tested by welding experts and all kinds of people a million times. This nuclear pile was one big disaster. He had heard about the Fat cat deals and strange things with the commissioners from those State departments. He knew a lot about this place. He knew how to get it going, shut it down, and all kinds of stuff that made him feel superior to many men. This power supply above the winding Mississippi River was River Bend, and that was something to him. He always felt like somebody important, after an 80-hour turnaround. Nothing but Asses and elbows was what the bosses always said they wanted to see; asses and elbows. There were many isms around, but the bottom line was get your ass in gear and take that diaper off. Goddammit, get your butt in gear or I'll pull it!

He made it down the main stairwell, passing under the emergency lighting and glaring exit signs that blinked like a nuclear sub. He pulled out his Marlboros (his wife told him to switch to a weaker cigarette but he wouldn't listen) and fumbled for his lighter.

"Hey, Kemosabe!" "What it be?" Toolroom Johnston said with gravity and weariness woven together.

"You been up there for two and a half days? When you gettin' off?" It was the security guard, the black one. The ex-football star from LouisianaState. That made all the difference. If he had climbed through the ranks and played in that big SEC conference against Alabama and Georgia and was a star, he was an okay Negro in Toolroom's book. Hell, he was a superstar, not nearly a boy. He was on the front line; nose guard? He came from one of the Feliciana parishes. Went from a rice field boy into a wonder that commanded respect. The big shots picked the ex-football and basketball stars for jobs just to have them around. Johnny Raymonge was over at Dow; he was a punt-return super-bug. And Jimmy Boudreaux was over at Texaco. Mike Thibodeaux was over at Exxon. The state was sizzling with football players who could rest on their reputations. If you played in tiger stadium, you surely weren't no ordinary boy! It was weird and this security guard knew the game. He knew that if he was anything but a college football hero he would be out at those tarpaper shacks across from the refineries, playing cards. But here he was, security guard with a pistol. The envy of all men who played against Herschel Jones and Johnny Mackey and other legends on the ball field.

Toolroom walked out the door, his keys dangling from his pocket.



He wanted that security guard to call him "High Pockets." That was his nickname when he played split-end for Springfield High. But he knew that was just single division. He shrugged. Just remember, he ain't just a negro.

He knew Coach Charlie McGrew of the fighting tigers, Bear Bryant. He was dropped from the Miami Dolphins cut after he hurt his knee. Not just a nigra. "Highpockets" Johnston, the split-end from nowhere, king of the shit heap at this nuclear reactor, lit a cigarette outside in the cold breeze. In the dark, he was immersed in a bath of light surrounding the huge terminal-looking structure.

Toolroom kinda looked like Lincoln if he had a lobotomy. There were those inner recesses of hollow cheeks. The troubles of unrest lining his countenance, the unruly black hair. Toolroom Johnston had seen a lot of shit in his life. He held himself up with notions that he reminded himself of that very fact. The night air was chilly, fit for man nor laborer nor operator.

He sucked gray smoke deep into his lungs. The river was nearby. If it ever changed course there would be one party island of the nuclear variety. But his River Bend facility stood proudly on the bluff side of Old Man River, its muddy waters used to cool the piles. It stood up there like the battlement armaments of Civil War times at Vicksburg or even the Ramada Inn in Natchez. Toolroom always thought about this when he walked the grounds.

Hell, even when he worked inside the belly of the beast.

He walked off the sidewalk and looked to his feet as he traversed the cultivated lawns where Louisiana and American flag proudly flagellated against the breeze. The spotlights spun upwards to where the flags were waving o'er land and river. He looked at the sky. At the horizon were the pined woods, loblolly paddocks, thatches of underbrush and Spanish moss.

The woods were high and rather stilted and the city lights of Baton Rouge could be seen as a warm glow effect skirting this horizon. He pulled a drag on that Marlboro so hard the thing lost an inch or two in eight seconds or so. He dropped that ash on those purified grounds, and saw something about twenty feet away. It looked like a big snake, and was eerily silent and still. It was some sort of animal or reptile. He said "shit" silently, put his cigarette butt down on the damp ground, and mashed it in with his sensible footwear. He skirted the grounds and trod to the thing, curious now. He stood over it.

It was plain to see that it was not a snake, and the head of it was beastly. Unnameably horrid in its gashing mouth, those gaping teeth in that scaly head mouth were stuck open in a gnarly grin of death. It was plainly dead. It was like a planarian that you see in a microscope, he thought. It was essentially not cylindrical; it tapered from the largest head down to a tail. More a muscle, it had a stench to its boiled off-whitish-looking body. It was nothing he had even seen or heard of. It must have crawled out of the swamps a long ways off and slithered somehow (however it was locomotive) into the grounds. There was something else to it. It had an extra appendage that looked like a miniature deformed twin mate to its own head. The thing was, to tell those guys down in research and development, show them where it was and get them to identify the thing. He had caught everything that was in the swamps and rivers in this sportsman's paradise. But this was something of stygian nature (not that he knew what that was). This shrieking blob of protoplasm, this singularly violently imaged thing. He wasn't going to pick it up with his hands. The thing had a stench like fish in a barrel, like a seafood market full of beheaded turtles.

He was just going to point it out to the fabled linebacker and let those guys pick the thing up. He walked away, coughing from the vile pervading order throughout the ether.

He walked back to the gates and entrances to the pantheon of nuclear piles and fissionable materials up the steps with puzzlement and holding his hand over his mouth to keep from retching.

Toolroom Johnston accorded himself the manner befitting a Louisiana Hayride anti-Long everyman and launched himself into the cloistered War-room of the facility from hell and brought to him from the folks at the Manhattan Project. Shorty Steven was in there arresting his crotch and fingering Ms. Lesion scores and Tool and Die Cover Girl. In the photo her labia were pinned back like a dissected frog with her dingy little fingers. Her manageable tits had road maps of blue veins traversing them. She had a smile on her face that said 'give me more cocaine for this shot!' Toolroom punched Shorty out of the chair and Shorty cursed him out. Toolroom laughed and told him about what-the-living-Christ was sitting out there about two feet long and dead as Martha Mitchell.

"Bull screwing she-it!" Shorty said with utmost resolve.

"I'm telling ya, I gave the security boys the idea to go get it for the R and D department and the screwing thing had two screwin' heads!" "Bull screwing She-it!" Shorty said with utmost resolve again.

"I ain't never seen nothing like it, it was like some screwing eggsterrestrial or some shit! It was oozing out green shit! Looked like some screwing arm the water treatment plant drags up when they're trying to unclog the pipes." Shorty could tell he was serious. Toolroom was a rubbing his face with some serious attitude trying with all his might to figure out what it was.

"It weren't no half a water moccasin? Or grouper or eel or shit like 'at?" "No, man, no way." "Well, maybe this here screwing plant is leaking out radiation like them OSHA screwers are a sayin'. And the screwing wild fishes and animals are mutating. That could explain that two headed deal part you are talkin' about." "How could anything have two screwing heads?" They had both seen pictures of freakish looking animals: deer with six or eight legs, but that was just nature or God's playfulness.

"I heard at that nuclear reactor in Oregon they found some frogs in a pond, maybe had four screwin' legs." "There's some mighty weird shit going on around here. Some shit nobody's telling us about. Or maybe we are the first ones to see radiation effects. Did you ever think about that?" "Bull screwin' shit on this radiation. This thing is safer than three screwin' rubbers on a eunuch slave!" "Bull screwin' shit yourself," Toolroom said, "You know these screwers that built and rebuilt this thing made it so it bulges out like a fat lady in a satin shirt, dog shit!" "Screw you." "Want some coffee?" he added.

"Yeah. Anyway, we'll hear about it sometime from OSHA or DEQ." "The screwing Mississippi is so full'a gunk and shit. Hell, I worked at Dow for nine years and there was more chlorine spills every day or week than you could ever imagine. This screwin' place is filthy." "Yea, but we loves it anyway, don't we?" Short went on about a hunting trip. The relief operators arrived, Rhett, and Greg. Two younger guys with more intelligence but less experience.

They didn't even tell them. Screw it, Toolroom thought. I gotta get some screwing sleep. Those screwing contractors been trying to fix and patch up shit and I had to earn five weeks of overtime in two weeks.

"I'm gonna go home, screw my wife doggy style and drink a couple fifths of JD!" There stood the ex-football hero, having been summoned by the Man, Toolroom. He was trying to put the snake into a cardboard box. He was coughing because the stench was so bad. It was turgid for Christ's sake.

He pushed it in there with his nightstick, his broad shoulders pinching and flexing. Toolroom and Shorty walked to their respective hunks-of shit.

Shorty's truck had added fiberglass filler to that huge dent in his old Dodge.

Toolroom started his car, and the sun was coming up over the horizon. It was always spectacular the way everything looked up there in the hilly site above Port Hudson, where a civil war battle occurred.

Toolroom's rugged face stamped with good country living was wizened with battle fatigue of staring at gauges and computer screen CRT's.

That grotesque thing looked like some kind of arm, but really weird! God, he didn't know what to think. Walking-talking Nixon.

Baton Rouge was just a heaping series of connected concrete slabs.

An industrial community with slums on one side and suburbs on the other.

The interstate was full of chuckholes.

Toolroom's pap died of cancer, and he didn't even smoke those last fifteen years.

He had heard some real heavy information rumors about some leaks in the plant. About some of those fat cats on the highway commissions.

Bridge contractors, Big Four River Construction thugs. Hell, they were all right, they were crooked but they got stuff done. Crooked politics was okay in his book as long as he wasn't on the losing side. And he wasn't.

The unions were bulging with dead wood. So were the nuclear plant construction crews and independent contractors for the six years it took to build that pile of concrete Play-do.

He almost nodded off as his car careened down the I-12 exchange.

Almost through the rich folks neighborhoods, into Denham Springs where the good blessed folks were. No room for these rich idiots. He was all country boy out of Springfield, split end for Springfield high. He had married a small town sweetheart.

Hell. He sighed easy and sucked a half a cigarette into his chest, the ash falling on his gangly frame. He whisked it away and slapped himself a few times to keep awake. He had more coffee in him than a lab rat. He woke up in his driveway. Or he wondered what he had done since the exit ramp off the Super slab. That's a big ten-four in his noggin, it was.

Sinewy mother-fricking thing. Trash fish? Sewer snake? Who the hell knew? It was probably Governor Thibodeaux's little peepus for all he cared. It was out of his gnarly hands now; the best hands in Single-A football in Livingston Parish, where white men ruled. He loved it. Every white man a king!

## Chapter Six

Back at the Apartment hellhole, Ricky Harrison put up with rank harmless Tomer with his hairdo. And little lithe girls getting pumped by little bozos of fellowship. He had to get his own apartment. He thought about Karrie.

How could he get her to fall for him? He had fallen for her hard, he thought to himself, in an anything but sage thrill of drinking his PBR.

He found an apartment in Tigerland, far away from Nicholson Drive and Snowmass apartments full of his frat brothers who would stop at nothing to snake and dog his own girl, Carrie Capshaw. It was reasonable.

He had already gotten a cheque from his mamma, Marlene back at the spread in the suburbs. He had smelled like a chimney sweep when he had stopped by. Marlene was all for it. Anything to get away from those potheads.

She had called the house frat mother and quizzed her at length about the exact drug habits of these ruffians. He had gotten worse since that stint in Delta Epsilon.

He got used to getting high in the Porta-potty of Heaven's own wasteland. He had his apartment. Pretty soon he would have a phone and electricity, and chose just to wait it out with a cassette player and stereo, portable. Karrie came over the night before and she stripped and he did, too. He was extremely excited over the dreams of empty sex. She was still unvote about her feelings for him.

"What do you mean, am I still going out with Don? He hasn't called me in a long time," she said.

He looked at her little white breasts perfectly formed. She sat up after they finished making love. Her little white body shimmered in the moonlight coming in through the curtains. There was the mattress as before, but now he would not have to wade through coeds of all races, creeds and religions, with a side variety of sexual habits. And there would be not Atkinson's sexual prowess, Tomer's asinine imbecility, and the hangers-on.

The assistant professors lured over with overtures of promised sex, and grad students wanting in on the train pulling wonderment of the barbecuers from hell. He felt he was drifting away from that. It was a rift; there was nothing he felt for the frat brothers. There was no common bond. He had about as much in common with them as the Iranian students ready to protest over the despotic Shah. He felt he wasn't cutting it in school. Could one just go inactive in the fraternity? He went to sleep alone. She had left to go back to her apartment several blocks away, where her sorority sisters stayed and honed their feminine skills and wiles, he thought. She had kissed him tenderly.

Ricky Harrison's mother went for a Mammarian checkup and they found some sort of lump that would require immediate surgery. In the hospital she was staying there were incessant phone calls from her sisters and brothers, Mark's Acadiana uncles and aunts. Dick Harrison often came over to check on her progress. After the surgery, everything seemed okay. She was back home and cussing and putting up a wailing commotion. Ricky's brother Mark stayed in his room even more so, to grow every more distant to the tribulations ensuing forth. In that swelling winter Ricky Harrison made his tuition money, dated the Genitals of the Divine on and off, mostly off, and made his apartment rent and dropped out of the fraternity.

Someone found Wayne Langlois's body floating in the water by the pirogue. The three-headed thing was found in the ice chest with a stench of flesh beyond ripeness. Old lady Langlois went into a frightful bender of Catholicism and prayer vigils at GrandCouteauChurch. In the baleful winds blowing through the quaint graveyard, she stood there many times wanting to remember him as she had for fifty years. Since she was a little girl in Sunset, Louisiana and their first date was "Gone with the Wind" that only cost 15 cents. They had necked through most of it in the Ritz Cinema.

They had been happy together. He had fished and trapped and hunted everything worth eating in the Atchafalaya basin. It had been good to them.

Now he had been caught up with some monster creation. A three-headed thing so ghastly she didn't even want to think about it. She went to Novena masses and all her sisters and friends and relatives soothed her and told her he was trying to do something good. Trying to bring back that specimen from radiation reactions or something like that. And it bit him. Those three bites in his leg like the coroner at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital said.

The sisters of the hospital feared the worst; that this was a sign like Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. This was the literal antithesis of the mirabile dictum of turning silver rosaries into gold, etc. This was the antichrist, child! And the sisters of the Sacred Heart were gonna pray for whatever evil Lucifer the fallen angel sent into the swamp.

Wayne Langlois's brother-in-law petitioned a lawsuit pending investigation into why those kinds of creatures were in the swamp. The grotesque organism that Toolroom Johnston gave to the black running back to give to the research labs: they had just shrugged it off and sent it to the LSU School of Biology. Those young whizzes just gawked at it. They gave a few interviews; the UPI wire service boys got a hold of it, and the hucksters started coming in for a look-see at the marvelous monstrosity.

Marlene Harrison started getting chemotherapy for something new, Ovarian Cancer. She was in remission. She was a trooper, a fighter. She would be okay, they said, . . . for now. Ricky Harrison continued at LSU, changing majors like some people change brands of cigarettes. He finally settled at that certain point like he was trying for parole: just how long would it take to get me outta here, Warden? He had about three more semesters. The fraternity didn't fraternize with him anymore. He was basically out for good. Life went on in his languid anonymity. He dated infrequently.

Karrie Capshaw had gone off and got herself married to a filthy rich Sigma Chi Alpha milk and doughnuts boy. His father was in the oil business in Texas and money is the honey after all.

Ricky sat in his apartment and drank more frequently. He switched from beer to wine and then a bottle of wine or six pack a night. Then bourbon and schnapps and gin and vodka and hangover cures and b-12 vitamins and Alka-Seltzer tablets fizzing in late morning roundups. He still managed to get quite good grades.

He saw things change: the fashions, the attitudes, the politics.

Wildness dulled down, lessons relearned by freshmen girls and guys making the same mistake all over again.

Marlene Harrison continued her bouts with remission and cancer and treatments, radioactive blankets of healing power. Ricky Harrison was in perilous times; his father estranged from him, almost as much as his brother. His father favored the somnambulist martyr Mark Harrison, and the silent one even considered going to college. But there was this sense of eras coming and going. Mrs. Harrison, matriarch of the ascetic Catholic family was fading away like a magnolia turning yellowish ocher upon touch.

Ricky's sisters told him all she said sometimes was to cry out for Mark the silent one. That he was coming out of his chrysalis now; emerging from the shrine as it were. Going to take some classes, what a big wow that was, Ricky thought. Ten years of insipid laboring torment and silence and now his drastic move to free himself from the bondage of the sour room which reeked, the stench of ongoing silence, umbrage against the next of kin.

The campus was not itself with every passing day. All the creatures of freethinking were gone. It seemed Ricky Harrison with gut and Booksack and elderly state was alone from that late seventies era. But he was going to be paroled from the big house of learning soon. Ricky had stopped obtaining those

laboring jobs. His father was retired now so the connections were severed with the boardroom types that enabled one to get those cushy jobs before. Ricky Harrison was finally going to graduate with a totally worthless degree and poor grades. He had taken to drink. He thought mostly about the women that had scorned him tenfold. He upgraded his belly from size 28 to size 40+, and his face had that "look of possibility of exploding." His last chance before the descent into the hellishness was that little Tri-Delta sorority cherub, Karrie Capshaw. Karrie. His last love in god knew how many eons ago. A sickly child was the essence of their relationship.

She slipped through the small winking cracks. She fell right where her rich family wanted her to. Into the good hands person of a filthy rich oil magnate's son, a daddy's milk and doughnut scion of that fraternity, the classiest homo house on campus, Sigma Chi Alpha.

There was a new generation of youths coming through the ranks of the school. Radical hairstyles, the wearing of much black. New wave Keebler-booted boys. Ricky was bewildered at what these boys stood for and believed in, and he thought maybe, nothing. Before them came the Reaganite thugs of maligned proportion, pro-nuke-em dolts. These Iron Maiden shaved clowns with daddy's car and mamma's money took over the campus. They tried to indoctrinate the masses with Republican ideals, of which they had no such inkling. The generation of wonderment, past the last remnants of sixties anarchy which gave birth from its own head like the mother of Andromeda, Cassiopeia, issued forth an infant of disco-deaths and rock and roll talent of K.C. and the Sunshine Rand, Saturday Night Fever and endless disco lessons. Ricky was going now through the quadrangle on past memories becoming ever more distant and lost soon enough.

The eel-like things made the national news, an anomaly for the throngs of gawkers. The power plant of fissionable materials was still up the river, heating its piles away happily against the starry sky. The state was still a cesspool dressed up as a fraternity house. Louisiana with its salt domes caching excrement of used up uranium after it had been lit and burnt, was becoming all the rage. Dump it into the underworld; let the gods of yore swallow it whole. Governor Thibodeaux was re-elected once again, though he was running off to Vegas to gamble away hundreds of thousands of dollars instead of running the state agenda. Ricky's peers were married and working and turning into their parents. They were the tailgate end of the baby boomers now, part of the gross national product.

The eel-things weren't seen too much anymore. They were the talk of biochemistry and third-rate hucksters like Geraldo Rivera, and NOVA science programs of public television universes, and were an amalgam, unexplainable, and inexplicable. There were biologists and geologists and such searching for the little glow in the dark monstrosities, but there weren't that many more found. But the talk in Acadiana among the native French Americans was many a tall tale spun over a plate of jambalaya.

There were quite a few people dropping like flies from the cancerous rife through the area. It was their own mini-plague of no small proportion, but not yet enough for anybody to start packing it up for the 12:13 Amtrak to Alexandria.

Ricky Harrison made his vigils to the Lady of the Lake hospital in this Year of our Lord. The new facility was as busy as a midtown mall.

There were nurses at duty stations like a field of cornflowers. The antiseptic scent and that pervading linger of death performing its deed was all throughout.

He went and saw the nuns in every corner, praying to heaven and visiting the afflicted people who were slowly rotting away with tumors, growths, maligned or benign. It was a dirty business.

Some tried to attribute cancer to the heavily spiced Cajun food.

The Cajun fishermen talked about the old friends in WhiskeyBay and Gross Tete; old padres and maw maws that just up and died. They spun their opinions into a lashing together of subjective reasoning, but the deaths continued.

The cover-ups of the River Bend nuclear plant had been uncovered.

That was the downfall of people like Karrie Capshaw's daddy. The governor was put up in the swanky Riverwalk Hotel overlooking Canal Street and the Superdome during his racketeering trial and tipped the waiters well when room service came around.

The crimson orange Tequila Sunrise sky was laced with smokestacks of Aeonian fluted columns, burning pyres for the wretched landscapes.

Ricky Harrison whiled away his time after graduating, getting set up for interviews, showing up with mixed colored socks and a hangover, looking like the two-headed boy in the circus. The men spoke with reverence of his father, Dick. But found out that chip-off-the block Ricky was not sure of anything befitting him to be gainfully employed. He delivered pizzas nights, thinking about getting off work and hitting that bottle of ten high, or K and B bilious elixir of the blind. He had night gaunts about eels and mutations, and told folks about it sometimes. His contemporaries in the vast and hugely successful market of pizza delivery. He scoffed at going to his five-year reunion and soon it would be ten years, and then he'd take a look at himself and remind himself that he was some sort of flop. A destiny manifest of utter bleak outlook and disgrace. He was in decline. He was still strung up by the balls by his father. His mother doing her penance with chemotherapy, hoping that Gods will would strut forth from gamma rays emitted from apparati at Our Lady of the LakeHospital. Remission, what a saintly word.

Would she be alright? Would he further the legacy of demise of the House of Harrison, all gables toppling, a fiery combustion of household, by having himself a little old nervous breakdown? He was landlocked in this carnival show, eels on a stick one dollar sir.

The environmental agency bragged that its lady in charge of the whole shooting match, Pat Norman, was considering running for governor.

Then they would shut down the taps of the chemistry set in sportsman's paradise. But there was a small codicil concerning huge monolithic corporations that could squash her like the bug she was. There were so many suits pending between the Environmental Protection Agency, that they had a whole wardrobe. OSHA had gone away like a small cold relieved of a strong constitution.

The governor finally stopped going to Vegas to do stunt dives for call girls and cocktail waitresses. He thought perhaps his political career was on the downswing. Does Racketeering do that for one's credibility, Harrison thought?

Reverend Jenkins was pumping the North Baton Rougeans for wads of coin and currency. Sow that seed of faith and God'll get you a motorhome!

Praise the Lord! They had built that big Bible structure there and then he had to go and make them trips into Mobile to play hide-the-pickle with a lady. Kind of soured those spud-headed morons. The ones whose blood and sweat had built Exxon, and Dow and every hoary bunch of tool and dies, electrical supply warehouses, po-boy shacks and little tin roofed Black churches, tabernacles for the afflicted. But that balanced out the beauty of the matrix of tract homes in Sherwood acres and Shenandoah and the country clubs and all those apartment condos and town-houses shabbily built but high overhead. Big renter types. The baby boomers invaded this town and summarily destroyed it. Revenues were up, like a catheter. They cooked, kilt and ate their own. Many a BMW forked its way around the boulevards in those newly developed hellholes. Concrete just seeped into nooks and roads were built. Civilization

came and then Lord put himself a McDonald's, and Mrs. Winner's, and a Burger King, and it was Good. Fast food for bleating consumers.

Ricky Harrison moved out of Tigerland, eons away from the Friday night beer blasts. Fraternity brothers stalking him for quitting, not speaking to him. He was now friends with unmarketable degree types who waxed lyrical about art movies. He had a bust-a-gut stomach with retractable belly button. A countenance of bloat and that sour face from a bad stomach that was from industrial strength liquor. He was making mini- mum wages, and moved to other, cheaper apartments soon. At least the old man didn't want him around that nice suburban house he grew up in. The sisters of Ricky Harrison talked of the plight, the dilemma of this lost person.

The Cajuns started calling the spills of strontium roentgens the red-hot chili peppers cancer. Groups of men, Creole and white and quadroon and octoroon and mulatto, from Lafayette to New Orleans spoke of relatives succumbing and the Blessed Mother giving up on them. The reporters went for the carotid, bloodsuckers of the TV they were, as far as these little ventilated spills careening into fog banks of invisible black or redhot chili pepper death was concerned. The whole city of Port Allen, river rats and cheap hotels renting by the hour, on the mud flats opposite the bluffs of Baton Rouge were cited as heavily bombarded areas as far as cancerous strife.

Ricky Harrison had now forgotten most of his seventies days. He forgot the Valley of the ashes at Exxon Petrochemical of the Damned, Dow Chemical, Texaco refinery, and standing hundreds of feet in the air atop the big iron ironclad tanks that he thought were once swimming pools for the gods to match the fluted Aeonian smokestack. He was blackballed forever from the frat house.

## Chapter Seven

There was a girl, a grad student in biology and biochemistry who couldn't quite cut it in Medical school. She had gone into veterinary medicine and had several minors in etymology, reptile study and beer drinking with the boys at the Chimes Bar. That was where anyone from the seventies played once, to the latest coterie of punkers since Jesus played street ball and Caesar was slam-dance jerking down at the vomitorium.

She was Kendra, who if she had not been endowed with a brain, would have had no trouble getting into the modeling business. She was of such beauty it made many a man build up his bollixed up sperm count beneath his belt. She had a face that launched a thousand ships. She was in danger of being perfect. She had a deep sultry voice. She had a beauteous blank face of pure charm and gorgeous eyes and a mouth that just plain was perfect. She was of Aryan stature, tall, 5 foot ten. Her tanned skin covered every square inch of her radiant body. She was timeless, a classic.

She had gone through undergraduate studies, going to rush parties, at the request of every heterosexual man and others. She was dated at LSU football games. She went out jamming and partying in legendary exploits unknown to modern civilization.



Some of them were of mythic proportion. Getting so drunk at an LSU football game that she pissed in her pants. She went to the ladies room inside the bowels of the stadium and used a hand dryer blower to vaporize the affected area. Drunk many times. Would go to bed with any rock star on MTV quicker than a possum eating a sweet potato or faster than you can spend 1000 bucks at Cortana or Bon Marche Mall. She went to Murphy's bar, home of the famed miniature Lolitas. Sorority babes, the noted Tri-Delts were smallish but perfectly beautiful, proportioned, and mature beyond their years. The place was covered with oily rosin of beer. There was many a nickel beer night there.

She did have a talent in the biological and natural sciences. In high school, she had a star in her notebook for every time her and her punkrocker skull-ear-ring boyfriends partook of LSD and ecstasy! Many a boyfriend would call her using his one phone call from jail.

She was a much-chased Byronic vision of splendor. An automaton of quality like a centerfold. But equipped with a brain that she just didn't apply. Instead she sought the wild side of life. Many a fraternity boy was after her; even Atkinson couldn't manage the miracle of getting into her fabled trousers.

She had been to the White Horse Tavern, Fapps, Zacharies, after many a football game. The reason for her being made by the gods of muse above was to give men pleasure.

She had gone to many a rock concert. She was queen of her high school once. Like Professor Moriarty, she spun her web of intrigue whose tendrils focused from a hub and spread to many intricate unseen corners. A celebrity on the nightclub scene during her Undergrad days. She had slapped many a frat rat for grabbing her breast. She puked up many a fifth of Jack Daniels. She learned not to take drugs anymore and went to graduate school to pursue biology. She could easily been on the cover of Vogue or sat in cattle calls in New York. And successfully made it in light theatrics and movies and television.

The biology students didn't know what to think about this angel of lust and pouty, thick Kelly LeBrock lips glossed. And those eyelashes and that heaving bust. That tanned skin, the overall ambrosia of the gods embroiled in human form. Walking talking Jesus, she was fine off her ass.

Many a frat rat would have liked to screw the dog shit out of her. She came waltzing in. The elderly professors took to her immediately. They saw her talent with nomenclature. She aced the biochemistry exams, the chemistry labs, all that good stuff. The students ogled her and loved every part of her.

She was the stuff men dream of. And she made those grades. Her parents had split up during this time, but she took it well. Gone were the endless trips to New Orleans to Nick's Bar, where the theme from the Flintstones could be heard in 70 MM Dolby, and a 6' 10" inch Tyrone, the bouncer took kindly to her and knocked the shit out of anyone pestering her. The plutonium shot, the abortion purple passion, the swamp fart shot were all her own, once.

She had put in the long tedious hours, quite unlike her undergraduate days. Now she excelled in her studious application of bugs and lizards and crawfish and fishes and the dissection of the lot. She had to fight off her suitors, though pugilism with the frat rats enabled her to easily get along with the much more subtle graduate students. The professors loved her. She had a few various boyfriends off and on. Not ready to settle down into the real big LOVE thing yet.

Ricky Harrison was getting more and more out of control. His mother was dying. He saw Karrie Capshaw's father go to trial for kickbacks.

He still dreamt about eel-like things. He saw a nuclear facility with a phosphorescent heat-sensitive pattern of swirly circles and wispy plumes of radiation in his fever dreamed alcoholic states. He had

gotten up to a half a fifth of bourbon a day. He couldn't explain this to Dick Harrison, his dying mother Marlene, and his now college attending brother who had indeed emerged just in time. He couldn't explain why he was drinking. He just wanted to stop it for awhile. But the dreams came on, trudging ever forward in his forehead.

He was unloved, and Carmen was happily married. Karrie Capshaw was probably also; Beth, Holly, all of them. And he was alone, sitting in the new cave-like structure, an efficiency apartment. A hovel for the damned person, rising only to drink and find work. The interviews were getting worse, and less. The \$190.00 flat, upstairs right along the fringe of the projects. He was delivering pizzas. A man with intolerant muses, furies of vengeance against cancer. He would moan late at night in delirium of the worst torment. Piles of dirty laundry, videotapes watched over and over again like cable in hell, and empty cans of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee festooned the kitchenette. He didn't care, for those who drank to excess didn't care about almost anything. Especially he who was caught in his own mother's descent into a black void. Death and his brother Sleep; Shelley's Queen Maub, he thought. How wondrous; yes, he was thinking suicide. Without fortification of bourbon of the vilest variety (that was the beauty of it) his nerves were a shambles. He began to pray for the intervention of the Holy Saints in regards to how about them looking into saving his mother and her variety of cancers and growths. How many operations had it been? The graduation day for him, for what now seemed eons of pain, was abysmal.

That was perhaps his exit from the fabled stagy show. No one was really there. The sisters were busy with their toddlers doing that Yuppie shuffle of day care for the abysmally affluent. Ricky certainly couldn't expect anyone to show up.

By God, his own brother showed up. He was there. He just couldn't find the new college graduate to show him the truth of the matter. Ricky Harrison found it very comforting this turnaround of his brother. He managed to say a few sage words of nervous patter, "Congratulations, well done." A huge burden was lifted off his chest against the years of silent treatment.

Ricky's brother was now becoming a solvent person, real and alive, and part of the family. The upcoming demise of Marlene Harrison would be the adhesive of the nuclear family once again.

"Do you think this nuclear leak stuff and..." "You mean cancer alley?" Karla Harrison quipped.

"And mamma. Yeah. There have been a lot of people dying from cancer. We have the highest in the country. I wish we would just move away from here." "All mamma talks about is Governor Thibodeaux, blaming the whole thing on him. She is delirious most of the time." Ricky nodded.

Ricky Harrison thought of snake farms in his dreams which were now nightmares and that movie with Lon Chaney as the crazy Cajun being treated with those invidious cobalt rays and then Lon Chaney dissolved into his mother, Marlene. A weird mondo disarray; the very method to the madness of his surreal landscape of thought processes. He was in denial; they didn't give her long to live. Mostly he felt for his dad.

But things were afoot in those cloistered chemistry labs. Grad assistants like Kendra Hoerst were keeping their eyes open to the ever-awakening truths found under the tensors and needles of eel-things glowing in dishes. The smell of formaldehyde now her favorite perfume instead of Chanel Number Five. The gorgeous creature of what hath god wrought was now diligently into her pursuit of whatever the hell this was a sign of. Mutation, genetic accidents, populations, nests; she was beginning to uncover truths. After all, she was now as knowledgeable and brilliant as she was beautiful.

## Chapter Eight

Cornbread, the old black jailbird, wizened from the ages, had been sent down to the docks again to drill yet another hole in the concrete shipyard docks. Two days earlier, some white boys had been asking Big John the mailman joint dealer football player about why Cornbread didn't have any teeth.

Big John cracked a wrinkled curly-que grin from pot haze in his mindset, and said, "They don't give you no toothbrushes in Angola Prison." He had saintly eyes, brown as almonds and a gaze atop his perch fire watching.

They didn't even know if he had the strength to turn on that firehouse and hold it if those welders did catch some gas line on fire.

The black laborers rejoiced in this man and his image; he stood for peace and tranquility. They took care of him. He was their savior for some reason. He didn't say a word; he could have been mute. Those two teeth coming out of the top of this palette were all he had. Nobody ever saw him eat. They even joked that he had turned two loaves into two thousand oyster po-boys and fed the milling throng. Parables were created about this honorable ex-con; no one really knew why he had been in Angola. He was the kindest, happiest looking man. That old wrinkled countenance had seen the olden days. He soaked empathetically all the hypocrisy. He was still nothing to the white man. In the north end of town, in those tarpaper shacks by the refineries, people were dropping like flies just like the in manicured suburbs. There were no strata or stratification of class and denture; Cancer hit you whether you had a fat checking account or none.

But Cornbread was like the Second Coming. He was an illusion of kindly color. Ennobled by all, the welders seemed to shy away from him.

He had some kind of mystical reverential power unseen. But they did send him along with a white laborer to the docks. About three months after Harrison was an Exxon laborer working for the scumbags at National Maintenance, Cornbread got sent over with a blond geek wigged out fool. He drilled the hole perfectly with his maligned style, punching bits and shards of concrete that popped into the river sixty feet below them. Some Norwegian sailors were making phone calls in the phone booth and smoking French cigarettes next to a supertanker. Cornbread was trying to find out where Mr. blond geek was and went down into the descent of the rickety docks. In the nether underworld of Neptune and Poseidon, where his godlike fantasies were conjuring themselves. He smelled something fishy. He found the geek smoking reefer under the docks. The geek pointed out the nest of sinister eel-like activity, now proliferating. It was truly amazing the monstrous nest of slithering Medusa-like snakes with snarling glowing apertures hadn't been found before. And it wasn't the biologists, it was the old Second Coming for the Jim Crows, Cornbread, crawling up, balancing carefully on the beams to see that unnatural vision he thought was in his imagination.

Like when he used to kind of pray and see the Holy Virgin come descend into his cell in Angola. Hovering above his bed, he thought, She had come.

He was getting closer to the nest of the slithering things. Cornbread smiled and waved at these things.

They were hissing and whining and seeping with insidiousness. He saw only the inner circle of hell, purgatory. He had seen this for forty years in Angola, staring at the graffiti and art on the walls of the prison. He decided to enter that world. He knew Jesus commanded him to walk and cure the snake sticks, he had heard the voices. He summarily walked and sat down in the nest of eel-things. Now horridly stygian-shaped and much more smelly, fungoid, algaed, smelly. Rotten and mutated with triple heads, teeth now snapping and chewing the flesh from him. Flaying the skin in their own evil way. He smiled as they chewed him up. Before he went unconscious, he smiled to Jesus and told him to leave the gate swung wide open. Here he was coming in his momma's truck wagon through the dirt roads of Iberville Parish. She told him what a good little boy he was.

That he had kilt his little baby brother with a rock and now he was feeling okay, as the flesh was ripped from his arms. He didn't waver; he was in shock, bloody and mutilated. It was like dipping some raw meat in piranha waters. He smiled up to Jesus and the blessed Virgin watched him go to purgatory where the counsel would decide where to send the old man now seen as a little boy with archaic smile grinning in wounded festering hopelessness.

He was dead now, and with the angels on high.

They questioned the geek and Cornbread's body was found. More of a skeleton with pieces of flesh still adhering to the frame. In the Water Treatment plant, the corpse had gotten caught in one of the main valves and it was flowing a bit with sanctimony. That's what the men had said, the grinning bodice was in a strange assuming posture of reverence, a clanky holy order vessel. They put the remains in a body bag, the decomposition after the body had been churning in the undercurrents of the river; they assumed that he had fallen in. They fired the blonde geek and his pot that Big John had given him was the reason. The black men mourned the death of their saintly old jailbird. Stories spun would be remembered. The pauper's grave near Devil's Swamp up north there between the Exxon fringe of the northern ridge. And he was forgotten by the leathernecked welders and pipefitters. They would mutter about that Negro getting killed, and it was a good thing, one less. And continued to walk the pipes in steel-toed boots teen of feet in the air with a nonchalant air befitting circus acts of daring feats. But stubborn closed minds with a rebel flag draped around ignorance forever.

## Chapter Nine

Mr. Wayne Langlois's brother-in-law was overtly pissed at the lack of attention them reporter fellahs were giving him about his relative. Mr. Langlois was found in a boat with weird non-non-fishy like thangs. She was paralyzed by the monster eels; it caused him heart failure. Dem things from outta space them scientists at the cawleege say. His own brudder-in-law, he done got kilt; all he did was go fishing like he had been fer sixty years. Since he was a little baby in Grand Coteau, him and Wayne were best friends. Mr. Boudreaux from BreauxBridge done went and got himself a lawyerman.

He was gonna file suit against somebody; somebody was in a wrong about dis.

And his poor sister Madeliene, she had herself a nervous breakdown and got put in a mental help center. She ain't nevah had no problems in the mind before. She done missed her man, fine Wayne Langlois. Paw paw Langlois had so many grandchildren the funeral had been packed with people. And Boudreaux had tried to explain what he thought had happened, and what was gonna happen to more fishermen. He was talking to Thibadeaux and Bob Guidry and Henry Sillbeaux, and they had thought they all had seen some slithering type things, yeah.

Those reporters wid dem television stations in Lafayette were all tryin to capitalize on the rumors of outer space creatures landing and festering in nests in the swamp. They had found dat one near Baton Rouge at the Exxon docks. Them LSU biologists were now taking dem in and dissecten dem all up. They still to this day cannot explain what kind of creature they were. It was a mystery like the Holy Trinity. They found double-headed snakes and even found some fishes with radiation contents dat would cause severe sickness of radiation. Poisoning to all dem folks who make dere livin on shrimp boats, and catfish farms, and crawfish ponds. Mudbugs a glowin like little penlight batteries. And now de whole world was eatin Louisiana cookin, Blackened Redfish, Red Snapper, Crawfish etouffee, all dat stuff in dem bays yeah. Them fancy Cajun restaurants were opening in Dallas, New York, and New Awlins. Dem city folks was gonna start hearin them reports about glowin in de dark. And them big-assed restaurants wouldn't take no catfish or crawfish or even dem big shrimp as big as your hand in the gulf.

Boudreaux had got himself a lawyer and him and his neighbors were gonna try and go out dere and catch em. But dem neighbors said, dem biologists already done dat. They know what dey doin. But the old Cajun people thought it was a sign of the devil. They said the rosary many times yeah.

And went to Novenas on Tuesday nights at Church. Boudreaux had said his confession to Father Patin, and Father Patin toll him to go jump in the lake the way he was talkin. Ain't no satanic thing; it was about the environment.

Father Patin's little brother was dying of cancer and he wasn't even thirty yet.

he worked over at River Bend Nuclear facility for eight years as a security guard. And now his skin was so painful, hurtin and Melanoma was what dey call it. Father Patin told Boudreaux to just keep on talkin to dem fancy lawyer types. They couldn't file suit about Wayne Langlois gettin eatin or poisoned by dem outer space eels, but about all the neighbors that had been stricken with one form of cancer or another.

It was a plague going round. The swamps were turning into freak shows. Two-headed deer, lizards and fishes with no eyes, two-headed calves.

The environmental protection agency had several major suits pending against Dow Chemical, Exxon and River Bend nuclear plant. The thugs and wheels tried to grease their palms but they was good honest folks, poor, but none of em trashy! The plague had run like a dark carnival through the heart of the state. A boy with flippers born at AbbevilleHospital; two headed cats that didn't live too long. Fishes caught that glowed in the dark like their deep sea counterparts. Nests of eel-things found all over now, inundating the state with hyperactive talk.

But the people were ignorant, the lot of them. They saw the eelthings as just another fish. They didn't have no radiation in them. There was plenty of deer, and nutria rats, and crow and choupique and alligator gar, just like these eel things. The people were so used to eating almost everything that came out of the swamps and marshlands that some eel-thing wasn't no different. It was a running joke with the people now. Cancer alley was a big lie. Every bit of people weren't scart about them eels. Eels was eels. Squid was squid. Some people ate it over rice; some people used it for bait.

## Chapter Ten

Sophia, that television lady, oh how famous she was. She taped another segment about tryin to talk more about cancer incidence in the vicinity. She had some lady on there from Denham Springs. They were taping at a KMart parking lot with bleachers full of good country folks. River rats from Livingston Parish, and Port Vincent, all come to see the famous black lady do that talk show.

"Ya know, for a Negro she don't act like most of em," one old stringy grandpa mused.

"Shit man, she ain't no different." People sat in the bleachers watching all these gaffers and cue cards people and the star of the show, Sophia do her thing. Taping had commenced and the guests were just plain old folks.

Sophia looked in the camera in that boiling hot sun in the K-Mart parking lot.

"Cancer Alley is a stretch of land from St. Francisville, down through Baton Rouge and the AtchafalayaSwamp and Lafayette to New Orleans. It is packed stacked up closely with refineries. There's Georgia Pacific, and Dow Chemical, and Exxon, and Dupont, and Tenneco and Texaco, and Shell, and the list goes on and on. Many generations of Louisianians made their living working at those plants. On my show we are gonna prove that these refineries and the River Bend Nuclear Site are to blame for more than a 45 percent mortality rate of cancer. Fifteen to twenty points higher than any other area of the United States, with the exception of Utah and New Jersey.

They showed a sign to clap and the spud heads clapped and gawked.

They hawped when the warm up guy did some jokes to keep em occupied while the taping was off the air. It was sweating tits off a boar hog it was so hot! The K-Mart was the mystical shrine of dwellers and smart shopping.

And it didn't look like there were too many Negroes around.

"Our first guest, Mrs. Ida Mae Figg, is a resident of Springfield, Louisiana. Tell us a bit about yourself." The fat lady in double-knit polyester slacks and heaving stentorian breathing fidgeted and sucked in that massive gut and hawped away. "Well, me and my kinfolk done had words with the doctors at Seventh Ward Hos- pital. They said my husband and my two brothers all died of cancer because they lived near a creosote factory. And then they found out we was gonna sue them factory people in Ponchatoula, and they up and changed their minds!" She was on the verge of tears mixed with nervousness.

"Our folks is just simple, we just go shopping and try to lead a normal life, and we go to PonchatoulaPentecostalChurch." "So what you are saying Mrs. Figg, widow of Leroy Figg of Springfield, is that too many people have died in your family alone?" She begged the question.

"Yes, that is right." "And you agree that this place has a high incidence of cancer. Right?" "Yes ma'am." "And how do you come to think like this?" "Cause they found a malignant tumor on my breasts." (it was a wonder she didn't call that load of heaving bosom titties), she laughed. "Can I say it like that on Tee

Vee?" "Yes ma'am, this is a serious subject. So you have a growth on your breasts." "That's right," and she went on.

"And you say that is the biggest problem in this state, right?" "That's right, Sophia, except for the colored folks in them projects selling crack and killin" What better revelation than at a K-Mart in Denham Springs. Sophia walked through the tiers of the bleachers, smiling and looking at the kinfolk of universal southern gothic nature. She said "Ida Mae, you do a lot of shopping at K-Mart, right?" The audience laughed.

Ida Mae said proudly. "Nope. But I spend almost every weekend and half the week in Wal-Mart, they got better prices" The crowd roared with laughter in huckleberry biscuits of sound.

She walked up to one old black man and put the mike in his wizened wise face. He resembled Stepin Fetchit aged sixty years.

"I don't think crack and dope has anything to do with this issue.

We are here to talk about cancer and monstrous new forms of life, not racial and crime stuff, you know" He looked at the hawping fat lady who could possibly have worked in a state fair to make a few extra bucks at the Guess Your Weight Booth.

She looked away and started mumbling prayers. Sophia might have thought she was going to end up rattling around on the floor, not unlike a frat rat gatoring in the Tigerland water holes late into the night. Her tongue was almost babbling though in silence. Sophia addressed one of the biologists from the University. Some medical staff from Ochsner Medicine in New Orleans, LSU School of Medicine, looked on.

"So what percentage of these cancers are formed or come about?" Sophia pranced in her new designer jeans. "Are they because of River Bend nuclear facility? Because of plants like Dow, Exxon? All the refineries, all thirty or so of them up and down the river in this state?" The biologists and doctors talked.

"Because of the lawsuits pending between the environmental protection agency and the nuclear facility and the Waste Disposal plants around North Baton Rouge, near Devil's swamp, we cannot comment specifically on who is responsible." "Now. You, Kendra Hoerst. First of all, you look more like a model than a biologist. By the sound of this crowd you should consider going into acting or entertainment." Kendra laughed a deep sultry sweetness, quite unlike a whiskey tenor. Some hayseeds in the peanut gallery were whooping and hollering. Kendra had on a semi-sexy outfit (the grad students told her not to dress up too much, she was supposed to lend an air of modified authority and verisimilitude to the proceedings, which was now almost turning into a Tennessee Ernie Ford record spin in Tupelo).

Kendra spoke, and immediately a professionalism took hold. "Well, you want me to give you some information on these creatures. We had found two or three central nests or traces of them so far. We do not at this time know what these creatures have to do with nuclear spills or cancer. I am not a medical doctor, but I have dissected many of these things, they might belong to the family " , " genus " " and related to the family of muscular creatures found in the Florida everglades. We do know they are NOT from outer space, as so many tabloids have said. We find that to be irresponsible reporting and as part of the LSU research team, this just creates panic and havoc. We have found many of these creatures to have multiple heads coming forth from a ventricled split spine. We do not know whether radiation is the cause for this. We have found traces of radiation poisoning in these and several other creatures, in the Atchafalaya swamp, and in Devil's Swamp landfill, which are areas near several refineries, and Exxon petrochemical, specifically.

"So these may be a result of, and the cancer deaths also, from a huge blend of caustic chemicals and

nuclear radiation?" Kendra fidgeted in her chair, as one old boy was whispering how he'd like to do it with her, and it got caught on the audio mikes.

"We simply do not have enough to go on at this point." There went Sophia, searching renderer of causality and précis' of Armageddon.

She walked over to Ida Mae Figg, now having regained her composure.

She stopped praying for that old Negro man in the front row in that K-Mart parking lot at four in the afternoon as the sun set over the interstate I-10 exit.

"Ida Mae," She said patronizingly. "Do you think this is a result of just something to come? That we are going to experience something of a plague, a black death, like the middle ages or something?" "Well, ma'am, I just know that our minister said that dark times are a comin like the Mark of the Beast was a stamped on all of us. We just got to be payin for our sins, for the evil deeds we are a doin" Miss Sophia got a more relevant answer from Dr. Sorenson of New Orleans Pathology.

"We believe that if some of these waste dumps are not cleaned up, and the nuclear facility is continuing to sporadically leak radiation and toxic waste is to continually be stored in bottomless salt domes, that we could experience something akin to the Black Death. It would be tantamount to the demise of all the folks in Louisiana. And all I can say is that the Environmental Agencies better folks in Louisiana. And all I can say is that the Environmental Agencies better crack down and win some of these lawsuits.

There will be a major class action lawsuit from these hundreds of cancer victims, even though it will be hard to prove which would have died anyway from cancer. And which were as a direct result of chlorine spills, asbestos, toxic waste, radiation dispersal floating debris over various areas that the wind takes this dangerous stuff. It could be as bad as the AIDS epidemic." One old boy said something when they jammed the mike in his face. He had buckteeth all gnarly and rotted and a trucker's cap on. He was gawking at Kendra on stage just a waitin to be poked real good-like.

"This is worse than the AIDS epidemic. That just basically kilt off all the homersexual faggots. This is good people being kilt off. For no good reason. Gawd didn't mean it his way..." He paused. "Gawd might a wanted to kill off the faggots, but it ain't right to kill off us people just trying to survive and raise a mess a kids in a crime free environment." "Have you checked yourself for cancer?" "No ma'am, I ain't." "And where do you work?" "Well, I worked at Georgia Pacific waste treatment for ten years, and now I worked at River Bend Nuclear" Miss Sophia laughed. They went to commercial, and later the carnival taping finally concluded.

In Grand Coteau, just outside of Lafayette, the Creoles and Cajuns watched Sophia do her thing.

"She lost a lotta weight, yeah." "How can you be thinkin' a thing like that, man? Dey just said about them chemical petroleum plants causing Maw Maw's cancer. And Aunt Loyce's daughter's cancer, and all my friends cancer in der families!" "I was just watchin that Biologist. She ain't only good lookin but she got a lot a brains, yeah." "You gonna call that lawyer man?" "Oui-yeah." "Are you gonna set dem traps in WhiskeyBay dis weekend, Boudreaux?" "If I went out der, I might get kilt like Wayne Langlois." The paradise had dawned now as a caustic pit like Devil's swamp. With little monsters from outer space, who knew who would be safe?



## Chapter Eleven

Kendra was congratulated down at the Chime's bar. All the other grad students commented on her professionalism. A guy she dated, a smooth-talking black-haired doctor who was doing his residency, had latched onto her and was not letting her go. They sat with the entourage while the Dash Riprocks headbanged onstage. Everybody indulged in the two-for-one kamikazes and a dozen oysters on the half shell, with horseradish ketchup and crackers sliding down their gullets. Kendra was still elegantly hot like Kathleen Turner. A sizzler of beauty, she was holding her liquor better than the Korean couple. Also the Brazilian grad student Juan, whose gender bender affectation lent him to be engrossed by that ravishing lead singer up there with the short black hair. A boy toy for Juan, late of Portuguese descent and the decadence of Rio de Janeiro. Rumor had it his father had been Secretary of State in Rio, and they had a very influential family. Juan looked a lot like Tyrone Power. His smile and those obelisk eyes of gaiety were subject to picking up many hearty freshmen and taking them to the French Quarter.

To the Gunga Din, or to see the Transvestites ladies at the Parade or other balconied queerhollars. Funbuns and "Which witch is the bitch" contests, where the bartender wore leather cowboy chaps and quivering buttocks coming out the back all the way down to the floor. Juan and Kendra made many forays into the Big Easy, Nawlins. They would go to the Rainbow or the Dungeon, to talk with the bikers. And those loose bars pullulating with queens. Old, artistic, lonely-eyed, alcoholic, healthy, butch and effeminate.

Women and men, lesbians in comfortable shoes, tall men with mustaches named Mary, dykes with tough abrasive and masculine traits.

The decadence of the smelly French Quarter was just an overall clue to what might happen to the entire state. AIDS wasn't the only thing to fear anymore, Kendra knew. But she didn't like to think about it. She was on schedule with her studies of these creatures. Her dissertation would be brilliant. And she was definitely in love with Dr. Chuck Miller, a veterinarian with the Labradors and the swanky townhouse near college. She had always wanted to live in the garden district. She spent many nights at that townhouse just lying around. Spreading her radiant beauty like pollen through the windy streams of breezes wafting from the multi-painted porch and veranda overlooked the yuppie swinger's pool graced by bikinied honeys and men that looked like fashion models.

Kendra sipped her Tom Collins with THOSE pouty protruding lips that wouldn't end. Every single man in that raucous bar managed to look away from their shaved-head-on-the-side girlfriends to stare at this blonde Aryan wonder.

"How did I look on TV?" she asked Juan the gay blade. Juan smiled and made a funny face and then pouted his lips. He said, "Darling, you are a star! If we could just get you in that pose? You have IT like Clara Bow, and you can keep it!" She hit him lightly and with purring sultriness a notch above whisky tenor, cooed, "I'm serious!" "You are Garbo, Dietrich, Tuesday Weld, Hayworth, and Louise Brooks too, mon vieux!" "I don't understand a screwing word you are saying. Just say yes or no!" He nodded yes exaggerating. Big bobs up and down as his ponytail flopped.

"I know you could be a movie star. I always wanted to be one too.

Who could you be if you were a famous movie star out of any you could pick?" She laughed. Every head turned at each table; their tendrils were out. They were pissing at every fire hydrant on Chimes Street catching her scent, like tommycats bashing garbage cans together like TOPCAT the cartoon.

"I guess," she mulled over it. Her smooth intake of Tom Collins swirled about her brain, like cocaine used to do to her. "... I guess, Marilyn Monroe?" Juan laughed a feminine screech, the more female than male in his bronzed Portuguese body.

"Oh, come on. Merde!" He glanced over at the swooning lead singer of DASH RIPROCK. Could it be true love for the two birds of paradise among the progressive punk masses of disgust and loathing?

"Okay. Kim Basinger!" She smiled at him. Her bee stung lips with bubblegum lipstick smooched and parted, oh so sexy.

"But I think I'm better looking." "My little darling! There will always be fabulous women like you who deserve to make deals with Paramount pictures, but you are not in de vicinity." He sipped his drink.

"So you shine your luminescence over the ugly people." He was actually serious for once. Then he smiled again after drinking the last of seven brandy alexanders. He popped a Mantrax and Darvon combination of pharmaceutical beauty.

"But you know what Todd Rungren says" "What does Todd Rungren say?" she looked towards the loudness issued forth from the motley guitarist onstage.

He leaned in on her with a grin.

"The only beautiful thing is when ugly people Screw." She guffawed. She loved being around him and his little lovebird Paul. Paul was an Elton John queen with a sever pout and Barrymore drinking style conducive to the wildest times. Especially when they embarked into the Vieux Carre' the French Quarter.

That time she was drunk at Mardi Gras. Those days of carnal sin, perjured lusts went through the milky disinfected streets over sticky pavement.

Mustached barkers staring at her torso, and lewdly smiling like course men oft did. When they attempted to coax every girl into showing her tits. And lots of them did. What voyeuristic moments when nipples explode into view like hyperspace.

Vapor trails and strip joints whirl by. Johnny Friendly's with the barflies watching basketball and forgetting to go relieve themselves. Pro-whores did their thing in the little alleyways of intrigue. Crack pipes lit and little rock candy igniting next to Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo.

When she passed out and there was a law about sitting or lying on the sidewalk that went back to Reconstruction and General Butler. A Nawlin's cop had come up to her: "You get up, dahlin', or I gotta bwing youw in. It's against da law to sit on da sidewalk!" Over and over that swirled in her mind like Ecstasy in a semiprecious capacity.

And then seven buddies just coming from the costume contest of "Which Witch is the Bitch," which had the theme of Halloween, or more appropriately all soul's day. They were dressed, three as witches, MGM Grand style. And four were reverent nuns, all with quite a set of balls on them, hanging in jockstraps girded around their gay loins. They picked her up, she now bleary unconscious, and straddled her like Cleopatra off that illegal sidewalk and away from jail.

They whisked her away to a love hut party in Pirates Alley in Bill Faulkner's old apartment. They let her

lie chaste and white in her sundress with gillyflowers and cornflowers around her. As if waiting for her sweet prince in this truly apt fairy tale, to kiss her and awaken her from the throes of Spiritus Fermienti.

Lying at her throne were Paul and Juan like two little angels pecking each other in this summary gay soirée.

The cop had left mumbling "Gawddamn faggotass faggots" and got on his horse and it took a dump. It left pop-n-serve rolls of merde pooping along the street like little buncakes from the uplifted tail in the alimentary canal (as seen through the eyes of a biologist veterinarian). This was before Kendra met her hundred-thousand-give-or-take-a-couple dream Doctor. Chuckie-the-wuckie sourpuss who wanted to have Kendra all to himself. To go and accompany him to the screwin' ballet, or some shitty art movie at the Collonade theatre.

There were just more cretin shaved-heads, skull's-ear ringed slam dancers. Who only showed up at four in the morning like pathological vampires out of Byron.

"Kendra." It was Chuck with that disappointing look on his face, of a man who had everything but still hadn't had enough.

"Huh?" "Why do you do that?" "What?" "What's the matter?" "Make yourself the center of attention? Everybody in this bar is staring at you!" Kendra was miffed.

"We talked about this a million times, Chuck. I can't help it." They finally went home way before the sun came up. Before the punkers for Jesus dove into the woodwork from whence they cometh. The last shaved head and skull jewelry fobs left the establishment, usually without that drunken frat facade. More of a pharmaceutical anti-everything demeanor about them. One girl had a big eel thing T-shirt on. I guess that made it headline news word of mouth all the way, Kendra thought. Cross sections and split eel-things with formaldehyde odors ran through her memory. Her demeanor deteriorated like little soap suds being punctured from the kill juice in the cheap kamikaze's with sour lemon-lime. She and Chuck split off from the other grad students and party. Juan went home aching for Paul, his lover.

## Chapter Twelve

It was Friday night. Ricky Harrison had obtained employment at a small fotomat four hours a day. He celebrated with a bottle of insolent formaldehyde which had the audacity to read from the label, Katz and Bestoffs (a New Awlings drug chain dating back to Reconstruction) fined aged bourbon.

Green label was the cheapest. He figured the last three years give or take a millennium, that at two or three bottles a week, 52 weeks a year, made him consume 130 bottles a year at five years. That was over 600 bottles over that span of chiasmic indulgence. Here in the 190 bucks a month efficiency apartment a shiny new Trinitron played Fellini movies. He was next to the projects of tacky painted variety. His second story view was of orange and green buildings, where down the street the 7-11 sold liberal cheap vapor trail wines with the sophisticated screw top. Fermented nature that gave sustenance

to many a sterno bum with \$2.79 to spare. A thriving quickstop business in Hades near Choctaw drive, an industrialist wet dream.

This is his misery, was his misery, and would always be his misery.

He had fever dreams of that night on the mudflats splits caked on the levee, porking a puking little witch named Karrie Capshaw and then being chomped to a mutilated torso dragged by his arms, a trail of entrails to follow. It was the ever-ongoing fever dream, a multi-stacked horrific night gaunt like a newsreel of terror buzzing through his forehead. What to stop these, resolve this? He had thought something was slithering and whining under his bed?

That was ridiculous, but many a night he would look under there to see the double headed monsters leering back at him, in his semi comatose state.

They sat at the foot of his bed and sang quartets of stygian lore.

The lyre of madness, that way lie death. His heart lurched when he would see the illusions of illustrative gore. Rats nesting and being attacked, chomped down to bloody masses of road kill. Maybe he was drinking himself into some unclassifiable gate into some inner circle, something out of Dante. his sexual diversion of tossing off to tattered playboys out of date took striations downward spiraling. Many declining ounces of moxie were evident as he swooped below the low door in this exit all the way. It was many eons since he had real actual sex with a girl, cute or otherwise. Not even a big girl could be lured out of a Baton Rouge nightclub, however ugly with a capital U, because he had depression writ all over his face. It was a good thing he dropped out of the fraternity. They remembered him as youthful and rakishly charming. A thin, almost gangly pretty boy. Now he was a pendulous gutted pig's arse. He applauded inwardly this decline. His father was ever vigilant with his mother, Marlene. She was given only a week more to live now. The Dr. Cyclop's Radium ranch with cobalt rayguns giving Chemotherapy to the new martyr. Our Lady of the Lake Hospital was to be her last dwelling place. A cloistered, shunted sad room in which to die dingily. He sobbed now, utter gobs of saddened whining away. Tears streaming down, the faucets were wide cracked in his unsubdued angst. He would get suicidal soon, he thought to himself. He went to sleep finally Friday night.

The funeral was impeccable, as Marlene would have wished. Her dutiful sons now, the ex-martyr and the newborn apprentice, Ricky Harrison, carrying the torch from the now much more sensible sibling. The two sisters, crying heaps, were there, amidst the relatives from both sides of the Harrison family. The sign of dark fleecy skies of steeped caustic waste hung over the horizon. Ricky Harrison had a smell of liquor around his yawp.

Carla and Penny Harrison were present with their dutiful spouses and both had come to realize prodigal Ricky Harrison was drunk. Or was that in his mind(?) as the world spun backwards and his efficiency hovel dingy wash ragged would appear over the slight hump of the horizon and appear. He was crying with sorrowful remorse like the town drunk. The wastrel nothing- boy. Some of Dick Harrison's uncles were overheard slightly saying cruelly, "What do you expect? He's a drunk. He is going to cry the water works; it's a reaction." Marlene was laid out very nicely. Her face was etched in Ricky's painful psyche. She appeared happy, with that expression of a wry grin.

God, Ricky thought, I ain't going to make it.

"Ricky, I love you," his sister said, and hugged him anyway. All the sorrow and melancholia came to a shadowy nether region. He had to get out here. He had painful moments of hating God in the name of God for killing his mother, his last link to anything or anyone he cared about. It was he who was the first to leave. The relatives, his aunts and uncles whispered, where is he going? Doesn't he have respect for

our sister? Dick's wife? His mother? Ricky Harrison went out and into the twilight and the crimson orange fireball fiery flames of scorched earth parted the thick air as he crept through the humidity, to the Toyota, which barely started. He did only one thing he could think to do.

There was the levee where he had done the dirty deed and snaked Karrie Capshaw. Probably the last person he had sex with besides himself.

Years ago, before the paunched wineskin stomach and the death wish, now magnified in the maelstrom. The levee was approaching. He drove through the campus by the Roman coliseum tiger stadium. In the empty parking lots, all he could see were parked coffins, with clones and duplicitous cadaver's of Marlene Harrison. He sat near the pristine waters of old man river calling to him. Wagging waves rippled on the banks, right near the spot where he saw that creature that he had told the shrinks about. They didn't believe him and said it didn't matter anyway.

Back in the Red room of Rabinhoerst Funeral Home, Death smelt like it was supposed to. Marlene was still and silent for once in her life.

Dick took it well as the men were talking about the weird rumors.

"Marlene had two cancers at once. Breast cancer and lymph node, or was it leukemia?" "She was a fine woman." "Don't know how Dick is going to take it?" "Do you think there is going to be a sickness? That Reverend Jebkins said so, but I think he's just trying to sop up some more pity and scare tactics to roll the bucks in." "We just keep praying. In Lafayette hospitals the cancer ward had to be expanded 400%. Something's really wrong going on.

"Those eel things" "Yeah." Some of the men walked away.

"Ricky Harrison said he was probably one of the first people to see one. Well, Dick said his sons were all screwed up. But Mark Harrison's about to graduate in Electrical Engineering. He's almost got straight A's.

Dean's List, Marlene was saying, a few days before she died. She was so proud." One of the aunts came over.

"Marlene looks so good. She looks at peace" "Yes." On the levee, Ricky's thoughts raced around, bouncing off nothing in particular: Do something with your life. The Fotomat ain't exactly a grey suit job, is it? You have a bachelor's degree. Your madre's dead. You are living off your father now. Before, it was madre who was the ambassador of good will. Get a decent job. He would go on more of those goddamned interviews with vampires, Daddy's old clients. He drove home, and didn't drink one drop there, and stayed up brooding in that ever-present remorse.

He was a new man, revived! He would lay off the sauce. He would find that job. Even if it was five dollars an hour. He would take that job.

That night he got up after finding he couldn't sleep and poured seven shots of Ten High poison in 7 shot glasses and holding the two liter cola he took them on, kamikaze-ing them in heroic efforts. So much for laying off the sauce. There were too many things happening. Too many symbolic gestures from on high, from the principalities of Hades, from weird sources. What in the hell?, he thought in that single uncomfortable bed with sheets not washed since the turn of the century. The rumpled sheets were the flank side of the levee with mud splits caked around. Things glowed and twin and triple-headed monsters leered and him and sang the rime of the ancient mariner, the ancient French Cajun. He saw flying apparitions, cadenced rushes of weirdness flashing, waving.

He woke up in a sweat, groggy from the booze, and had some more, because he just remembered his mother was dead. From a cancer like that show said. From the Cancer Alley plague. The disinfecting of the hellishness of all the populist trash's descent into these nether surreal visions of empty roads, empty traveling, empty lives.

## Chapter Thirteen

After he quit Fotomat, he secured employment at Customer Service Electric, a small electrical distributorship. It was in the heart of the ugliest (with a capital U) region of industrialized soot hellishness. Another descent into Pireaus, and what would be the reason this time? Five little bucks an hour's wage for running around the insides of corrugated dank warehouse of shrieking black men stoned out of their gourds, one and all.

His father had obtained for Ricky Harrison an interview for a position as an insides sales person, but the moment Harrison entered the room, his interviewer gleaned that the boy was in bad straights. The blue-eyed boy for a while, he took the lowly position of a warehouse gopher to the multitudes of monolithic refineries all up and down the Mississippi.

His boss was Pokey Tuminello, an Italian who knew the ropes in and out of the business, who dressed casually and stood steadfast amongst the several men in the warehouse. Ricky choked on the carbon exhausts and soot from the two forklifts spinning around the concrete indoor building. It was a descent from the Valley of ashes into an interior of an inner circle.

The direction of Divineness was down, inside, ulterior, unseen. The further down one went, the closer to solving the perplexing state of grace of the lack of it. Here in Baton Rouge, off Choctaw drive. The wasteland of the city fomented with outcrops of little bolt and die shops, auto parts places. Little supply companies were like pilot fish sucking unto the lower lip of a shark.

He first noted the old black man. Short, firmly planted stance, swaggering shuffle, nice smile, with the difficulty of speech from the lack of teeth, wearing ill-fitting false teeth. He shook Ricky's soft, womanly, sensitive hand. Ricky could feel the man's soul through calluses and leathery hands that never knew leisure. For a fleeting minute Ricky thought about Cornbread, the second coming. But Wilbert was amusing. Ingratiating and happy soul he was. The blacks just kind of observed the new boy, working man, Harrison. They were very busy in their running around the sunken palace. Grabbing bizarre electrical fixtures, wiring, all sorts of alien contraptions used somewhere out here. Outside, where one could see, in some caustic refinery. Ricky could not register the individual collective of brown men's faces, as they peered back from the various aisles of tins, boxes, numbers and parts. There was some order to the chaos of the shed of tin. Forklifts were driven by maniacs with licenses to main and would with rubbery moon vehicles following the paths to loading docks. The door wide open now, the sunny air was inhaled by all. The tall men of brown filed in.

Drivers hauled their flatbed railed vehicles, sputtering their diesel engines brutally. Trucks backed

ass-end into the stygian warehouse. The rustling about of men, hauling together like they were fit for the rig, so they fit in the rig. The day waned now. It was an estimable confusion to the new guy, Harrison. A displaced frat boy, white bread from the manicured suburbs, finding himself amidst these tough men.

It was a matter of feeling comfortable there. They would get used to him soon enough. For the first few weeks, Rick wouldn't say anything outrageous, as was wont by his alcoholic sensibilities. Pokey introduced him to all the men standing about. "This is our new warehouse man, Ricky Harrison," the large mouthed Italian said with some aplomb. They shook his hand. He was in now.

Paid every two weeks; that eagle flew two Fridays of the Mayan sun. He hastily exited the building daily, going through the executive offices.

The inside salesmen all wrapping up their hustling numbers and phone pitches, and calling it a determined end of day. He attempted to smile as he could sense that indescribable security from the half-empty bottle of the hovel. When he opened the door on that second floor and entered the safety from the projects across the way, down there, he knew he wanted to line up those shot glasses pretty all in a row. And fill them up without spilling not one molecule's worth on the slimy Formica of an orange haze sheen.

He looked about the place; in the shag carpet of inferior brusqueness lay husks of small cockroaches on the battlefield. The toilet was a moon pool of golden fluid, unflushed thickly urine. Not a good sign of moral fitness.

Empty bottles stood like coffins in their death stances near the door. The stereo from the era of the vanished seventies, a Marantz receiver stood with a stack of classical albums. They were concertos and mainly requiems. Ricky Harrison, part-time martyr for lost causes and lost brothers, was into requiems, which were Sacred Masses for the Dead. So he played them, to wallow in the languid lachrymose of vaporous silent seas. Creaking of chairs, two headed calves born in his thoughts, the spilling of salt, the etchings of alcoholic shittiness for the punk for Christ. The everyman for an undefined and now neither generation that didn't necessarily have a war to hang it's coat on, tailing onto the sixties radicalism. The bottle remained steady as he poured the liquid of thickly oil can weight. The dirty shot glasses all neat in a row were now poured neat, and the two-liter cola exploded into his mouth with carbonation. And then each shot dumped down the mouth and swished around. he had contracted liquor as a medication of sorts. He was in superior decline, and the descent was mutual; the state was falling into ruin about him. It was a scene of toppling Ionian arches in a fiery maelstrom.

But for now it was surceased.

He put on a movie carefully selected from the arduously straight video library. Stacks and stacks of celluloid plastic (that was one product from chlorine spills and glycol deaths) were his pyre of life. He had no excuse to drink. But yes, he did; the Faure requiem was played full bang from the funeral parlor into the air. Breezing along the interstate, and into his wafting room. The hour of lingering death, his mother laid out real pretty, like his shot glasses. He was embalming himself. He didn't know or think about AA. He denied reality beyond the four walls he was bound within, unflushed toilet and all. He finally got hungry enough to rustle up some shitburgers to throw down his maw.

He went to bed knowing the night gaunts would appear again, like a malevolent stranger, a phantom of ambivalence. The fine line between both—him alive and his Marlene Harrison, fine mother, now buried beneath the dirt in the manicured cemetery near the neighborhood, right across the street from the BroadmoorShopping Center where one couldn't beat those double coupons. he tried to nod off in his resentment of drinking himself sober. He was committed to throttling his genitals in amazingly dreariness. The mutilation of his soul as he tossed off to terribly ripped up playboy magazines courting him. The eyes of the playmates beckoning him to issue forth and in a sense vanquish another stemming tide, libido. But

soon that would go too. Everything seemed to be entropying here in the ugly city, a rather large version of Devil's swamp landfill over there near EXXON.

So he would have a work ethic in proportion to his wayward drinking, something akin to St. Augustine. The precipice was not as precarious as thought before. He would garner his sum and slay the beasts of this mindset.

His mother copped up in his dreams again. He couldn't even think about masturbating in his pathetic drunken way. Would he ever get a girlfriend again? It was like he had lost the way. He was too bloated and too pathetic and all he wanted was a little pity. He got plenty in his paranoid sheen or outlook.

The next day he managed to get up without necessarily feeling queasy, and managed to fill the tureen in the bathroom. He took a shower and the car started and he blasted down Lobdell Avenue through the un- eventful trek to Customer service electric supply company.

"How ya doin' this morning?" Pokey asked kindly.

"Good," he said.

"You're gonna follow some of the guys as they fill the orders. Start gettin' a feel of where everything is. Over there is plastibond pipe. Over here is the electronic stuff. Light bulbs upstairs." "Okay." "Okay, Royhound. Take Ricky around and fill these orders." Royhound was a scrappy black dude, dark in tone and lean and a hustler. Why they called him Royhound was the mystery left unknown for the nonce.

"You see, we got here the Techtronic line. Over here (as they walked the corridors of myriads of little doodads and striated little objects) we got —screw—what is that called? Oh, yeah. They got your plastibond pipe here" He lit a cigarette and it hung down his rather strong face.

"You got a college degree?" he asked seriously.

"Yeah." "Damn. And you couldn't get a better job?" "No. Believe me, I tried." Ricky Harrison was the silent boy for a good while during the day.

After a few orders were pulled, Ricky was introduced to the wild man himself, Joe Thomas. They shook white man style.

"Yeah, I played basketball for McNeese. Lake Charles." "I thought I read about you in some of the sports pages." Harrison sincerely thought.

"I got a few clippings." "What's that?" Harrison asked. A truck came up the parking lot and stopped, a sandwich truck.

"That's the roach coach." "They sell hot sausage poboy, orange juice, egg sandwiches. But it's all poisoned." Harrison smiled. He liked Joe Thomas, basketball star, hip hop contender.

The whole company filed out to get the ichorous vending sandwiches under heated plates. The girl stood there collecting the money from the masses.

"Look here, you got 'cha a sandwich here made in 1954. And looka here. . ." "Look here, Belinda," he said, holding up a boiled egg. "If I can bust open this egg without using two hands, you'll give it to me for free, right?" "No Joe, just pay for the egg or put it back," she said, smiling again.

"Okay, it's a deal. I'm gonna break it" "Put it back, Joe." Joe put it in his right hand, those marvelous basketball hands that had put many a basketball through a net for the glory of Louisiana colleges.



He squeezed like he was using all his strength. Ricky could tell he was just exaggerating. Harrison was quite amused. They exited. The day went a lot shorter than that first day.

The insides of the concubined tin roofed warehouse were filled with interesting men. First, the insides sales boys were nice. They were on the phone all day long. There was a contingent quarter for the black men.

Bobby Magee was a Christian born-again, who had told Ricky Harrison upon shaking his hand: "Man! You got hands like a woman" and he laughed.

He was truly a nice guy. He blew the curve off even bleeding heart liberals like Ricky. He could have been of divine origin like Cornbread. Same lineage, ennobled Christianity and indentured to Almighty God.

Joe Thomas was a maniacal man. Married, he talked about being in basketball camp with some LA Lakers. A lie. And playing basketball in Australian. Another lie, but he was hilarious in his jockeying roughhouse of the games. The dozens.

"What are the dozens?" Harrison asked Joe. They walked by the docks where trucks backed up by black drivers who knew the black guys that we had, thought Ricky. There was some secret society of fellowship among these guys. A whole other world.

"The brother's play the dozens." Joe said, matter of factly. He fooled with some packing slips.

"Like what?" "Like messing around with each other." "Like what?" "Like giving each other a hard time. We give Royhound a hard time because he's so strung out, tense." "Like stuff like 'Your mamma'?" "No. We don't play that." "That's what the white boys got from y'all." "WE don't talk about each other's mommas." He went into a speech with a five-point program detailing how the brothers played the dozens. Ricky laughed hysterically.

"You know, crazy white boy? When you first walked in here, you looked about seven feet tall. I swear, when I first saw you, you must have been wearing elevator shoes" He laughed.

"I was just standing up straight. I'm normally a hunchback." "You crazy." "See ya later, little man." Ricky smiled and walked away.

"That's my boy. Jethro over there," Joe pointing to Ricky, the white breaded fraternity punk.

He filled a few orders on his own and thought reverently about booze hitting inside his innards, relaxing him. That instant feeling of reverie.

He hadn't even thought about his madre, Marlene, now not of this earth, on another plane of existence. But he didn't believe that. But he believed in chasing the snakes out of Ireland, with a walking stick, St. Patrick.

Well, he could be the St. Patrick of Baton Rouge. Home of the dirtiest water this side of toxic waste dumps and salt domes in subterranean caverns.

Make the water calm in the midst of turmoil. The turmoil inside where it hurt. Where the bourbon would medicate his psyche.

## Chapter Fourteen

He went home and set up the shot glasses again. But he managed to watch a halfway decent movie on television and called his sisters and said hello.

Told them the lies about his situation, what they wanted to hear. That he was happy, that he was employed, that he had a paying salary. That he wasn't drinking, he said, while the bottle was sitting there beckoning him during commercial breaks.

"Don't talk anymore about cancer or eels. Okay Ricky?" his older sister said very carefully.

"We think that you are the most upset about mamma's death." Ricky gulped the bourbon and it almost went down the wrong pipe in his near-weeping stance. He didn't say anything but a tear formed like a globule and fell down his sensitive blonde countenance. His mouth was all rubbery now into a wagging low frown like he was ready to burst in his bleary melancholic state.

He managed to say something, barely. Sobbing, "I loved her," and then he exploded into remorse.

His sister was crying too, now. "We all miss her." "Ricky," she managed to say, "we all love you." He continued to sob, unable to get anything coherent. It was like Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, heart of the melancholic just streaming invisibly through him.

The aching pain, throbbing. The distinct raw feeling, even through the medicinal bourbon, cheap of late. The emotions emoted in that hovel, that shanty, that tin shotgun shack next to the projects, which almost seeming like Bethlehem. Glowing with a peculiar radiance that seemed to wash away the known evil. He was here. He was alive. He felt through every pore his being alive, when measured piecemeal against the still body of his beloved madre.

Marlene, now uninjured, with that great blot of death ceasing cancerous pain.

He thought about Bethlehem, and the glowing projects. The inward stability, the unity, of life in the beautiful projects and his ramshackled apartment. Sometimes sad and dingy things could be quite beautiful. And it wasn't just because he was tight with bourbon. It was raw emotion searing viscerally through the craziness of these times. The just remembrance of a singular woman, the little Tri-Delt with a Quaalude moon hovering over the flanked mud splits and the puddle of vomit as a stain of beauty on the wet ground becoming a cheerful happy hell. In one's pain racking came the censure and then anguish, ugliness.

Hell, of all of Choctaw Drive, the industrials, the plants, the refineries, were beautiful like the Land of Oz or the pleasure domes of Kublai Khan. Through the tincture of substantive blariness of way too many shots. The infernal machines of Cocteau could somehow reverse the illusion into something beautiful and radiant. Each little singular light bulb hanging on every piece of rusty angle iron like the rigging on the Flying Dutchman hovering invisibly. The lost ships of these immobile vast amalgams of magical processes and chemical profundities had become as radiant as a Christmas tree in the finest loft in Yuppie breeding, a Volvo in the garage and a nest egg of immeasurable proportions. And here he was, in bed, seeing in an auto suggestive hallucination of goodly glowing, of a radioactive Christ child under a Quaalude moon.

That blessed virgin Tri-Delt Karrie Capshaw had given birth in her retching in this weird analogy crossreferenced in his semi comatose thought. Andromeda, the constellations could still be seen in the night air amidst the vast lightships rigging of these huge constellations on the ground. Guiding the third shift operators as pilots of much more infernal machines of Cocteau's worst nightmare. For in such ignorance bourn anew, the harboring of such a safe talent of this strength of ignorance, came an unfear. A righteous drive to not be afraid of cooling radium piles not a few hundred feet away from those controls. The mainframe Babbages, microchipped and semiconductored logical wretchedness. The whole dream of the century had fulfilled its wish for dispersal of gummy substances for every housewife in the nation. Louisiana as a fierce contributor of heavy metal and heavy sodium. Nature rearing its head and trying to live around God's unrealizations that man hath wrought radiation.

Ricky Harrison was in a state of almost weeping pleasure in an uncaring world, a world he had shut himself out of. Souls of cancer victims in their astral vectors. Heaven above, clouded nimbus' of angels hovering above Limbo and Agamemnon each preceding. Victims now hovering amongst the Dantean cherubim and seraphims, in that unbelieving cosmos of heavenly hosts. The intervention of the Saints was of insignificant proportion to a man of blissful negativity and capability in that negativity of believing nothing. Pleading agnostic in this world of seraphim as a record label. Teeming serfs in lost lands past the inkling of electricity and the industrial revolution that spawned this mess of ordered chaos. The lightships of twinkling industrial magic not amusing or bewildering anyone. The wonderment of man's ability to stride over the restless equations of the heart and spirituality, and leap boundlessly into his contraptions of hurtling space and breaking mach meters. Becoming godlike in his immaturity of man's inability to balance himself. Lopsidedly, an idiot child playing god in this world and subsequently wrecking it, and being quite gleeful in this Bethlehem. The wailing walls were shell-shocked in many a war. The twentieth century was quite possibly the dirtiest that nature fought back with mutants as a precursor. A waning signal to man idiot child's unbounded happiness of blowing the tits off the world. Queer imagery of suspended lands with roots beneath in the subterranean caverns of glowing hellishness. Now all would heed the malevolent gawd who now saw man's quest had led him past Copernicus and Newton.

All who stood on each other's shoulders until the final dirge has whistled in the foggy land of pythic wonderment. Eeriness like a Bergman cinematic dream sequence, until the pyramid of genius had suddenly been perceived as a hellish limbo. A purgatorial whose logic was quite rational. These men climbing had realized they were heading in their untowardness and rushing like fury, ironclads into the unknown. Determined to solve, destroy the illogic and spew forth chunks of it back into God's face. It was now men leading themselves into a finality, a hell. There would be no time long spanned before the end of the evolving world.

Man was getting there faster than reckoned in his gleeful hurtling, headlong striding, rampaging. Victory which had seemed imminent was now a sinking lachrymose of eternal world sorrow, of eternity now finite and discernable. In this venturing into unplumbed territory, Ricky Harrison dreamed not of mutating monstrosities, but of a willow wisped heaven. Amongst the clouded clime of ethereal silence stood his mother in the concert choir amongst castrated angels.

Castrators in a melodic universal accordance in the requiems of Fauré, Mozart, Bach's Mass in D, Rachmanikoff's Vespers, Verde's Missa Solemnis. In the phosphorescent whiff of cathartic heavenly mix-up of the Divine, was his madre, singing the solos with the same voice he remembered. When playing the piano in the solitude of the manicured suburb; his mother washing the dishes, and harping towards a line of excellence. And now she was safe, away from the infernal machine of Cocteau now fully realized. Man's yearning to become more complex.

Concluding that if done so ad infinitum, that he would be nearer to God. Though he was burrowing into

the ground and blinding himself. Lancing his own eyes, piercing and impaling and wincing and going further deeper. Only to find Limbo and a no return sign pointing for an eternal ceasing and waiting. Impatient man would be on hold forever.

He awoke like Lazarus given probation and good time off. he almost felt like the blue-eyed boy for a while. Of course, the occasional hangover hung over him, but he didn't feel embalmed. He had blacked out from the id monster from the night previous. Even though he had gashes of dreamscapes of horrid landscapes of caustic dirt-clay, he felt somewhat anew.

That he had wiped something from his memory.

He hurriedly got dressed for work in the jeans of late standing in the corner by themselves, and pattered around and hauled his ass to work.

The usual hallo's. Now he was taken in by the boys and Pokey, the modern Mafioso. Ricky savored the cup of coffee with the boys. Most were loading the flatbeds. Those metal fence pieces stuck back on the flatbed gave the illusion of holding all the pipe and wiring and orders all brown bagged like Uncle Earl's free lunches thirty years ago.

Elward was as always talking that White Castle-Plaquemine coonass slang.

He had possibly the world's ugliest mustache ever seen upon the embrasure of a black man. Elward wasn't exactly black; he was closer to orange. But he was quite a guy. He had been one of the first to greet and introduce himself to Ricky Harrison, new meat.

As usual, Joe Thomas was messing around with Royhound. He was also trying to borrow money from Mark Green, a black guy who walked like John Wayne. He was Joe's best friend; when they had gone to MacNeese together, Joe told Ricky that "I even wore his underwear, when I ran out of nothing to wear." That was quite an accolade to the dwellers of industrial paradiso.

The men nearer to God inside that subterranean warehouse than all the clergy at the Catholic spire cathedrals put together.

Royhound casually said: "Man do like to get high?" in such a nonchalant way. A refinement of his dark featured squarish skinny countenance.

"Well, uhh. . .I used to," Ricky Said, "I just like to drink. A lot." "What you like to drank?" Royhound said.

"Lots of cheap bourbon." "Man, I tell you what, last time I had a lot of Vodka, I was screwed up the next day" He laughed with tremendous jocularity, "kaa haa hhhaah." Like the dozens had barraged him for many years.

Once more the suburban college boy thing surfaced, but Ricky sensed that they were all one. In these few weeks of getting acquainted with the boys nearer to God in the nest egg of La Machine Infernal. Amidst the refineries like the tower of Babel. The MagicKingdom. Spires of monstrous circus apparatus hung above them like a Martian city.

Joe Thomas told fledgling black wannabe Ricky Harrison, the blueeyed boy from the manicured suburbs and the death pyre of the flaming carcass of his madre Marlene, that he would make it through the denial and memory and pain of his mamma.

"Man, you start feeling better when you make your mind up too." Joe cared. They all cared. They all seemed to accept Ricky Harrison for his quotations of Eliot and Lowry. And the other famous poets and

writers, for Harrison himself had risen like a Phoenix out of the ashes of college fraternity death row to become the writer/poet in residence of Customer Service Electric Supply. The boys didn't mind when he said, "I want to quote Lord Byron to y'all sometime in the gray mist of this place." Joe would then say, his stolid nature, suave so much that the pretty white girls loved him" Yeah Harrison, Someday Jethro, I gotta have a long talk with that boy . . ." Then peals of laughter rang through the hollow worm ouroboruos.

That first paycheck came. He had 400.00 fins before taxes at 5.00 an hour. Even though his college frat brothers were making five times that.

"When it's wintertime you'll be freezing your ass off in that warehouse.

You'll be standing by the trucks to keep from freezing" Royhound would say.

Barhopping was mentioned once in a while. "You ever been to Smackwater Jacks?" Mark Green asked him. The behemoth was funny.

The guy was from Iberville Parish, he had some white blood in him so he was Creole. Handsome also. "Man that church lunch cooking from what sis name's church got me sick." "Why?" Harrison asked.

"Cause there wasn't no seasoning. It was so bland." One literally had to have a cast iron stomach to eat the Jambalaya from Gonzales, the Oysters in Horseradish sauce from Amite, the Gumbo from anywhere in the state. It was a peasant dish with shrimp, turkey, chicken, onions, oysters, fish, everything. It was way before Popeye's fried chicken put a franchise on the heritage of the state. People liked their dirty rice, hot. They liked their deer sausage hot. They liked their hash browns hot.

Ricky thought that this sportsman's paradise had equated to a sideshow carnival, laden with snake man, lizard man, the two headed boy in the circus. The thing in a jar that was the nephew of a redneck woman in Denham springs, where bumper stickers read "Hitler would have loved abortions." Now the carnival atmosphere had escalated in the most mysterious way. Reports of nuclear leaks like a ship being plugged and bilged. Chemical plants buying off the state environmental midgets, dumping sludge into the mighty Mississippi. The blood that soaked the ground was taking root.

The forlorn cavernous salt domes had subterranean promises yet unkept.

Things came to the surface.

Edward had that catfish mustache befitting a Creole black man who lived on the river road. On the lower bed of the big river, down by WhiteCastle, well below Plaquemine. Down where one would see antebellum homes and plantations now as historic landmarks. He used to see lots of stuff, he said to Ricky.

"I went down by Ceiba Geigy. That thing ain't nothing but a big garbage can. I put my respirator on before I even get close to there," he said with that Gross Tete, WhiskeyBay eloquence of enunciating and fervor when he spoke. Ricky had a cocked ear.

"I done heard about them EEEL things (almost like a preacher). I don't even like going near that nuclear reactor these days. Got DAMN!" Ricky wanted to tell him about the night he screwed Karrie and saw the gargoyle of mystic origin.

"Nuclear mixed with Chemicals and Chlorine and Glycol ain't NO GOODDD!" Edward said. They were all lagging round at the end of the day.

"I heard some field hands down on the nuclear farm." That was too much for Joe Thomas. He gagged,

laughing.

"What chu laughin at?" Edward said, looking Joe Thomas hunched over, exaggerated.

"Nigra. . ." Royhound said, "Watch out - -here it comes" "ah hah . . .

"Screwem if they can't take a joke." Joe Thomas nodded.

"The nu-clear" he said clearly . . . "plant, said they had a bunch o' people with radiation sickness and left the company." "Shit, the whole town's got cancer" Ricky stood there uncertain but interested, keenly so.

"What I really heard," Edward said, his eyes looking bugged out now at Joe Thomas . . . "Was they had some men who got caught near them radiation silo looking thangs . . . and they half dead and half alive, like" "Like what?" "Like screwin zombie's!" "Sheeit." "I aiinnt kiddinn." Edward looked around quite animated. "Monster men. Men breedin with eel-things. Men eatin eel-things." "Eel-things," that struck a chord with Harrison.

"Shit, I don't know. Snakes, two heads. They found those under the docks at Exxon. Shit I go there every screwin' (he hushed when he said that word) day!" It was time to go home. 5:00 o'clock. Time to check in with the K&B Drugstore lady who stood in front of the finest bourbon stock in the parish. Many a five dollars and 35 cents were spent on the swill that made the wheels greased and the tongue babble.

## Chapter Fifteen

As he went home he tried to look past the lurid signs hawking the bolt and tool die sweat shops. The electronic stores, the urban blight of this industrial wasteland. Choctaw Drive. The essence of maligned capitalism on the rampage. The refineries were like the antebellum plantations and these were the slave quarters. The pure unadulterated ugliness with a capital U. Sinful displeasure, a real injury to the sight. Pluck them out, Ricky thought, than make me look at these roadside gypsy beggars and little businesses up and down the arteries through Baton Rouge.

Even New Orleans was much better, except for Airline Highway across the tracks. Highway 61 was where the old blues man would travel.

From New Orleans all the way up through Baton Rouge, to Memphis and Chicago. Old highway 61, where God said Abraham, kill him a son.

The garden districts, Ionic plastered structures, gothic, Georgian, Spanish, French colonial. Gables, cupolas, gambreled roofs, and no bad proportion of ugliness like Baton Rouge. Who made all that money from all this rich hellishness? Who was sitting way out there away from the mutation and the gummed works next to Reverend Jenkins, millionaires? Thoughts coursed through Ricky Harrison,

prodigal son of the cancerous. One foot in the alcoholic ward, one jaundiced eye bulging in accordance with the noxious ether, one eye wavering upon the icons of religious sainthood. He would think about making the hegira, the pilgrimage to a cathedral, where once he was an altar boy, for intercession in matters of the heart. What the hell, where was that bourbon when one needed it. That was where he sought refuge as if it were alabaster ancient carved stone from a basilica, or Appollinaire church, or ziggurat.

He ate more canned chili, a repast not coming back up as the bourbon swilled inside him. The projects still seemed like a holy city. He watched Fellini's 8 1/2" and once again attacked voyeuristically the Playboys which had become his children.

Elward with catfish mustache, truck driver extraordinaire, had said something about Zombies and nests. His wayward routes through Ciba Geigy, Elward was worried about contracting cancer.

During a break late that night, on the national news, Ricky Harrison blurrily saw Dan Rather and Brokaw both comment on different networks about the unusual cancer rates. Bote attributed unsubstantially by Chemical leaks mixed with radiation leaks. The radiation was unconfirmed. So the nation was getting involved even more so.

## Chapter Sixteen

At the nuclear plant, Toolroom and Shorty came on shift for the night.

"Don't break out them screwbooks just yet, you pig eyed sack of shit!" Toolroom told Shorty.

"Why not?" "Cause it looks like we got us a problem." Mother of Gawd, Toolroom thought.

"What's coming out in the scheduled entries on the computer?" Shorty asked.

"It says things are getting too hot." He tried to beep the big men, D/P managers and the assistant manager.

"Sir," Toolroom said in the receiver. "We got us a potential leak if the temperature don't go down" He continued. "I'm trying to halt load now. The gauges all say that it's in a danger zone, but the efficiency and Threshold, and throughput all are trying to not go down . . . stay up . . ." He was starting to stutter.

"I tried that." "Yes, sir." "Son of a screwing bitch." Toolroom said as he hung up. "It might leak just a little bit." "Fawck!" Shorty echoed.

They diddled knobs. Men came in from the other areas. Engineers.

Computer technicians. A few disk drives had gone out and a gauge wasn't telling the truth.

Outside the faces of the concrete terminal island nuclear piles were sweating like fat ladies in satin skirts.

"We got it under control," Crippen the wimpy engineering genius told the Unisys computer technicians, all four of them. One replaced the drive. One turned the AC up in the room, Another digital technician was testing that meat magazine.

Some other bosses stopped out in the doorway. Muttering. Cursing.

Really not anxious anymore. Just a few roentgens had gotten through.

No big deal, considering what had happened last week. The DEQ boys would let it slide. It hadn't gotten out of the immediate area. The science wonder boys took that to the bank.

If this shit kept up, Toolroom thought, we are gonna explode one day. Fly to the fuggin moon!, like a nuclear space shovel or shuttle or whatever it were callt.

He thought about his wife and daughters. Sheeit! Time to maybe get into another line a' work. Maybe go back to being a tool pusher doing turnarounds at Dow Chemical. Sheeit! He winced again at the nightmarish pressure being put on him. They wouldn't determine whose fault this was for a couple a weeks. Shit, he was in for an ingrade raise next month. This would set his skinny tubercular arse back to fuggin Springfield again, plowing rotten dirt and eating Mule farts behind a backhoe plow and the ass end of a jackass.

At the campus, standing like hotels stood the twin towers of the Biochemistry and chemistry buildings. By the Plato-looking professors in bummish clothes, the ragged hair, bearded and minds a million miles away, one knew one was in the confines of a freethinking place.

Kendra had just come from her apartment after another argument with Chuck the doctor over some goddamned curtain rods. Juan examined a Playgirl magazine while eating his chilidog from hell and sticking some mashy fries in his mouth. Before it had been a macrobiotic diet, stir-fried vegetables. But he had fought with his lover, Paul.

Juan checked the loins and buttocks in flashes of admonition with every turn of the page. A blonde buncake hunk was equipped for life and standing by a rock on a beach with everything tanned. Even his naughty bits, which weren't so itty-bitty. Kendra snuck behind him. She would have put her hands around his eyes and said guess who in that sultry voice like Lauren Bacall. But that argument with the doctor who liked to do nothing but watch golf, play golf, attend golf workshops. Once in a while attend to Kendra's sexual needs while the Master's tournament was going in the background.

Climax and moans and Chuck had looked up right when he should have been attending to her, that face pouty and full of blood, red cheeks and a smile.

She had that sinister device of being swayed by charm, money and power. Yuppie pond scum in medical frocks had tanned her bottom brown as a nut in Destin Florida, Bermuda, St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands.

Atop diving boards of swimming parties behind blistered doors in the French Quarter. Juan had taken her behind those, where courtyards would be festooned with handsome gay men from France, and Rio. Her mane of blonde hair, and those looks of Hellenic proportion that would make the Ford modeling agency shed a tear, not to mention Aeschylus at her Olympian heroics.

And here she was in her formaldehyde scent reeking through the Obsession Calvin Klein. An eel-thing still alive in a cage. She had been dissecting one in the next room where the live one had teeth like Lon



Chaney. Kendra made notes on it. Its capacity to function better in the colony from field study. There were biologists over at the Exxon docks watching the glowing things slither all over each other. The nest of eggs hatched out tiny reptilish mewling babies. Another nest was found in the Atchafalaya swamp under a knotted undergrowth of cypress.

One discovery was made by Kendra. The eel-things had venom that would be released upon biting the victim.

They had analyzed the venom and found it similar to water moccasin's venom. They tested it on lab rats. How it fit into the overall scheme and if it was an entirely new strain of poison was yet to be determined.

Juan moped when Kendra came behind him. She pointed to the engorged member of the nude bronze buncake in the Playgirl and Juan laughed.

"That is my new lover! Unless I let him sleep with you for a while!

Tee hee, he laughed, his Tyrone Power eyes twinkling.

She could tell something was wrong. "Don't tell me sweetie! Paul is cheating on you?" She put her two fingers on his bearded smooth face into a grin. He finally smiled.

"Oh, my darling," Juan said. "I am going to go to the Parade bar in the Quarter and find a little blond and lock him up for all weekend!" She laughed.

"I know some guys who are hunks. Unfortunately, all of them are hetero!" Poor baby pouted with blue crystalline eyes.

"I will find my hunk and make love to him well!" He muttered some Portuguese fugacities at Paul now off to Aspen with some boy toys on a free all expenses paid trip with a video production company. Paul wrote blurbs and ad campaigns and was really quite active in his frivolities. That displeased a more sexually conservative Juan. But Kendra could hardly pace herself with Juan's wild excursions he would spend hours telling her about.

"Paul is in Aspen, screwing Jack Nicholson probably!" "Well, I'll make love to you then" "My darling. You reek of formaldehyde and guts. I cannot be around you unless you put on your miniskirt and smell like a French cathouse!" "You would rather be in a Turkish bath." He smiled finally. She had cheered him up.

"Well, cutie, I gotta go finish my notes and eat my sushi." "How can you eat dat stuff?" He gestured his masculine arms (he was built like a woman's dream) at the pans and petri dishes with culture samples, and serum jars, and fluid dispensers.

"This is a take out from the sushi bar on College drive. Sushi with lots of ginger to get loaded on." She had gone into detail about how lots of ginger paste would make her hallucinate. A juvvy woman.

She ate the sushi. It was proper as it got chewed by her gorgeous teeth and those lips embossed with pink lipstick. She wondered what the eel monstrosity would taste if pickled and eaten with fortified warm rice wine, Sake. Not too good. She knew the tissues of the specimen twitching in the petri dish as a steel pick pitched in its head. A large mean one, shrieking like a monster. Its head bobbed with the spike in its bulbous head. Now a stream of green fluid flowed from the puncture. Kendra calmly finished the last of the sushi. The taste didn't mix well with the formaldehyde.

Juan stood there as she grabbed a hunk of ginger and sensuously put it in her mouth.

"My darling, you almost turn me on with your finger full of that pink ginger dabbing in your mouth." "Let's get back to the subject at hand." She couldn't keep from laughing as she said it.

Juan looked grimacingly at the dying specimen. It seemed to not want to die. Its little brain, (which was classically tiny) was lobotomized. It shrieked one last time and then bared its teeth and a little whistle. Then the twitching ugly bodice shrugged around the metal tray. The dorsal fin closed and then it lay still.

"It's dead. It's weird. It whistles. Like an altogether different species. It does have traces of radioactive tissue. Look at the underbelly." Juan lifted the tail.

"It's a female. There are signs of mutation and distortion on two out of three of these things.

"Tell me something I don't know, dearie," Juan said as he put the tail down and it flopped.

"Time to discover more secrets of this thing," Kendra said.

"Well, it is all yours, little bambino. All I know is that it is as big around as a certain organ of a football player I seduced once a few years ago . . ." "Which one?" "I'm not telling, but he was almost all-American." "Damn!" Kendra thought about going to some social parties. She always had to turn them down because of Chuck, the doctor from hell.

Something would have to be done about their relationship. She thought for a minute about it. Juan left after blowing her a kiss from his handsome Latino face of a matador. She began delving and cutting away, and identifying egg sacs, and such, and stayed there late, in that dark night. She thought as she began to leave after several hours that something ominous and dreadful was going to happen. These things were capable of being carriers of plague-like diseases. And she wasn't sure exactly what strains of viruses these things possessed.

## Chapter Seventeen

Elward drove through the gates of the River Bend nuclear plant. The radium piles and vast cooling towers looked like huge roman structures or wheat silos and were pendulous in size. The white alabaster steaks and lines of connecting steel rod and concrete and specially treated material and steel was awesome. Angola Penitentiary was down several miles; the largest prison in the South. Elward didn't like to think about that either. He grabbed the stick shift coming out of the floor in the standard-H and downshifted over the speed bumps as the guard let him through. He could just imagine in the boiling sun brutally beating down on everything that he could smell the radiation leaking.

"Shit" he sounded through the respirator. OSHA rules. Plant rules. Nuclear fallout all around him, he envisioned. Give them their lousy mofoking wire and plastibond pipe and he'll get his ass away from round here.

The security guards were lollygagging round, amidst the beautiful structure. It was almost a modern art

masterpiece. Through carefully cultivated lawns, Elward saw amidst the parking lots full of cars, his packing-slip Jimbob and the loading dock freight gate. He redlined the truck at 15 miles-an-hour in his earnest anxiety to get the hell through this. The sky was swirling like an art picture at a Catholic Easter fair. The clouds were funneled like a nimbus kaleidoscope beneath the veneer of the magical golden garden of wonderment. Here comes Elward, catfish mustache of hairs blonde, orange, yellow and brown on his upper lip. He didn't have the sense to shave the damned thing off and stop looking like a catfish in the bottom of LakeBorngé.

There came Jimmy the freight man. The man whom he could give the stuff to while the gamma rays hit him invisibly. He could smell 'em, he could feel 'em. They were piercing him, x-raying his insides. He ought to talk to Pokey about given this screwin' route to somebody else, like Royhound! Hell, Royhound thinks he can get off on radiation rays, probably.

Nigra, you's a fool! Nigra, you crazy. Give Jimmy the glowing man the fuggin plastibond pipe and . . . Shit they'll probably have to use the forklift for the pipe! Shit! Maaan. He parked. He motioned to the white boy in the silver suit. Come and get dis here plastic bond pipe before I shove it up your ass.

"What 's goin on, dude?" the silver suited surfer mutant said. Blonde with dat California accent.

"Hey, how you dooin?" Elward said, fiercely hiding his displeasure at the extended wait.

"Forklift coming?" Okay. Thank Gawd in Heaven. They got it down and Elward talked to Jimmy.

"Any more weird rumors about dis here place?" "What do you mean?" "Bout monsters, mutant people, eels, fishes, deer . . ." "No." "Come on." Elward said. "I can't even stand to be here for a lil while, padnah." "Sheitt man," Jimmy said . . ." He (pointing to the silver dude) said he saw things in Devil's swamp (landfill) like oozing green waste and stuff sloppin' around it." "What about zombies?" "Zombies?" "Yeah," Elward said, sucking on his proud makeshift mustache.

"All we got is some workers home sick with radiation poisoning.

They were in an unauthorized area. Got caught smoking weed under the radium piles. Said they could got kilt." "Ma-an!" Some people just stupid!" The sky continued to give the warning in its orange red fleeciness.

Sailors take warning! Heed the zombies.

"Man, I gotta go. Y'all be good now!" Elward crashed through the gate practically, but the dude in the post had Pink Floyd's THE WALL crescendoing through his nether head. All the melancholia and despair of the work ethic; the sadness of this century. Nuclear plants are an abomination, Elward had been told by black minister fellah, Bobby MaGee. He been trying to preach and he used to admit he bought more weed enough to pay for a Cadillac. But he was saved now. Elward was getting married soon.

Gonna pay the notes on that house in WhiteCastle, right on River Road.

No cancer down there, he thought.

## Chapter Eighteen

After the work ethic was laid aside, it was the cool air of the evening wafting through the open door pushing staleness aside also. The air was being attacked and infiltrated throughout by Rimsky Korsakov's "The Golden Cockerel." The melodious eastern thematic sounds chorded around Ricky Harrison. His Bourbon and Seven was cocked sideways as he was wont to do when imbibing; that miracle of not spilling a drop. But the television was miraculously not whirling some sophisticated video but the local news was pervading the torrents of stereophonic discord.

He abruptly turned the stereo off as the grotesquely handsome newsmen plowed along: "The Biochemical research facility at LSU has found a startling new turn to the new specie of fish-reptiles found in the Atchafalaya Swamp and Devil's Swamp.

(a picture of the ghoulish thing drawn and colored in background) They have been known for quite some time to be poisonous." He went on.

"Dr. Plaisance of the faculty of LSU medical school, what is the exact nature of the problem?" "What we are looking at here are nests in various locales. Primarily believed to be an offshoot of the common alligator gar of fresh water variety. But this particular strain is venomous and a cure had not been made readily available at this moment. We have dissected these and they did have traces of radiation in some. Especially the nest underneath the docks at Exxon shipyards near Devil's swamps." "So if one were bitten by one it could be fatal, Doctor?" "Precisely." They went on for a few minutes detailing the anatomical nature, the origin. All pseudo guesswork. Not an inkling, thought Ricky Harrison, of late at Lamplighter apartments with bourbon in hand. Lethal does in innards, and running low on ice. The ravioli cans lay around like vestibule icons. In the land of nowhere, he thought about the buzz of gossip going round. Nationwide news now. Rumors of plagues.

He caught the last tidbit of information.

"We think these and other similar creatures are responsible for disease and spread thereof disease through the Baton Rouge parish (east and west)." My god! Pestilence by the throughhold! Plagues like Camus's own.

Almond trees with disinfecting of the dying city. Venice, New York all rotted to the core. New Orleans, French quarter smelling like defiling of rotted graves. Now the town with refineries built all round, surrounding the people.

Even in the manicured suburbs, the city was toppling like Rome did for centuries of rot.

"Poisonous, disease spreading. Quarantine now mentioned." These are just the preliminaries. The blackness of the night silenced the distant shrieking of goblins and stygian caves forlorn! Here are sights and sounds unholy! Whistling steampipes. Baring of gnashing teeth like Reverend Jenkin's prophecies gone amuck. He would play it to the hilt. Soothsayer of the working class North Baton Rouge scumbags, the yuppie road killers, and the suburban trash.

## Chapter Nineteen

Were the soothsayers right? Was Reverend Jenkins right? That very night, Reverend Johnny Joe Jenkins was at his BibleAcadianaAcademy on newly developed Munson Lane. Next to a nightclub where folks had seen little scion of Reverend Jenkins. Johnny Joe was saving souls in countries where they never heard of no little baby Jesus.

In the covetous wooden structure of beams and girders holding the temple of the pious figure of the working people, Reverend Jenkins came to the audience and the television viewers with a special show. It was timed perfectly with the newest twists in the monstrous dilemma for the folks who lived in a cauldron of plague and pestilence worse than bible times.

The glow of hopeful clodhoppers of ungainly status except that they were members of the fastest cable ministry, was exuding into the stage where the grand piano and flowers and stagy setting was.

Came the words: "Them doctors. They got all that schooling . . . (amen), but they don't know what Jesus and the holy book (and he kissed it and forced them holy water tears) prophesied in the last book of the New Testament. . . In that last book! Revelations!" The spud headed women and men gasped. The television camera focused in on one nubile creature crying in the full close-up shot of the camera. It leered and then oozed down her bodice into the Bible cradled in her luscious lap of the gawds.

Ricky Harrison was in front of the television after a bout with the Playboys and uninterrupted masturbation. The Reverend Jenkins was getting more than him. The rumors of Jenkins's taste for chickies in Texas were bantered around. Louisiana had many dumb asses in its long lineage of hicks and hayseeds getting Uncle Earl's free lunch. Reverend Jenkins made his vast network on the hicks and hayseeds and the oily scumfolks from North Baton Rouge.

Reverend Johnny Joe Jenkins spoke to the multitudes. They were the hayseeds with tithes for the ministry and BibleCollege. Johnny Joe's advance men had done their research about the serpents. With venomous bared teeth, ready to lure Adam to take a bite out of Eve's apple. So he was sweating that bourbon from the night previous when he and the boys in the upper room had highballs. But Gawd, them Catholics drank their asses off.

He had a ministry in the millions. He was reaching all over the world, for Christ's sakes. So the multitudes were ready for that speech for them to pray for Wayne Langlois and Cornbread (real name James Lincoln Buchanan, born 1909 in Iberville Parish). They just knew the special preaching was gonna be about them serpents from the deeps that crawled out on Land. To spite the evolutionists and Charles Darwin. And all those people were gonna get cured from cancer. That was promised to them if they sowed a seed of a thousand dollars to the Jenkins's Ministries, and God'll get them a motor home. Many times, hung over, Jenkins would ramble to the parable of the old widow woman. Well, he had to lay off the sauce and start taking antidepressants.

His wife was practically estranged from him. Making him turn to street whores in Texas. All the way down to the hotels that rented rooms by the hour.

"Some of you folks out there seem to think," he said, with cries yawping from the orifices of holy vessels.

". . . That we got us a cancer problem here in East Baton Rouge Parish." "But Jezus himself is gonna cure those cancer victims rotting away." The crowd got swirling into a whipped frenzy sooner than expected. News of the moment it was.

Now a close-up shot of a woman crying, her harden leathery face with that hand hovering upward, like Jesus was lapping holy water out of her hand. And then an ex-biker who used to pull people's teeth out with a pair of griplock pliers he kept in his back seat of his Harley. When he needed a drink and this is what he could get tequila shots for. Now he was crying up a storm and all that was lifted him up. (choruses of love, lifted me, love lifted me) "We are a gonna whip that cancerrr!" Amen, they cheered. The crowd wavered with releases of anticipation. Unrehearsed charismatic healing through the rock-and-roll religion of Reverend Jenkins.

"And these eel-thing monsters." The people cried OHH LAWRD!

"They are an abomination!" PAUSE. "An Abomination! I say rebuke the satanic serpents." "There was a serpent (pause) once." "and it was in a place called the Garden of Eden." (as Ricky Harrison saw this he thought of Eve riding out of paradise on the back of a tiger). "But why are they showing up here, do ya think?" Some lady with bandages sat next to a man who had so much chemotherapy he was blue. It was righteously gnarly. A surreal quality to it.

He pointed out that blue-faced man. "You whipped the cancer, didn't ya, Mister?" The man raised his hand and a tear welled up in the duct on television on the big screen.

"And you were supposed to die, when?" "Yesterday." "Holy Jesus, Praise the lawrd! Hallelujah! Sweet Jesus," he cried.

He thought of the wellsprings of gushing life it self on that whoredog in Texas. Get my mind off it Christ, dammit! Not Now!

"But about these eels. These snakes. They are a sign of things to come." "Antichrist is awaiting to take over, and our state is the first to come. Now those scientist fellahs, (haw haw) down there say these are from radiation and pollution. We know we got refineries all over here. But some of these fellahs don't think too much about religion and good old time healing and revivals and Jesus coming down and talking in your ear . . . Hallelujah, praise the lawrd! These scientists don't know there is gonna be a plague a coming soon, and we are all gonna go to the judgment day. What with Aids epidemic a coming soon, from the sickest of sexuality, (amen brother!)

to these plagues and the diseases that some scientists fellahs way we are gonna be facing while they try and clean up their chlorine and nuclear radiation." He looked at the blue man with radiation making him look like a bride to be, actually glowing. But more a putrid pallor of death turning slowly like a cadaver sitting in the ice cooler for an eternity.

The Reverend pushed the last thoughts of chickies out of his mind.

He felt genuinely serious about this latest bullshit. He thought, there is gonna be a plague. He talked to God once in a while when he could get a line open. And God told him, though he was a sinner, He knew that there was gonna be a big plague. He had a vision about evacuating the city. Like those plagues in the middle ages brought upon by the rats. He told this to the masses of yokel hayseeds and trash of various varieties, "People will be sprawled about the city in ruins. It will be like the Roman empire. Decadence and radiation and pollution will be the players in this game of death." "And you will be evacuating your houses and living in another state. For this state, known for its cultural significance and good country people, will be unfit for you good people to live in. You will move or die!

Sayeth the Lawrd!" The folks in the audience were stunned as the Reverend said this spitting into the mike like Hitler's famous radio speeches. Leering into the camera with oozing sincerity like running pus. Some lady tried to run up there full blast to offer praise and get comfort. But the Reverend didn't signal for that particular grotesque event to take place. So some hired thugs grabbed the lady and placed their hands on her head like they were giving her the holy spirit all supernatural like and it would do a boogie dance up and down her little fragile spine. "Poor soul, the Reverend winced through partial cowardice at the sudden surprise of the hayseed. "I don't mean to scare y'all so much but God done told us there would be this stuff . . . He prophesied thusly" Then the folks came up to get that Holy Ghost in plain offering and doled out like twinkles in 20-year lifespan in cellophane. It was intangible, that holy supernatural spirit. The shrieks of tongues issued forth from the gashed mouths of wailing and circumstantial terror. It was a death dirge of the people. They fully believed everything he told them. These asses wailing in his face made it all so difficult. It just hurt him so much when his lawyers kept telling him it wasn't his money. It was the ministry's money.

There were certain loopholes. The huckster hayseeds would continue to buy the troweled out sludge of his whopping record enterprise. Holy cloths, prayer blankets, payer requests at 5 bucks a head. He would be going to Bermuda with some fineass whores going down on him. Oh gawd help me, he thought. I am a sinner! If they only knew. That bitch wife o' his blackmailed him and told him so much a week a day. A chunk of money so large per diem and she wouldn't go to the presses. They were estranged you see.

The woman was trying to turn him into a celibate apostle. Like they could be reverent and bask in the good glow of the ministry. Screw that sheeit! Reverend shook the spud heads hard calloused hands that generations ago had been sitting on stumps listening to Huey Long. Or toiled as sharecroppers and canewhippers for the fallow ground. Caught the catfish and ate seafood until they wanted to burst. Ate hog, every last bit of it! The people, dumb suffrin ijuts! All of em fatheads! He would lay his hands on em and take every last screwin dime from these ugly assed people. The more they worshipped in his ministry it seemed the more they worshipped his screwin' self. And that made him sicker with disgust. Time to get my screwin' bodyguards and hole up in the upper room with some lay secretaries. Take their blouses off, unhook that bra, and play AT&T with their titties. Smooth creamy pliant flesh of the devil! Amen to that brother, pass the bottle.

Move 'em on over. Make room for the horniest man after horndog women that he birddogged and scrounged for. And all the time the millions of dollars kept pouring in like piss.

He would harp on this plague shit! Oh yeah, he thought. This screwin state was for gawds sake going tits up and going to hell for sure. But he was gonna reap spud coin off these hog eating shitheads. Take their fuggin Exxon paychecks and sign it over to the Holy Ghost himself. The holy ghost had a savings account in Hibernia Bank so fat you could drown your fuggin self in the floating bond.

Did he feel any remorse? Screw, I give em what they want. Suckers!

The whole lot of 'em. He busted his ass as a preacher in a little church in Texas long enough; he deserved all this money. But the screwin lawyers say it's taxable now. That he could only use the money off his stupid screwin records and tapes. That huge whopping sum of moola was the people's.

Feed a couple of pygmies in Africa. Say some Spanish prayers to the screwin peons with some acne-scarred peasant translating the usual bullshit speech, standard. And he would look good enough for those screwin people trying to investigate him. As long as his Cadillac windows were tinted. And the screwin whoredogs in Texas didn't go to the screwin cops about him getting off with those scabby bitches. He would be praying his ass all the way to hell, just like this screwing state! Hallelujah and pass the bottle!

Ricky Harrison despised the dribbling shit that oozed out of this suppurating hind end of a carcass that the Reverend Jenkins was. In the phosphor glow of 19051 Lobdell Avenue, in the cavernous little hovel, lay a man thwarted by the invectives of rhetoric and pixie stick welded structures all rusting since 1937. That issued intervals of toxic liquid ooze. That seeped into the skin shankers that wouldn't go away. Suppurating lesions of melanoma.

Gamma rays like they were living in a moonscape, the very atmosphere undulating with ichorous vapors of veritable insidious atavism. Ricky Harrison was maturing from those rages of blinding fury. He had made a sort of pact with the somnambulist martyr, who was now going on interviews that materialized from his good grades.

So he overcame that innermost fury of technicolored soul. There were other conundrums of sorts. His madre's death, buried in the fallow soil nest to the Broadmoor Shopping Center which now had triple coupons!

The divine juxtaposition of shopping malls next to bone orchards and corridors of streets congested in the rapidly growing city. The quadrants of land festooned with yuppie growth children of American unoriginality. All that money floating around by yuppies like his older sister in her turbo Volvo 740 station wagon, couldn't stop them from eventually succumbing (the mere thought of it) to the ever present but unseeing festering sores of dripping pipes and drainage and radiation. From murdering their spoiled rotten offspring. All the ninja turtles and Metal Herculoids and Transformers couldn't make up for children with sicknesses unknown. Cloying corpses in their Big Wheel tricycles, to breathe no more.

## Chapter Twenty

At a yuppie nightclub were thirtyish accountants, alumni and lawyers, some rich. CPA's, doctors, engineers and on down the leveled line. All sat around like the cloned lost generation, none too brilliant but fitting in evenly to make those righteous yuppie bucks. All holding Manhattans, Whiskey sodas, wise power drinks. Scotch and sodas for men who were once fraternity boys seducing the femalia at frat parties, mixers, exchanges. To most of those, memories did not remain conscious in their progressive seriousness about women and greed. And all the other deadly sins inherited as one generation passeth into Lazyboy recliners and another generation cometh. To drink in the flowing of colored liqueurs that they couldn't even name. They didn't even know they were alive. But that was the beauty of it all. If one thought too much, one was misdirected, unfocused. The trick to the fawning of precious lust and management of money was to be unaware of oneself.

But well built below the neckline and stouthearted like the split ends had to be in high school games now forgotten.

Some of these suited and suspended lawyers and consultants and types, spinning webs, were blissfully ignorant and uncaringly cruel. Over there in the corner was the ex-quarterback from Catholic High. The man's paunch stuck out as he related fond memories now extinct almost, to a silk stocking Karrie



Capshaw. Prowling about the town, so sexy and cherubic again. And turned into the full womanhood that was her destiny. The men swooned with the girls laden around. The frat rats, Atkinson and Tomer were there; less successful businessmen who still hung around each other.

Atkinson was married now. To somebody that he must have found to his liking over the multitudes of lofty whores he plugged eons ago. It could be said that Atkinson porked a goodly percentage of coeds who were now yuppie mothers on the upward spiral.

"You remember that guy Harrison? Ricky Harrison? He never really got initiated into the frat, right?" Tomer asked. He was not circling the airport anymore, but had cocaine running round his brain.

"Harrison? That faggot?" "Well, he WAS your little brother!" Atkinson was eyeing the three hot babes in their business outfits. Succulent flesh beneath the outer garb.

"That guy was a loser!" "Man! That's Karrie Capshaw over there!?" Atkinson wondered how HEROES happy hour could hoard together so many people whose lives intertwined at one point in time. In the time slips of radiating geography.

"God Damn! She's still fine!" "Yeah. She married that guy from Bossier City. That wimp whose father owns a whole shitload of oil fields." "She married well!" "I still remember what it was like screwing her. It was after the Vandy game and she was with Don, the hairy ape." Tomer's eyes were glazed yet perked up viscerally. "The white ape.

The guy with more hair than a flying wombat!" Laughter pealed out manically. The \$3.00 longnecks were taking their toll on the fraternity trio. All sported the paunch.

"A what?" Atkinson said. He eyed Karrie Capshaw as two comely accountants eyed him. His wedding band was carefully tucked away in his shirt pocket.

"I don't know how many people screwed Karrie." They mused on that for a while. Karrie's decadent silk stockings were evocative of Edmund Wilson's diaries of making it with chorus girls and flappers fifty years before.

Karrie was flitting amongst the rich at play. The spoilt Richie Riches who had all got a good foot up from Daddy, or daddy's firm, or Uncle Fester's business. "Do you think she can hear us?" No, the question's, Radio, do you think she recognizes us?" Tomer said.

"The old days. It's much nicer now. We all have money and charge cards, and respectable jobs. We never had any money." Almost a reverie of old times. Hell, the new generation of youngster had found their vices of choice: Ecstasy, Pot, LSD acid. They would find God one way or another.

In Heroes at the onslaught of the night looming about them, the music brought pleasure. The girls unflinchingly were on stage, taunting.

Atkinson had really turned into a garden variety alcoholic. Don Juan had given way to no pollen spreading. His wife hated his drinking. He didn't talk much about when he had left many a Yankee coed pregnant in Ft.

Lauderdale or Pensacola.

Their love was still God and sixers, and a hatred for Ole Miss and 3.2 beer.

"Karrie Capshaw. She's so fine I would suck her daddy's," Radio murmured.

"She's looking right at us." Radio eyed the hind end of a woman with button-down shoes and a button-down personality. Blessed be a woman's backbone. "Those legs, that body . . ." Karrie Capshaw waved somewhere in their direction.

"Oh shit. She waved. She remembers you, Atkinson." "So what the hell made you think of Harrison?" Radio mused. "Didn't even he screw her?" "No." "Yes he did. I remember that crazy story about when he puked.

Don't ask me how I remember it, . . ." Tomer rejoined, "Because he was one of the first people who heard talk about those monster snakes." "I don't remember. All I remember either he puked." "but you nailed her after the Vandy game, right?" "I sure did," Atkinson said. "At least I have all those memories of snaking and doggin." "Hail fraternity!" "Amen." Then Karrie came by, getting another free drink.

"Hey, Karrie," Tomer said.

"Hey," she said. Those pearls of beautiful teeth shined as she reached around for some beer nuts.

"Scotch and soda. Two." "I remember you." she said, pointing at Atkinson.

"Don't you remember me?" Tomer asked.

"No." "Well . . ." "You all were in Delta Epsilon, right? Around 1977-1979?" "Right" they all chimed.

"Whatever happened to Ricky Harrison?" "Oh, we don't know. He quit the frat a long time ago. I used to see him on campus. He must have finally graduated." "Ummm." "I'm surprised you even remember him. Never even got initiated.

He was kind of a strange guy." "I thought, well. Was he? I didn't think so. He was cute." "I saw him at Cortana Mall. He's gained a lot of weight." "Oh." The bartender handed her the two drinks and she stuck straws in them.

"Well, nice seeing you," she said.

"See ya Karrie." She walked away. That womanhood dangled inside that dress. Those legs just so. Wow Cazart!

"Who gives a screw where Harrison is. The guy was a loser," radio added. He bellied his fat ass up to the bar in his cheap ass suit.

"He would have been my frat brother." "Screw im," Tomer resounded.

"Screwim," they added.

They drank a few more brewskies, but it would never be the same like those days of golden wonderment. They left and the bar hopped and hopped onward into that goodly dark night.

And Ricky Harrison became forgotten even more so to those that one knew him when he was only in decline a little bit, not now.

It was a microcosmic world. In a petri dish, the culture was rampant.

Not long after, Atkinson left to go home to his wife. Tomer went to go score some more coke. And Radio went to gawd-knows-where, probably to Tigerland bars to infiltrate his old stomping grounds, as he was wont to do.

Kendra showed up with Chuck. The waitresses were terribly pissed off by then. The suitors of the onslaught of middling years were already gone. The stranger crowd came in. Those crazy younger kids who got carded at the door.

Kendra once again became the focal point. The place was buzzing with excitement regarding that blonde Teutonic myth. She was decked out in a clubby dress. All pretty pouty and like an Italian film starlet in "La Dolca Vita." Unfortunately Chuckles the doctor was no Dirk Bogarde or Mastroianni. He was yuppie scum not yet turned into watercressed gunk.

Two cocktails for the couple of the night. Men starting standing around trying not to look interested by her. She was smiling at the ex pro-football black men, got a light from some fraternity boys with those Jerry Mathers fraternity caps on. And Chuckster was still unavoidably ignorant of the petulant looks being given and taken therein.

Kendra, ignoring Chuckles the fantastic doctoring wonder, went home with a handsome boy-toy of the best type. Moused hair, filthy rich and spoilt, and recently divorced.

"I will take you anywhere you want to go tonight. Rome, Paris, New Orleans, Caribbean, Venice, London . . ." "I'm just using you to get rid of Chuckles the doctor." The suave man with the expensive 1000 Italian sports coat, gabardine pants. Munching on mixed peppered nachoes, he pointed at Chuckles.

He was fuming in the corner, on the answering machine, taking a medi- cal call from his beeper.

"That guy there? Yes," she said.

"He is your boyfriend?" ". . . Was." "Lets go to a place I know . . ." "What's that?" "How about the ritziest hotel in New Orleans?" "Landmark?" "No, silly, the Royal Orleans." "Let's go. My Beamer is right outside." She didn't even finish her drink.

She was maintaining that levelheaded rational thought. Deep down she knew this would be the best thing. Was she regressing into that silly coed from the undergrad days? One thing she knew; she would call Juan to get her things from out of Chuckles the golfing doctor's swanky townhouse.

Chuckles started following them to the door. The suave gigolo, an investment banker, saw and picked up speed. he could handle this guy.

They drove to the CrescentCity past the Munson exit where the Jenkins church was silent; all Bible students tucked away in scripture.

Some punkrock skinheads had spray painted "JESUS SAVES" on the railroad trestle right next to the mall. And each "S" had a dollar sign like JESU\$ \$AVES\$. Kendra rode in the misty humidity down I-10 towards the spillway, thinking of triptych headed venomous eelmonsters spreading a plague.

Who knew it was just the beginning of the end? But for now she lay her head back and watched the moon follow her in the car window as they headed South to an ancient romantic city. The Louister (that's what she called him), had opened up some Asti Spumonti. She trembled as he poured with one hand and steered with another. She hurt. She was confused, not only about Chuckles the bonesetter who specialized in gunshot wounds, but the whole of the river parishes. She and Louisie sped along in the wake of the mist towards the highrise. The superdome was in sight and the city sparkled like Xanadu. She would forget tensors and muscular distortion and respiratory irregularities and atrophied mutancies. For she had severed surgically her latest unsuccessful relationship. She sipped the Spumonti and the pristine rush from her perfume mixed with Louis' Obsession. Looking at the sparkling waters of

the swamp as the exits went whooshing by, she lay her precious head down and felt relief of the aching. The city opened up as they entered it; this was one kiln of strains of culminating beauty: Ionic, stucco, Spanish wrought iron. The last thing she saw as the Porsche parked in front of the Hotel was the wet cement. She trudged doggedly up the steps to the penthouse elevator. Goodnight.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The next day Ricky Harrison made it to work. He was ready and fit, revived from the seven shots of thickly bourbon the night before. He wasn't rank smelling, nor sickly sweet with alcoholic blurriness. He felt a certain satisfaction, like the calm before the Hurricane. The first to greet him was Bobby Magee, who told him something he had dreamt the night before, after watching Reverend Jenkins's show.

"Ricky, there will be a mighty plague across the land." He gestured wildly with his hands, his eyes banJoed wide. "There will be 7 forms of pestilence, and people dying of diseases. The good Lawd done said it, He meant it." "Do you watch that ministry show?" Ricky asked. As he sipped his coffee.

"Yes, I watched it and a great sorrow came over me. These monstas all over the place. They are instruments of Satan! And . . ." "Wait, you don't have to convince me." Ricky smiled. A resolution of something had occurred inside him. A lifting of the burthen of the ichorous eels. For it was off his humped back, and on the backs of every swinging dong frat rat and leathernecked pipefitter in the tri state arena.

"He done hovered over me and my wife's bed," Bobby MaGee said magically. Exaggerated in the upward liling of his undulating belly of supernatural Holy Ghost in his recently transubstantiation of the blood of good Christ Jesus.

"Well, I tell you. I have seen not that, but I have gotten up to see visions of those snake things sitting at the foot of my bed." Bobby's eyes opened wider, if that were possible. There in the dank warehouse with the FM radio playing Boy George, over and over. The cadences reiterative unending. The screaming, maniacal jostling and haw hawing from down the aisle. Pokey and the men were carousing and talking conventional concepts of everyday life, somehow fascinating.

"You done seen those snakes. Eels?" Bobby Magee shuddered and flitted his eyes, which were saturated with pink. Gorged, enlarged maps of tiny blood vessels, making his eyes appear runny; that was the Holy Ghost inside of him. Pot did the same thing, but Bobby bought more pot before he found the Lawd Jezus that he coulda bought a Cadillac.

"Well, yeah." "That's a sign of supernatural heavenly hosts. The principalities are telling us from heaven that we are gonna go into some scary stuff. Make the rapture seem like a picnic. Judgment day almost on Earth." "But don't you think that Reverend Jenkins isn't smart? Don't you think he's a faker?" "He a white man." Bobby laughed.

"Rich white man." They both laughed.

"But see, the Holy Ghost is workin through him, even if he is all rich and crooked. He don't even know it. See, he is just an instrument of the Holy Ghost. it works through you too. Me. Even Joe Thomas!" "Well, I probably believe that." Joe Thomas walked up.

"Y'all havin a revival?" "No, man, you crazy!" "Jesus done told me to buy these tennis pumps." He looked at white bread Harrison.

"Jethro here said Jesus done run through his joggin' shoes." Ricky laughed sincerely. These guys were the gold. Here in the underbelly of the laden reptiles, in the blood and guts of insolvent working stiffs. A soulful underbelly of oceanic tattered tears welling in this duct of plastibond array of hope.

"Naw, I put super glue in Jesus tennis shoes," Ricky said, almost blurted, and it came off.

It got Bobby Magee laughing. He realized he was laughing about God and stopped. "Now you oughta be ashamed o' yourself," Bobby said.

"Saying things like that, blaspheming," he said smiling. Joe Thomas laughed.

His eyelids were closed he laughed deep down there where men laughed together, striking that chord in a sea of trouble.

"Blaspheming. Talkin' 'bout Jesus like that." Bobby MaGee said.

"What you got to say for yourself, Ricky Harrison?" he said charmingly.

Even through his good nature, the extending of it to all radiating points, he was not aware that he had that charm.

Joe Thomas looked at him.

He said, "Yep, Jethro, someday I'm gonna have a long talk with dat boy!" Then a smirk and the lips thinned and he lisped intentionally at the end, like it was the thing to do. The dozens mildly tested in the waters of the suburban blight. Bobby Magee, with the Holy Ghost in him whether it was real or not or whether it was around the corner and hadn't caught up with him yet. Ricky Harrison started to blush.

"You know what I want to do?" "What's that, little man?" "Uhh, you'd think it was crazy. See . . ." "What do you want to do?" "I want to quote Lord Byron to the warehouse employees one day." They grinned, not quite understanding. And then somehow they accepted the slanting possibility.

"So what you are saying, Harrison, is that you want to quote some Poetry to the house nigras." "A what? House nigro?" Bobby MaGee laughed. "Y'all crazy, every single one a y'all." He was a simple man with a bevy of little kids all being taught about Jezus, and one on the way. He needed a raise. The lawrd would change that figure on the salary books, the hourly rate. "I just don't understand . . ." "He wants to quote Lord Byron to us." "Why?" "Cause you are my friends, and I have a literary bent." "You are my friends, and you are literary?" Bobby Magee.

"Lets get back to work." Outside the shack, Elward hauled the diesel flatbed through the manifold, the shit shack for the boys where they needed Melville or Byron to be told to them. All around the cosmic kiln, the day was growing weary and gray. Mottled were the concrete slabs and terminal was the horizon.

Haze and gunmetal and flakes of dusty carbon were in the air. Tobacco ignited and aromas of that filled the sky.

The funniest worker of them all, Wilbert, (without his teeth, they were in his back pocket), came out and shook Rick's Hand.

"Ricky." "Ricky." "Yeah." "Are you," Wilbert laughed. A long bellyful of soul that was all the way down deep.

"What," said Ricky and laughed.

"Are you my friend?" And Wilbert giggled and laughed and Ricky laughed. It must have been time to go soon, for Christ sakes.

Elward came hopping outta that truck he was so freaked out. Even Royhound dropped his cigarette (which he often told Ricky that regular tobacco smelt like weed, man) on the ground. It smoldered like Garbo had been smoking it or something, Harrison thought. All the men now looked at Elward and his crazy mustache like a catfish. His eyes flitted around.

"Sheet, sheet, maaa-aan, maa-aan." Pokey came up around the table desk from where he was normally perched, sucking a bellyful of Marlboro into his small frame.

He spoke. "What's matter, Elward? Route gettin' to ya?" "That ain't even CLOSE! ... Maa-an." He shook his head now to and fro.

"What, you almost got in a wreck?" "Naw, mann! I can't even tell ya." "What the God Damn is it?" Christ, thought Pokey, his black hair and glasses melding to his face.

"I was talkin wid that guy, the surfer guy. Bill, down at da what cha call it . . . Nuclear Plant . . ." "Yeah?" "He said something bout some dead people. Or half dead people.

People that live out in DevilsSwamp." "Nobody lives out in Devil's swamp, you know that!" Royhound lit another Marlboro and plucked it into his strong black handsome face. He was shaking his head now.

"And he said there's dis whole village of people living, like a commune out dere. In the trash and landfill, in the swamp." "Bullshit!" Pokey said. "I been living here for all my life and anybody who used to live out there moved. 'Cause 'a all the refineries." "Bill, the California dude, said he heard from some dude that these people are strange." Strange, the way he said it. What emphasis to the back aisle of comtech electronic bullshit sitting in dusty cardboard boxes. Awaiting installment of gunmetal air in the infernal machinery of Cocteau nightmare.

"I'm telling you. You heard bout the plague." "There ain't no screwin plague." "Pokey, I heard everyone from that Reverend Jenkins asshole to a news TV man tell about Cancer and those monster snakes. Disease, makes AIDS look like screwin' German Measles." Screw!, he thought.

"Put me on a nuther route, Pokey!" "Screw no, Elward. You ain't afraid. You're a big boy now... " Pokey said humorously.

Joe Thomas started dancing like Michael Jackson in "Billie Jean." "Shit man, you a crazy fool!" "Come on. My Padnah Ricky here'll do it. Come on Ricky . . .

Get in the groove." "I ain't screwin' Huey Lewis. I listen to Requiems." "What da screw is dat?" Royhound quizzed.

"Sacred masses for the dead. Mozart, Verdi, Faure, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff." "Dis here lurch Jethro, Lurch. He crazier than all a you." "No this motherscrew is smart. He knows the real music," Pokey said. Masses for the dead. Sheit.

"Well, I tell you what. From what I think is gonna happen, there's gonna be a big screwin' requiem mass. For all the stupid motherscrewers who don't move outta dis screwin hell hole!" "Amen to dat," Bobby Magee said.

Joe Thomas raised his hand like a good Christian soldier. "Can I get with ya brudder?" Like a revival tent it was. Healings, stricken folks, pestilences, the book of revelations. Freak show. Mutants. Eels being chased out by patron saints. Fawk!

"I listen to Berlioz's "L'Enfant du Christe," Brahms Requiem, The Vespers, The Bells, Bach' Mass in D minor . . ." "What da screw is Jethro Harrison ranting bout now?" Even Elward wanted to almost laugh, though he was still rattled.

"Requiems." "You a morbid son bitch. Screw a Brahms Bach!" Elward envisioned it. A small village of zombies. Zombies! Like he was screwin Mantan Moreland in dat horror movie talkin about Zombies.

Bamboozling zombies. Madderscrewler!

## Chapter Twenty-Two

A village of dregs, glowing creatures half conscious. No mortality left, damned lost souls in a limbo of nether shadow. A rattling of that same solemn bell sounded a dirge. The death dirge. The marching of people down the arteried streets. Seeking refuge from monstrous plagued rats slithering around the putting greens of Sherwood Forest Country Club. Coming out of the drainpipes where he used to play as a teenager, going subterranean from one gutter to another blocks away.

That night at his hovel, the projects looked quiet and actually safe right under him. Next door through the wooden fence, looking out from the window, the lone window where no light penetrated anyway. The utter bleakness, the great nothingness, indefinable great sleeping blackness like nothing worse. What about this village of the damned? Cajuns living on hard times? The way Elward described the scene that he hadn't seen himself, but in his Cajun Creole head, that White Castle Plantation logic cogitating and ruminating like a Mint Julep in his noggin.

Harrison managed to finally go to sleep that night, listening to Faure's requiem and Pavane. He wished this would be played at his own funeral, where he would soon be buried next to his madre. Behind the Broadmoor shopping center, where there were triple coupons in the offering.

Now after seven shots and a cranky wanky for Karrie Capshaw and a oneeyed wink of the trouser snake to the ole fraternity boys, he lay down on his dirty sheets and flicked the roaches away from his nest. Almost as if drinking bromide solutions, he saw hallucinations of eel-thingamajigs whistling in the hour of the damned. Ramses the Egyptian god told him to take a swig of cold water out of an old two-liter bottle. He swigged the water to purge and screw up his electrolytes until he was revived, a new man.

The next day at work, nigh on lunchtime past the long gone roach coach, Joe Thomas challenged Ricky Harrison, college genius, to a game of chess. It was over near Joe's office, where Joe Thomas proceeded to whip the shit outta Harrison, otherwise known as Boris Spassky, rather Jethro or Lurch from the Addams Family.

"Man, you're killing me man!" "Just keep playing, Jethro." "Man, you got my queen!" Mr. Gregson walked in. The company rat. The mustached con artist passing as dead wood in the not-so-burgeoning company. He happened to pass through when he saw Joe Thomas.

"Hey, a chess match!" "Yep," Harrison said.

"Who's winning?" "Me . . ." Joe added.

"The Black Spock," Harrison quipped.

Remembrances of the three dimensional chess game from the old series came into mind. Joe Thomas laughed, particularly in front of Mr. Gregson. Harrison tripped him out.

"Oh, good move." Harrison quipped. Joe was serious when he made his moves.

"I got you checked now . . ." Now Harrison calculated this quip would send Thomas howling.

He said, "Negro, Please!" Joe Thomas screamed with laughter. Gregson just kept on going, talking about what move Harrison could make.

Thomas checkmated Harrison.

Lunch was over. Everybody walked over to Pokey Tuminello's uglyassed desk, Pokey behind it. Holding his chest. "Heartburn . . . God Damn Burger King." Joe Thomas went up to Royhound and Bobby Magee. "You shoulda heard Harrison . . . We was just playing chess and he called me (his handsome face beamed . . . the Black Spock . . ." "You crazy, Harrison." "Then," then he said, "Negro please!" Royhound kinda looked at Harrison funny.

Elward drove in as usual. It was another day, another punch card.

"We gonna have a barbecue over at my house down at WhiteCastle, on River Road." "Alright! Gonna have some Ribs now, yeah." Royhound went into his weird African break dancing.

"Man, Royhound looks like he's got a muscular disorder." Thomas and Elward laughed.

"A muscle disorder. That boy's crazy." Harrison was becoming the charming discreet bourgeoisie of the warehouse set.

"You invited too, Ricky. Can you make it?" Mark Green said.

"Man y'all gotta bring ya own meat! Goddammit." Joe Thomas's college buddy who even once shared the same women and underwear. Mark Green's Creole disposition never hurt him any.

He was sweating up a storm. He used to bum ten bucks worth of gas off Harrison until payday. Harrison just put it on his father's Exxon card.

"You gonna be able to make it?" "Uh, this weekend?" "Yeah," Elward added, the gamma rays still coming off him from River Bend nuclear plant. "You ain't gonna crap out on us. Even Royhound is comin' ...bring a woman." "I ain't got a woman." Harrison said.



"Joe Thomas and Mark Green'll drive you. Saturday. Be there." "Yeah. I guess so." "Come ooon Maaaann!" Elward said.

"We gonna have Ribs, Fingers (pork fingers), Pork Chops." "Yeah." "Hotdog snacks, gospel bird, (chicken), steak!" "Joe, y'all can give me a ride Saturday?" "Yeah, lil padnah." Joe took off on the forklift. They had to get the hell outta there; Friday evening. Mark Green went on busting ass knowing he was going to get Five Alive and Thunderbird all mixed up.

"Alright, Big Harrison." Mark Green said. It was payday. Big Eagle flew for the boys not quite prepared for Harrison's Lord Byron. The monstrous plague could wait.

Harrison handed Mark Green ten bucks, as Mark Green passed him a twenty. Harrison made change for him.

Joe Thomas had a habit of keeping his gas tank low.

"Goddammit, Joe, put some screwin' gas in da tank. I ain't pushing the car no more." "All right, lil padnuh," Joe said, as he smiled and loaded some more wooden pallets. The forklift screeched its tires belching like carrion out of hell in the Dies Irae of the waning afternoon.

"We'll see you tomorrow. We be coming round about 9 o'clock.

You betta be dere." Mark Green added. Waving as Harrison loped to the Toyota that sounded like a log truck coming up the road because the muffler was about to fall off. Off to his apartment and more boredom of time spans, and pain endured. Specifically remembrances of his dead madre, his sisters of yuppiedom, and his brother, who now had secured a job out of state. Ricky Harrison the failure.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

He awoke like Lazarus dreaming of disinfected Bourbon Street. Displacing himself in trances bromide-induced, Bourbon forget-me-nots, until his sinuses came slamming down on him. Today was the day he would attend the barbecue of the noble men of color.

The brothers were on their way, he thought. He cleansed himself, excising an emulsion of liquor and dirt and semen. He felt the nuzzled beams of water shove into his mouth ridding him oral fixations. Lately of drinking as much liquor as possible in a wayward tendency. He knew there would be plenty of grog at the barbecue. Quoting Lord Byron to the infidels, the wogs. What a racist. These men he knew were probably better men than he was. They were on their way.

Knock, knock upon his chamber door. Evermore. He rejoiced in that funk of alcohol, expunged remnants. He rejoiced that he could just have that Saturday and drink and most probably get high with the brothers.

Though wog-hemp didn't make him anything but paranoid.

"Open dis door, boy!" Mark Green yelled. It was Mark Green, Joe Thomas's eternal booger boy, his righteous college roommate, who had in hand Five Alive Juice and a bottle of Thunderbird.

"What's going on man?" he said, turning on the TV. "Da Herculoids is on. I like Tanna and Sheera, and the Herculoids better dan Space Ghost." "Where the hell is Joe Thomas and Royhound?" "Royhound going wid his lady. He'll meet us there." That Creole gentleness; the man was a saint as a brother. Nice fellah. Ricky would say that Mark Green, drinking Five Alive and Thunderbird, watching the Herculoids, was a nice fellah.

"Man, look at all dese tapes!" Ricky laughed. He put a shirt on over his Sonny Tuft's chest of the damned. Male sensation.

"Man, Mike, I'm hung over like a bear!" "Take a sip man." Mike sat up in the easy chair and gave Ricky that bottle. It beckoned him to tap into its greenish fruity backwash. He took a swig that Thor, God of Thunder, would have choked back.

"See if dat don't make you feel good in about one minute." "Hair o de dog." There was this whole world out there, beyond manicured suburbs.

Here were men of color. They didn't need Lord Byron scolded to them.

They carved it all out for themselves.

Mark Green stretched and sprawled out in the easy chair waiting for Joe Thomas. Watching the Herculoids, with dinosaurs and a gob of protoplasm called Bleep that went "HHHHHHHHMMMMMM," Hanna Barbera didn't know that huge Creole behemoths liked their cartoons. A serenity, an unashamed belief in the justice of cartoon. That the good prevailed, good over evil. And the brothers were essentially good. It wasn't like Mrs. Harrison had told him when he had started to make friends at construction sites . . . criminals, deviants, thugs. No sir! These were gentlemen that liked Thunderbird and the Herculoids.

"I like that blob, Bleep. He's able to turn into shapes of stuff like pillows or nets, or rope or anything. And he's always riding on the shoulder of the ape. Tanna was in trouble. And Bleep saved the day." The television showed brilliance, radiant animation of Hanna Barberra.

"Yeah, I like Bleep too," Ricky added. It was a good day.

"That Joe Thomas better get his black ass over here. Dey gonna start that screwin' barbecue widout us." Ricky was feeling the goodness of fermented wine, fortified and now edified. He was slowly becoming Norman Mailer's "White Negro." A man who could learn from these men of color, these unsavages.

These men who had more soul. Men who took him in as one of them and invited him over to the barbecue way down the river road, past the chemistry set of Dow Chemical. How dare Ricky Harrison call it a savage barbecue?

He would learn more, too.

"Open the door!" It sounded like Joseph Thomas, who shined as a hoopster at MacNeese.

"Ya keep on knocking but ya can't come in!" Mark Green sang as he stammered strongly away from the intrigue of "Herculoids" and opened the door.

Ricky Harrison showed his videotapes to both of them.

"Man. Everything is dirty, 'cept for dem videotapes." Fellini's "Amacord" showed for a second upon the Arts and Entertainment channel as Harrison changed stations.

"Come on lil padner. We gotta go." Wallet, yes. Checkbook, yes.

Cash, yes. No comb, no "White Negro," philistine in whiteface.

"I wanted to see the rest a' the cartoons man!" Mark Green said with apparent anguish. "Da Herculooids were in trouble again." "Screw da Herculooids. Come on Jethro. We goin'." "But Tanna and Sheera were trapped by the fly people of Mars," Harrison joked. Mark Green laughed.

"Someday we gotta sit down and have a long talk with dat boy!" Green quipped.

"Come on Lurch," Thomas said, and the foetid odors were stifled from fresh air again.

They hopped in Joe Thomas's old Riviera. His hardtop was peeling away, showing smatterings of rust.

"Shotgun," Mark Green called out.

"Jethro, get in back." "White man in back." Going out with some handsome men of color; this was the immediacy of the hangover cure that frosted Ricky's plight and turned it inside out. That hair of the dog from the Thunderbird was making him feel that rush come alive again. He swigged the last of the Thunderbird. They hauled onto Lobdell towards North Baton Rouge.

"We gotta get some stuff to cook?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, lil man." "Who you calling little man. I'll beat your ass!" "I got some gasssss..." Joe Thomas lisped with that smile that everyone loved.

"You all right," Mike said, and then laughed like they did in Iberville Parish. They winded up and down streets of ugliness. No one imbibed liquor. No mention of pot, just a couple of gentlemen running the streets.

Heading for Plank Road towards the Winn Dixie.

They invaded that Winn Dixie and made way for the sweetmeats section.

"What are we gonna get?" "Lil Padnah, we gonna get some hamburger meat, some pork chops, and some sausage." "Yeah. Gotta get sausage." "And some finger food." "What's 'sat?" "Why you call em that?" Harrison said with fermenting stomach of cheap fortified wine.

"You jes' pick em up off the griddle and eat 'em. Jethro." Mark Green was manhandling several six packs of beer.

The cute little babe rang it up for the men of all colors.

The Riviera with that curved windshield was full of the boys and beers that were just starting to pop open. They hauled down Airline Highway, all the way to the OldMississippiBridge. The one Huey Long built so that Exxon would have to be built in Baton Rouge. And fueling across were a few boys whose destination was somewhere on the other side of the river, where more refineries were. But not today, as far as Harrison was concerned.

They were all shut down.

That's when Mark Green busted out the wog hemp. For the wogs, all three of them.

"No man. Y'all aren't gonna smoke that now?" "Yeah lil padnah. What's a matter, you don't smoke weed?" Such an insidious ring to it. Joe Thomas and Mark Green started pulling on the joint. The sickly smell wafted through, and Ricky Harrison suddenly began to enjoy himself. He realized that those frat boys to whom the manor bourn were given every choice in life. Every chance over Joe Thomas and Mark Green, who played college basketball and then were sent to a hero's funeral.

Downtrodden, working in a tin warehouse for five or six bucks an hour.

College heroes. The other night Joe Thomas told Harrison about the basketball game which might have been on Television. One side was all recent ex-LSU players, the other MacNeese and Southern players. It was going on at the rundown city park gym, played for a measly few handful of folk.

Ricky Harrison decided to go ahead and take a few puffs. A surcease from the anguish. As they barreled down River Road, after going through Plaquemine, Ricky Harrison had finished two beers already. Mark Green noticed Ricky Harrison was laughing. He had gone hog wild.

"Whheeeeew!" Harrison felt it good. Green and Thomas casually sipped their beers and continued to have great width and breadth of souls.

But then it seemed they were going down River Road forever. What was this? The River Road winded next to the levee green. The river high with recent rains; it wasn't exactly the Nile, was it? Even though Allan Quartermain and his two King Solomon's tribesmen were heading down to Catfish-faced Elward's new brick house somewhere the hell down this road.

They went past some plantation sights.

"Hey. Historical plantation marker . . ." "WhiteCastlePlantation." Green and Joe Thomas weren't thinking about anything in particular.

The car was silent. There was no air conditioning and it was hot and it was the South and it was good. But, Ricky was paranoid now from the Mexican devil weed. Cheap Negro stash. He looked over at the two men, all three riding up front.

It seemed like they were going down this screwing River Road all the way to the mouth of the Mississippi! In Harrison's mind, was something up? Were they going to kill him? They were going to kill him. Take him down there, stab him or shoot him. Throw him in the undulating river, and . . . well what was he worth?

"Can I ask you two guys one thing?" Harrison asked.

He didn't know if he was serious or not. It was kind of surreal with that beer and wog hemp.

"Are y'all gonna kill me?" "What?" "What is taking so long? It's been a hell of a long time. We passed Elward's house." The two booger boys roared with their souls peeled all the way back. Happy, and stoned, their Chinese bandit eyes were full of mirth. Joe Thomas caught on.

"Yeah, lil padnah. We gonna cut you up and throw ya body in the levee, just a few miles down." "Yeah. We passed Elward's house a long ways back." Harrison's decline in general was so bad, his mind so twisted, that he couldn't tell if they were joking or not.

"We gonna shoot ya ass and throw it in a river. We gonna take ya money!" Green said and laughed that Creole bellyful. That was the essence of pure happiness.

They continued down the River Road, Harrison's brain trying to heal like Reverend Jenkins himself could lay on his hands and be an instrument of Christ and heal the poor Jethro's brain. Finally, Elward's house came up. A nice, white brick new house, just across the River Road where time stood still since the Mesozoic era, from Mark Twain's river.

They parked. Joe Thomas and his buddy were past the joke of paranoia. They were hungry. Royhound was there with his woman, and a child, small and cute. Elward was out in the back barbecuing. His newlywed wife clearly wore the pants in the family.

The barbecue was suddenly the most important thing in the known universe. Beer was drank by all the brothers and sisters and the token, Ricky Harrison. What reverse situations! How fantastic! Ricky Harrison talked with Royhound. Bobby Magee was not present; he had a church function.

Elward was talkin shop as usual.

"Y'all smoked it up?" he asked first though.

"Uhuh." "Oh Maaaaaann," he emphasized. Those ribs looked awfully good.

Elward checked out the goods. The meats included petertonger hotdogs.

The steak was Elward's. Royhound had brought some pork chops. The gospel bird was perched on there sizzling away, the fat spitting into the brimstone.

Ricky Harrison was stoned in front of the brothers. What would the Brothers of the Sacred Heart think?

"You got ya boy stoned," Elward said wittily. Royhound burst out laughing and started that muscular disorder two-step again, the cakewalk from disco hell. "Yeah maan, ohhhhh maaan," like a spiritual chant in a cane field. Ray hound did Isadora Duncan proud, like he was the Nicholas Brothers or Sammy, Jr. Ricky Harrison was kind of blushing. Then the subject finally turned to the inevitable.

"I'm telling you something's going down." "What you mean?" Thomas asked. Looking down the hot asphalt to the levee and the pecan trees in the grove across the street. Looking for a hoop. Basketball was in his mind always.

"River Bend." Elward said. A great worry crossed his brow and he sucked in his lower lip. His reddish hair shined in the still air. As Mark Green fondly said before, "It's hotter than Wolf Pussy." "What about it?" Joe thought. "Cancer?" "Not only that. The village." "You talkin 'bout the zombies?" "Yeeaaahhh." A quiescent pondering of the mysterious Devil's Swamp. The landfill between the Exxon Refinery and Southern University.

"Devil's Swamp zombies, all glowin'?" Mark Green asked, laughing.

"I wouldn't be laughing, lil padnah," Elward said, mimicking Joe Thomas as he gestured.

"Dey say there's lots a people out there, living there. It's a hellhole.

Half dead people going 'round, breakin' into people's houses, into businesses.

"Breaking in? Where at?" Joe Thomas asked seriously.

"Where you live!" Elward said, his eyes banjoing out. He was talking about the black suburbs. Scotlandville.

"What about these zombies?" Ricky Harrison thought about his mother's death. He sulked in the

cloudbanks of his mind. He went inside away from the heat. The brothers still stood around talking. Royhound looked handsome smoking a Marlboro.

"These zombies are killing people. Spreading disease." "How you know?" Mark Green asked.

"Da California dude down at the loading docks at River Bend Nuclear!" "How do ya know he ain't fulla shit?" The way Green said it, it was funny. But it wasn't funny to Elward.

They had no idea. They surely didn't.

The village was there and it was hideous.

"I live in Scotlandville, an you telling me zombies gonna be bustin into da house?" "Believe whatever you want believe, brother." He started taking the meat off the grill. The chicken was done. The steak had been done to a turn. Royhound, Mark Green had two finger food hotdogs in each hand, gobbling them up.

"Let's go down there," Joe Thomas said.

"You crazy." "White folks, government people, they don't give a shit about us.

Or about what's going on down there," Mark Green.

"Das right," Royhound added. "They just a soon see all da black people dead." Royhound had some buddies he knew were in jail, Angola, and they didn't even do nothing. Police trouble. Fuggin po-lice!

"I ain't going down there." "What you talkin' about go down dere? We got to eat dis food first!" Mark Green was getting pissed, 'cause he didn't believe jack-shit about the matter.

Inside, they found Harrison watching Star Trek. But he was sound asleep on the sofa, like that pot had cleaned and purified his soul. He had some relief from his angst.

"Look at da boy." "Let him sleep," Joe Thomas said, and they ate the food.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Kendra rode in Juan's old Mercedes, with Juan at the wheel sipping some fruity light wine coolers. It was the penultimate conversation of the epoch.

She knew the diseases were coming now. Various strains of mutant viruses, nobody ever heard about. Streptocylitransistorum Greganeion Ocillitus, HP23 and Herpes Simplex 6, Influenza, Typhoidic amyliatropic viral baccillium. Bad stuff. It would spread all round, like cocaine in her brain. That is what she needed now.

Juan broke the silence.

"It was right what you did. The government had to know." His handsome stubbled countenance glowed with radiance.

"I found out a week ago, Juan." She was petrified. Paranoia and mania all at once.

"Darling, it was good of you. Don't you see?" he said as they tooted along the interstate between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. They had just come back from the special meeting with the foremost LSU medical school doctors. Johns Hopkins specialists, all forms of biologists, specialized field representatives.

"I didn't WANT TO BE THE ONE, Juan!!!" she cried and leaned forward. Her gorgeous mane of blonde hair waved in the moment.

"I know, sweetie," Juan said softly. Their personal lives were a mess, but the biblical proportions of the repercussions of what lay ahead was Doom. The four headless Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Now there was a whole battalion, the Battle of Balaclava, all with death's head skulls.

"How many dead do they predict?" Kendra asked, hoping she had heard wrong. "Are they going to evacuate?" She knew without Juan's reply as he tried to open another wine cooler with a French cigarette in one hand and one knee on the wheel . . . more than thousands. Hundreds of thousands.

There had been this incubation, this festering of the deadly illnesses.

Not all would be fatal. There would be varying degrees now.

"Let's not go home now . . ." Kendra spoke quietly, softly into that great wet bleakness approaching. The exits passed by. They headed towards the Chimes where the maggoty punkers were warded off. Fended off by the upper cave dwelling social climbers who bathed regularly. Fine line that was.

She didn't exactly cry and she didn't exactly snuffle, because there was too much shock. She had put the little Chuckles Doctor business far out of mind.

That same evening, that time which rain sprayed the filth off the concrete graveyards, Ricky Harrison had finally woken up from Star Trek and eaten his barbecue ribs. Joe Thomas told him he looked like "Jethro again . . ." The booger boys were heading homeward.

"Lil padnah, that pot done put you to Disneyland." Ricky knew what he meant. For a while, the synaptic neurons stopped firing. He had blocked off the sickly whooping cough of death's winged fluttering in his noggin.

"Yeah. I feel like a new man, revived!" "Good for you, dude." Mark Green championed.

They drove back to the caviled cauldron, via River Road, then taking the new bridge, barges below.

"I'm as full as a tick." "Me too, Joseph." "I told you not to call me dat." "Sorry." They dropped the boy off at his terminal block of flats, Lobdell Avenue. Princes lived along this district, homeboys strung out on fortified wine, Wild Irish rose, Mad Dog twenty-twenty, and Thunderbird, the beverage of choice. Harrison was exuberant as if some crepuscular weight were pushed off his hind end. He was buoyant, as if he were fighting windmills, rather, huge iron tankards full of crude. The swimming pools for the gawds.

He showered to get the wog hemp funk off of him. Then put on some duds and decided to head to an old watering hole, which beat the heck out of bygone phantom days of the White Horse Tavern.

As he headed to the Chimes for some raw oysters, horseradish sauce, he whistled Mahlers fifth, the sonar melodious wafting from his sensitive countenance, half-cocked against the putrid air. He would see and be seen at the Chimes. He deserved a few happy hour hijinks and he would strike an attitude.

He parked on a corner across from four shaved youths bearing fascist manifestos on their t-shirts. He smiled at them and they had no response. Inside the Chimes, he spotted immediately the focal point of the universe. A black hole of intense gravity force at the corner booth. A mane of blonde hair, bee stung lips like a voluptuous movie star. He was intensely mesmerized.

"Who is that guy over there?" Kendra asked, suddenly blanking out the terseness of the impending situation. This guy was extremely handsome, though carrying a beer gut a bit. His blondish hair was like straw.

His sensitive countenance was once of thinness probably, but with the maturing into manhood. Those eyes of a bright blue in bewilderment and calm; a kind of treaty with struggling battles of a sort, something told her.

"I bet that guy over there used to be really good looking." She said this loud enough for the wild-maned metal heads in the next booth to bend their rooster tails to the bummish looking character who wore dark leisure pants and a greenish earth tone shirt. His face beamed as he sat at the bar and ordered a dozen oysters.

She was for some reason fascinated with him. Finding him ugly because he wasn't quite in shape. But a smart, interesting man, fun to just watch.

Harrison was so inward on himself this evening he had given up on the small phantasm of the creature in the corner. He looked over that away and she smiled at him. It was like her overdrive for cute boys was overdriving her biological demise of this city. Maybe she was cowering behind the knowledge and displacing it and herself. To forget herself as that Whisky Sour swam around her little belly of love. The unique handsome man Harrison ate his oysters in silence and managed to smile at himself. Everything would be okay. He just knew it. And he would occasionally glance over at the girl.

Wait, maybe he had seen her in some classes once. Yeah, he remembered her, through Atkinson. That girl over there, the one who was a Fellini masterpiece of modern art, 24 frames a second through living beauty and motion. She was that legendary phantasy that Atkinson and Tomer and the others had talked about. The myth of enduring proportion lay right there.

All dolled up but . . . hell she looked kind of dogged out. What did he know; she was gorgeous and pouty, the way Karrie looked when she cried when they used to get a bottle of Lambrusco and watch Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier in 1939's "Wuthering Heights." He couldn't take his eyes off her.

When sultry Karrie had pouted she had that gorgeous effect of transforming her petulance into a dreamy state of quintessential bottled beauty. Women, girls, wounded emotionally, crying and in distress. If only he could have her today, or Beth, or Holly, or the many others that came into his life but didn't sign the six month lease. There was a goddess over there in the booth. She was coming toward the bar. The little girl behind the counter was slicing lemon wedges. The brasserie and railings had an assortment of people. Harrison knew one older lady here was heir to a fortune. There were some young brutish men there also, scouting out the elongated gait of Kendra, Sheena of the jungle. The Herculooids come to life, by golly wow.

Ricky Harrison started getting nervous. that bourbon highball was starting to seep down into the crevasses of his frame. He was a citizen. For once he didn't feel sorry for himself. Maybe he had some sort of out-ofbody experience. Something indicated a rite of passage, as if he had bought a package of



inner peace at K-Mart, on sale, blue light special. Or some magical spice or herb at the Broodmoor shopping center near the manicured suburbs where his father lived alone with the dachshund that was the patriarch.

Which was right near the manicured graveyard where his mother lay.

Still. Sisters put flowers on her grave fairly consistently.

Juan thought the boy looked scrumptious to his palette and penchant for blonde-haired women. Blue-eyed boys who stood tall and firm.

Juan followed Kendra to a side of the brass-rail bar, and smiled at Harrison.

She knew she had seen him around campus. He was really bloated then. He had lost that fatness. She remembered seeing him in the quadrangle, reading and worshipping some fatalist dream in the hordes of lovely students in a miasma of students. That handsome head of hair curled up droopily to add to the swankiness. Harrison hadn't a clue.

He ordered another drink and then he would be on his way.

Kendra spoke out to the bartender when she ordered another drink.

The pretty little bartender smiled. She said, "You look like you lost your best friend." They had known each other from the beer keggens from unknown millennium ago.

"No, this man right here, is my best friend," Kendra said, and managed a smile now. That Whiskey (and don't be stingy baby-Garbo) had sunk into her.

"Dat iss right, my darlink." Harrison gulped an oyster into his gullet and sipped heavily on the highball.

The petulant little bartender spoke to Harrison a few seats down.

On the other side of the millionaire heir, who had a stack of ten martinis standing one atop the other like a pyramid.

"How about another bourbon?" "Thank you," he managed meekly. Kendra had her sights on him.

Guided missile research and development; if they could only get her stud- ied.

He's shy. That's nice. Sensitive and shy. But dresses for shit. A bum.

She suddenly announced, "I just presented a report that will go out on the news tomorrow . . . to the bigtime doctors, in Nawlins. There is going to be something bad happening in this town." "I believe that," the little cute bartender said and smiled. Kendra was serious. Her eyes were lit with that visceral frisson that indicated intensity and fear. Teary white, melting fear. "There is going to be disease, . . ." She started to say.

Juan looked at her, and grabbed her hand.

"Don't," he said quietly. Harrison looked over at her. That pouty look was coming on again.

"No, Juan," Kendra said, putting the drink down. "Can I have a dozen oysters, please?"

"Sure." They were shucking them in the back. Some punkers were playing surreal pool whilst on acid. The billiard balls were melting like a Dali painting. Rock and Roll was screaming all round them a bit.

Kendra crunched the ice out of her drink.

"A plague. An honest to goodness plague." Harrison stopped in mid-swallow.

"You see, I am in biochemistry. I'm good at it, too." Juan smiled faintly.

"Let's talk about something else. Like Pestilence." "See, Juannie baby here got my number. The little darling here is in my field also. Double major in biology, marine biology specialty." "We are just kidding you," Juan said and the oysters were placed before them sooner than they expected.

"Have y'all heard about the eel-things?" Harrison abruptly said.

Kendra looked at him with that Leigh Thomas-Young nose earring Ford modeling agency gaze. He soaked up her beauty through his eyes. She was drenched with gorgeous features.

"Eel-things, honey?" It was the way he had said it; it rang true.

"Why, we call them Ichthyinmambrical lamertinato ratterilinia." Juan corrected her.

"Latterilinia, not Ratterliniaaa." "Whatever, sweetie." Kendra said. She had even the millionaire bag lady drawn inexorably from her toppling pyramid of martinis with olives staring back at them.

Kendra daubed an oyster after spearing it with a cocktail fork in the horseradish sauce.

"You see, these things have been found in nests." "I've seen them," Harrison said. Kendra smiled.

"I've dissected them." "But I saw them as far back as 1978." "No shit" she said. That whiskey tenor barrage.

She was interested.

"Wasn't there a nest of them found near the Exxon docks?" "Yes." Her voice changed.

"I did some laboring work at Exxon between semesters at LSU." "Were you in Delta Epsilon?" she asked, off the cuff.

"Well, for two semesters I was . . ." "I remember you . . . what's your name?" "Ricky Harrison." "I'm Kendra. I was not in a sorority but probably went to more keggers than the sorority suzies . . ." and she swallowed the Manhattan.

"I kind of dropped out after a while." "Yeah, I know what you mean . . ." So he went on and told her the stories. About Karrie Capshaw on the levee (well, he used discretion; Kendra knew Karrie Capshaw.) About that first sighting.

Kendra told him of what was to come. "Disease rampant. The national guard will be coming in." He was in rapture talking to her. Hearing the bad news, he was taking it rather well. Perhaps it hadn't sunk in.

"You don't look particularly worried." Harrison was on his last martini. Thanks to the millionaire bag lady. The bartender babe in her turtleneck with manageable chesties said, "So Reverend Johnny Joe Jenkins ain't as stupid as all shit." The girl produced a lemon wedge in front of her teeth after a shot of Cuervo. Mescal was for the damned.

Harrison could see it. As Kendra talked to him, he heard the low wail of death fluttering its wings. Perhaps the machine l'inferral had beckoned its last twist of the turbine. His mother's death was just the beginning.

She went on about the hearing, privy information. Juan got irritated that she was going on about rather exclusive knowledge. But soon it would be common knowledge.

"Have you heard about the village?" Harrison said.

Juan said, "All I know is that I am probably going to move back to Rio." "Village?" Kendra wondered, as her eyes gazed into his. "What village?" "Devil's Swamp. I work with a bunch of black guys who say some guys at the nuclear plant to whom they deliver electrical supplies, that . . ." he said. And sighed. ". . . There is a village of half dead radioactive sickly tramps and half humans." He shook his head, the self confidence two-step shuffle.

"I never heard about this." "Well, we're going down there at Devil's Swamp to take a look tomorrow." "It's screwing amazing that none of the really big shots in the power structure give a crud about this. They don't even know." "We don't know if it's true." "Can I have your phone number?" "Here," and Ricky scribbled his number, ashamed of the prefix.

"I mean, if you hear about anything. I don't know if anybody would believe a wild story like that one . . . " "Wow, freaky . . ." She gave him a teasing wink. Flirtation, something she had never forgotten since she was an undergraduate hanging around Murphy's sleazy college fresh girls bar. Nickel beer.

"A Plague? We are all gonna die?" The bartender didn't believe.

They popped the last oysters in their gullets.

"Not if we get an antidote. There will be a vaccination. Mandatory.

You will hear it on the news tonight. Hell, it's already probably hit the national news." "Will there be an evacuation?" Ricky asked.

"There will be, IF there isn't an antidote to match," she said.

The little bartender with turtleneck started sobbing. "We are gonna die . . .," she whispered to herself. Kendra cried too.

"I was in A O Pi before my grades plummeted . . .," the girl said to Kendra.

"You were better off without them, sweetie," Kendra said to her.

Harrison bid her and Juan goodbye. He took off for home, birddogging his way from the freethinkers and sophistry students. The punks near the Bayou bar waved at him as he swung through the gates of LSU and a la izchierdaed his way onto State Street. Plague. He thought again.

Plague. But antidotes. Healing from plague. He was no good drunk . . . he thought.

"That boy was cute once." Juan said. "Delicious!" The little bartender looked Juan over.

"You're gay?" "Queer as a four dollar bill, darlink!" and Kendra smiled at both of them. Masking the trance that covered all of them in a veil. She would spin her web of information through those big doctors, much different from controlling and ruling the frat boys on the hollowed campus grounds.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

"We're coming to pick you up Sunday night, lil padnah." Joseph Thomas said to a drowsy Ricky Harrison, who was recovering from highball blues at Chimes, with Oysters on the side.

"Where are we going?" Harrison asked. He had a right to know where he was going, right?

"We going to the Village." Please no, he thought.

"Why are we gonna do that?" "Cause we got to." Joe said.

"Uhh..." Harrison mulled it over.

"What's sa matter, you don't like Zombies?" "Not really." "Don't you wanna know what's in Devil's Swamp?" Thomas quipped. These guys were nuts.

"What time?" "Bout nine o'clock, how's zat sound?" "Sounds spiffy." "Alright, lil padnah. Later Jethro." Click.

Silence. Harrison hung up the phone. Was this a joke for the ages? He wandered through the apartment with fetid odorific waftings, what was new? He began to recuperate from the night before. He wondered if Kendra and Glamour queen was shooting from the hip the night previous.

"Why didn't I tell Joe Thomas that we are all gonna die?" Well, turn on the television. Sure enough.

BROADCASTING FROM ALL THREE STATIONS . . . (Urgency seemed to be the idea here) Channel 2, WBRZ: "We are live from the Oschner Hospital and standing by at the LSU school of medicine is Dwayne Arroyo . . . (abrupt unrehearsed with no editing, live . . .) we are told by the State Surgeon General that there is a grave announcement at 8:15 am . . . CLIP fade to . . .

"At 1400 hours central standard time, the Governor was notified that there is an epidemic that could be spreading or has already spread throughout East baton Rouge Parish, West Baton Rouge Parish, The Feliciana Parishes, Iberville Parish . . . and possibly other sites, specifically a series of viruses that Doctors are trying to isolate. Some influenza of strain " ." We are trying to determine at this time how dangerous it is. We advise people to start maintaining healthier and cleaner facilities. To disinfect their homes, to wait for further news about this epidemic." CUT TO ANOTHER PART OF CONFERENCE . . .

We think that this epidemic is carried by new species of eel, specie type . It has been known for some time that this type of fish/snake have been spotted in several places. One near the Nuclear facility at River Bend. One near the Exxon refinery, and several in the Atchafalaya Swamp in West Baton Rouge Parish . . . partially radioactive and trace elements from refinery treatment wastes have been sighted as responsible for these creatures' spawning and proliferation. They tend to inhabit near refinery and waste disposal facilities." Harrison hit the floor with his left hand, thud. Goddamit, Kendra was right. It was all true. Life wouldn't be the same here. And tonight he was going into this village, if there was one. To see the trash can dwellings of zombie-like creatures. Hell, they were destitute men and women. This was all they were. Still, it was eerie. Well, what did he have to lose?

How did one get into Devil's swamp landfill? It was just flooded swamps of marsh nearer the river. Trash that was piled on and bulldozed over. Did they live underground? Had they burrowed holes in the ground, and remained unseen? How in the hell did no one else find out about this?

He took a shower in his portable Auschwitz. He thought for a moment about his own little landfill of Chef Boyardee cans and general uncleanness, which was next to ungodliness. After all, didn't he see eelthings dancing at the foot of his bed? With three heads? Hallucinations of an alcoholic nature. Dammit, he couldn't drink before they came! Shit!

Kendra.

She ran through his head, like a stream of consciousness. A goddess implanted. Going to the village of the damned. Just like the movie.

John Wyndham, the disaster British horror writer. "Day of the Triffids," the movie. Walking killer plants. Asteroid blinds everybody.

He stood outside the thatched hut from hell in Lamplighter apartments, and looked over into the projects. Mothers were talking. His neighbors came out of their doors, talking with neighbors they had never even bothered to say hello to before. All over town, this was happening. P a n i c rose, came forth, and raised its ugly head. Outpourings of telephone calls.

The lines jammed. The city came alive with people, coming out of their apartments, chatting. It was just like hurricane season. Except everybody thought they were gonna die.

The yahoos out in Denham Springs where that show was taped at K-Mart, they didn't think anything. The local fatheads who once believed Huey Long started panicking. Where were those bodies lined up, prone?

People sat around and drank beer and watched the Oakland Raiders trounce the Miami Dolphins.

Reverend Jenkins started praying and laying his hands on television, (One hand on your radio, and one hand on the radiator . . .): "You folks deserved this. The Satan worshippers out in Ponchatoula (a bunch of new wave Keebler-booted hippies munched on cow and dog hearts . . .)

have brought hell into our own backyard . . ." was heard over and over again.

Harrison sat reticent in the midst of the running around. The buying of disinfectants, bottled Kentwood spring water from Delchamps and K-Mart. Just like Hurricane Betsy was gonna hit! This wasn't a hurricane.

And there were folks who didn't move an inch for a hurricane.

Harrison remained steadfast. He was evolving in his head a scenario of this thing. Yes, Marlaine Harrison died. And now the whole five parishes surrounding Baton Rouge would succumb also. Including Marlaine Harrison's second son!

Joseph Thomas hauled the Buick Riviera towards the Great White Hope's Apartment, the ashram d'Jethro, with Mark Green and Royhound in it. All were toked up on wog-hemp and the oncoming excitement of the homeboys vs. the Zombies!

Ricky Harrison stood trembling in his apartment. The bourbon bottle was half-slaked. It would not be touched! He would face his hobgoblins, for he was in for the duration now.

"Come one lil padnah . . . Open up!" Mark Green yelled through the two inches of pressed wood. In minutes, they would be traipsing across acres and acres of mysterious landfill. When a man knows he may have some disease pullulating within him like a tapeworm, he felt possessed with a radiance from that knowledge of incubating disease. When one is desperate, he gets courage.

He opened that low door near the single window. Mark Green and Royhound stood behind Joseph Thomas. They walked in.

"We gotta go . . . getting too dark already." Outside the sun had gone down. Harrison asked, "Do I need to put camouflage on? Some shoe polish on my face?" He was surprisingly serious.

"No, do you see any shoe polish on our faces?" Royhound laughed.

They walked to the car. Everything was going crazy. A special edition of the State Times Morning Advocate was out for the peasants. Disinfecting was taking place all over the city. The streets were filled with people, bewildered all.

They tooled down the interstate and got off at the airport exit.

They wandered through the traffic of frenzied worrisome North Baton Rouge.

Entrance to Devil's swamp. Swing open the gates. No armed guards for the biggest swamp stinkpot hellhole of Calcutta in the Gothic South. Let the booger boys in, along with Lord Byron, Harrison.

The topographical clumps of trash mixed with plain composites of dirt, construction scraps, paints, chemicals, all made quite a soup for them to walk through. It was rather poetic, Eliot's wasteland before them. A sweeping acreage of fecal matter to boot. This wicked band of badasses was prepared. Royhound had brought a gun, and Harrison didn't like those things.

"Man I ain't gonna point it at yah, Lurch!" Royhound and the others seemed to be mad.

"Y'all know about the Plague! Screw it!" Royhound said.

"We ain't all gonna die, man!" They trudged onward. The car isolated behind them as they went further into the darkness. No one of course bothers to light up a dump; nothing valuable there.

"I believe we ain't got nothing to lose. We shouldn't even have to go to work tomorrow. Ain't nobody should work that thinks they gonna die." The vast tract of landfill, washing machines and rusty machinery, abandoned.

They heard a bit of yelling way towards the river, hundreds of yards ahead of them.

"That's what we are gonna go after. Over there," Thomas commanded.

They trudged through the muck of solid Styrofoam, hardened rags and assorted bleak mishmashes of this that and the other. Devil's swamp was once a swamp. Now a priceless find for the lookers. Seekers of lost diamond mines, Loch Ness, and Bermuda Triangles, Harrison thought.

Away they went, all apprehensive.

"We ain't gotta kill 'em or nothing." "If they attack us, sheit!" "No Royhound, we ain't gonna kill em. We just wanna see if they are here." "You never heard a spying? The screwing CIA?" Mark Green said in the ensuing mysterious black of night, not even a sliver of moon to shine.

The smell of rotting undulating trash piles that had not been squashed and so appeared like huts or

pillboxes, were all about them, all the way to the river. Where the trees and swamps hugged the levee, on out into the muddy waters.

"I'm scared shitless." More screams sounded out, of quite a sinister quality. They thought they saw and heard movement ahead of them.

They would keep walking until they met something; there was something out there to be sure.

"Like you said, we ain't got nothing against zombies, right?" "There ain't nothing bout no zombies. Ain't no such thing!" Mark Green said. More screeching of a horrific nature. But nowhere in sighting this people-of-the-pit syndrome, were seen any sort of buildings. The night was awesomely bleak and dark, the stench arose from under their feet. They crunched over the blemishes in the landfill. They sank in some areas, of myriad colors and loose remains.

"We are halfway there. I don't see nothing." "This is stupid, man!" "One day we gettin' us gospel bird at Elwards' barbecue and now we are all sitting around here with diseases in our bodies, says them motherfuckers on the news shows. And we are walking round a garbage dump." Royhound wasn't in the best mood. Condemned men seldom were.

"We might not die, Royhound," Harrison paused in his role as optimist for a change. For perhaps that was his turning point. The sticking point where he had made a choice away from the frothy bourbons and ensuing night gaunts. His past seemed no longer worthy of being trod upon by his negative respites. He was beginning to feel the freedom of a man with the burden lifted from his aching backside. His momma he thought was in a heaven he may have started to believe in. The alter boy days hadn't been anything but a lost cause. His waxing about Cathedrals in the middle of Eliot's wasteland, Devil's swamp, (where was the Devil?) was sobering.

Joe Thomas looked over at Harrison as they walked in formation it seemed. The tight unit. Zombie Patrol. Small squelching yawps from the enemy of invisible powers, it seemed. Joe Thomas smiled at Harrison. The boy began to be thought of in a different light. The way you could tell about a man who was tormented; when that suffering was gone, you could endure anything. Good man. Jethro and Lurch both.

They looked into the nooks and crannies at the water's edge, of the great bleakness of marshy swamp primordial, manmade fecal impromptus and proliferation of plastic pulp mush. A thick, goodly soup it was. The sturdiness of the ground of compacted high-density trash below their feet became soggy.

It seemed empty of Zombies.

"Man there ain't nothing here!" "Nigro you'se a fool!" Royhound said with a mania, "Now we can get our skinny asses outta here and go get screwed up!" "Shaddup Royhound. You think them zombies gonna be waiting for us. They hidin'." The incongruous nature of the entire idea, but it seemed to fit beautifully with the invidious epidemic that was in vitro elsewhere.

Joe Thomas paced around. He seemed quite intent on rustling out the zombies. If there were to be zombies, he would certainly flush them out. Mark Green said he had to take a dump.

"Well go on over dere and take one." "Screw you. Some Zombie come grab my ass. Just get your smelly ass back to the motherscrew in car!" He was only half kidding. Walking talking Nixon. There were several eel-things lying about in the water. Floating tits up, expanded and bloated carcasses of bellied monstrosities. Walking Nixon.

"That's the friggin eel-things!" Royhound said, now seeming to get interested in the matter at hand.

Harrison shrugged. "That's what I saw in 1978!" He sighed.

The vast wasteland of unruly landfill, a premium trash dump of the worst order. The sky sat lightly on the river horizon. The moonbright cast a glow ebbing up the river, winding and curving sharply. There were noises of a dying city in the wake of this foul dusty hellishness of Pireaus that the philosophy professors had premised their oral arguments about.

What was the hellishness of Pireaus, going down to Pireaus in Plato's Republic?

The answer. A three fuggin headed snake, make it twenty-five or more smelly rubber corpses dangling in the marshes. Still in the cesspools of the humus of Promethean life. The face of Death, the hellhole that this city of industrial good had become. The twilight of man trying to live peaceably with carcinogens, roentgens, and Reddy Kilowatt stomping on his very ass.

Walking, talking, they started home.

But Harrison saw something, yonder past the shitcans turned sideways, the rotted wood, and the chairs, refrigerators. Strangling with stench these boys emerged from the pit of the sinister strains not of this earth.

There seemed to be a series of holes, large enough to squeeze someone's torso through. Though no one would cop to wanting to do that very thing.

"It's screwing tunnels, like the Viet Cong!" Mark Green said.

"Zombies?" Royhound said, now sobering up from his Sun Gold White Port elixir. They wanted to get them feets a moving, don't fail me now. The minstrel show with the languid white soul brother. Those boys stood there grimacing from the monstrous chemicals that oozed from the rusty openings.

They were old sewer lines.

"Now, we don't know shit about whether there's anybody in there." "Look over here! See those things? Half eaten food, rotted stuff.

Don't it look like somebody been living out here?" "What is this shit?" Mark Green said. Greenish fecal matter of inhumanness. Bovine mushiness of bilious brine droppings.

"Sheit!" They all came over. The radial perimeter of foul sewage of human origin was a waste pile of droppings of bilge shiny with flecks and blood smatterings in the stool. If that is what it could be called, filled the air with exquisite raunchiness.

"Someone done been taking radioactive shits! Over here!" Royhound said. "Man, you took a shit?" Shit, Royhound. You too screwed up to come along!" Royhound shut up. There were sounds about. Weird sorts of rustling in various junk heaps as big as the three great pyramids of Cheops.

These were funeral pyres of Dow Chemical, Procter and Gamble.

They were here. They are here now, and they are probably watching.

These fricking pyramids were probably housing all sorts of zombies.

Half alive, probably insentient, fever dreams, a consumption of the brain through feverish radiation. Diseases rampant from direct contact with the shit-snakes. They were a touched people. A clan. They were here, he was sure. He felt something watching him here in Eliot's wasteland. The valley of ashes,



for the shadow of death, for I fear evil.

"We going or not?" They were all bent out of shape from the ensuing darkness. The stars coming out in the mattress of cumulus, the offending stench of a most noxious order penultimate. They began walking the hell away from the shadowy forms that were perhaps lurking from pits and pyramids of old washing machines, refrigerators. Nocturnal vampires of the worst kind, oozing and eyelashes and suppurating like brine.

The logistical formations of these piles of junk that appeared to be heaped up, were now some sort of community. The drain pipes near the river, that nebulous region of pyrrhic lore. There were lurkers in the shadows of the pipes.

They were there. Ricky Harrison believed this to be so. Nature tried to grown plants and other unclassifiable fungi and bizarre foetid life amidst the manmade textile city of Zombies, now silent and hulking and waiting.

But these people were probably once regular people. Maybe it was like rabies, you get bitten by a bat or mad dog! You get that incubation of maggoty insanity going to fester in you. And you split the offending animal's skull wide open to determine if it had been "touched." That way lay madness.

They were all touched.

They walked away after they had peered into the drainpipes from which inside was heard rapping as if people were walking around down there. Well, if they as big as a man in diameter, it was nobody's business to go creeping around in things. Rumor and innuendo and zombies or heal the plague victims? It was all a crap shoot, he thought as they stopped peering in there and walked back to the car. Royhound peered behind him like they would run out of those little pyramids and labyrinthine pipes. And grab him and pull his handsome little skinny ass into the gaping maw of hell itself!

Through the expensive wasteland of all the city's cumulative junk heart, Harrison mused the imponderables taunting him. The zombies were just a piecemeal fragment of the overall soon-to-be plague.

Joe Thomas and Elward were basically going to get stoned in as quick a manner as possible. There was a bottle of fortified Thunderbird waiting in the Riviera for the jaundiced squadron of brothers. Royhound smoked a cigarette and gazed intently as his eyes maneuvered this way and that over the vastness of the heaps. The Indian mound pyres were in lines however crooked all round the flattened heaps of trash. Roiling valleys of toxins and rubbish of the damned.

Harrison trudging along by himself. He had wanted to find something superiorly preternatural in his compulsive quest for the seething black hearted wretchedness. As if it would put him smack dab in this rotting, dying city. As lone figure, taunting those refinery chemistry sets of the gawds.

They got into the car pretty much not caring for the nonce a whit about Zombies. May have well been an old movie the absence of fright in the matter as the night air was beginning to be clear of flies, foetid odors pervading. They were discovering nothing. There were no zombies. Just perhaps a whole city of corpses walking round, incubating within themselves the rancid delirium and viruses that could possible succumb them.

Time had stopped. Life had more value in this waking tide, now that lives of the entire city were at stake. Things would probably come to a halt, there would be several panics. The media was trying to keep it down to a simple threat that would be nipped in the bud.

The Riviera rolled on past the slick road of muck. Their shoes caked with brownish orange sawdust gunk as a reminder to root out the truth of the matter. Communal swigs of the bottle of Thunderbird and the intoxicating pot smell made pretty much an instant reverie within the confines of the closed auto. Harrison was beginning to become a brother. What would the frat ratters think of this; Negro haters one and all weren't they?

Well, life was going to take on that meaning of precious commodity. There would be more news pieces. There would be folks like the goddess Kendra, making antidotes and cures for the entire city. The nation was bending towards this black hole of Calcutta like sizzling current of national interest.

People had already begun leaving the city.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

There were too many yuppie road killers out there who were frightful and had no hesitancy to haul ass before they would succumb in the mausoleum that Baton Rouge had become. The graveyards might as well have toppling tombstones and the incurred wrath of ruinous corpses. However embalmed with reddish fluids, pushing their way out of resting places and walking around like ghoulish biblical prophecy. Bobby MaGee would no doubt believe this was the last book of the New Testament coming true.

People were so dumb around these parts that they wouldn't give a hang if all their insides were maggot-infested. Folks would go to work the next day having crapshooted all their cloying selves on the experts of medicine. Was there a comet passing its tail through the earth's orbital path, Ricky wondered.

It was like some horrendous splatter thriller. No matter how many showers one took, there was the incubation of locust eggs, like the spawning scene of "The Brood." Hell yes, Harrison was raising hell in the car. Like he was one toke of secondary contact buzz from insanity a la Mardi Gras and Lunde craziness in Bourbon Street disinfected streets. One shot of Thunderbird away from alcoholic poisoning and the loss of all reasoning. If there were to be a horror film enacted out, if there was no cure, then he would get as much fortified wine and Jim Beam in his aching psyche before he was to be a corpse lying in the street. Shit on this age of man and his vile spittle of glycol and enzymes and polymers. There was his own theory. The whole town was dying like Cancer Alley because Dow had a good year, and so did Exxon. A holocaust, but they would just build a fence round it, bury us in mass graves like Mi Lai, and go on about their business.

"Are we or ain't we gonna die?" Royhound was insisting in his potflying frenzy. He was beseeching the think tank. Joe Thomas was more silent than usual. The basketball player gone depressed, like some mental patient.

"I'm worried for my little girls," he said, quite solemnly.

Mark Green burped some bubbles of seltzer of fruity variety towards the front seat. He wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Look, screwa da plaque. We jus do what they tell us ta do. If they tell us to go ta Mississippi, we go! We ain't dead yet!" Royhound insisted they were gonna die. "It's already in us, like a fuggin horror movie!" He went on, but he had that right.

"I don't know, man." Harrison said, pining for his dear mother. "I don't care if I die or not." "Come on man, don't bring us down even more," Mark Green said. Harrison wasn't sure if he was gonna cry or not, in front of them.

They were screwed up more than a bum begging in the French Quarter.

And here there was a no win situation.

"They are saying dat there's gonna be a cure and everybody is gonna get that shit outa them. Hell, they said there's a good chance there ain't nothing in us——YET." He began whispering in cadences of word jazz, the poem, "To a Young Athlete Dying." The time you won your town the race We chaired you through the marketplace; Man and boy stood cheering by, And home we brought you shoulder high.

Today, the road all runners come, Shoulder high we brought you home, And set you at your threshold down, Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away From fields where glory does not stay And early though the laurel grows It withers quicker than the rose.

He said it a bit louder and Joe Thomas, Mark Green, Royhound all screwed up with wog hemp, were silent. The radio was turned down as they listened further in the moment.

And round that early laurelled head Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead And find unwithered on its curls The garland briefer than a girl's.

Silence remained with them for the rest of the ride.

"Man, that was beautiful, dude." The tincture of toxins would embalm them all; sooner or later they would surely bloat, but Harrison, before he climbed out of the car, said: "Joseph, do you remember playing that basketball game, the one in Baton Rouge where everybody playing had once been on national television, in NIT and NCAA basketball tournaments?" "Yeah, Lil padnah . . .what about it?" "You know that was the best basketball game in the whole state going on, the biggest sporting event around, and no one knew about it." He went on.

"The colleges used you guys. You shined, sparkled, won championships, and then you wind up in the city park gym so tiny playing Herculean games (Royhound said Herculean, what's that?). And none of these people give a shit anymore if you are flipping burgers at McDonald's or starving on welfare? Doesn't that piss you off?" Harrison saw that Joe was looking in the mirror as the Riviera stopped to let them out. Mark Green had fallen asleep from his silent seizure of fright.

the pot and liquids wondrous had stopped the sledgehammer of death.

"I tell you what, lil padnah, . . . No matter if I AM on welfare, or working at Joe Delpit's frying Gospel Bird. Or robbing banks, they can't ever take those days away from me! I have been to basketball camps with guys playing in the NBA! I met Al McGuire, all the SEC coaches, and famous people and was loved by my whole campus! You don't ever forget that! I was their hero. (He paused.) So it really doesn't matter. Like that poem you just quoted. They cheered me through the market place. But you only stay gold for a while. Nothing gold can stay! That's what I think about it." He shook Harrison's thin hand tightly.

"I'll see you at work tomorrow. We ain't leaving town yet. This is my hometown!" Royhound murmured some slurs of love for Harrison. "Man, you alright. I love dat poetry when I get screwed up." "See you later Royhound, Joe." Harrison got out of the car. He felt resistance to the death wings fluttering above the illuminated pageantry of a town in the grips of all those horsemen of the new Apocalypse.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

In the abysmal mist of Devil's Swamp, in the forest of thatchy confusion, melting eyes appeared from the edge of the drains to gaze at the surreal landscape of phosphor gleaming. It was the mutant folk still hidden; they knew fear too.

Fear of discovery by humans. Inside their bloated bodies was a radioactive high of fever sickness. Ultimate pleasure from hybrid pain cutting through the nerves. Putting each into a frenzied malevolent thrill mode.

They did not remember how to speak to each other anymore. They kind of scurried around and depended on one another's tasks in their newborn anomaly.

They kind of grunted knowing monosyllables about what they had just seen. More intruders to invade their precious landfill. They got used to the laborers and garbage men who just ran their trucks through and dumped their loads and hauled off. They remembered little about themselves, what they once were.

Fever and a mixture of toxic waste enabled them to get their Jones off the heat, the melting of their psyches, thus rendering them soulless.

They had not wished to be there. They were almost silent, mute. They were inexplicable by their very presence. It couldn't have happened here.

Nonetheless, they peered from the tunnels and drainpipes that led to the riverbanks. There was a medium sized group of them.

There was not any understood structure of the new village beneath the concrete where the seepage would cover them, and scar them in their writhing frenzies. They subsisted on eel-things. The eel-things appeared not to mind when they reached in to divvy up the meatiest ones. They bit into the horrid reptiles raw and quivering as chunks would be ripped from the turgid things. Their constant euphoria of frightful chemical imbalance, the toxins had a searing effect on their central nervous systems, causing them to writhe and quiver and shake, rattle and roll. The jerking came when they had reached their final poisonous state, the death rattling. Then they would offer themselves to the eel-things in the final sacrificial offering.

They roamed the areas at night, lurching through the black neighborhoods; none had been caught. They chivvied out dead insects, rodents, vermin and consumed them alive, raw, bloodied countenances of sheer hor-ror! In that forlorn cavernous den next to the festering nest in utter blackness where their eyes

could now see, were shrieks and sights and sounds unholy!

But demented people were of this particular pit. There was another village of the damned growing in numbers in the Atchafalaya swamp.

Another outcrop of maligned ape-humans radiating and disdainful of sunlight.

They were not conscious of their robbing actions; of stealing foodstuff in garbage cans. They had good instincts to remain hidden in the safety of their drainage nest in the utter bleakness. They had become squinteyed nocturnal animals of a low grade, an undefined wretchedness. The eternal joke of the chemistry set that the dying industrial nest of yuppies trying to live amidst toxins in all elements, the alchemist's nightmare. The surreal landscape of Baton Rouge, the industrial giant, surrounded, bounded on all sides by cancerous sewage. The glistening infernal machinations of waste treatment plants. Perhaps now the plague could spread like gospel to the untouched of the city.

The treading over nightly terrain, neighborhoods being accursed by the village of the damned, was beginning to be noticed by the black residents who lived in those tarpaper shacks.

Ricky Harrison lay in his unwashed bed sheets with a bottle of Ten High to keep his body and soul intact. He would go out there again, if he dared. After all, he had nothing to lose. He had one foot in the grave just like the newscasters bleated out on TV. His mother had just bit the big one a bit early. The town rotted from the beauteous hideousness, the semblances of decay and its devotion to entropying down to charnel tombs for every working yuppie, redneck, and black neighbor stupid enough to have lived here in Cancer Alley. He lay asleep, the ringing in his head of mewings of the drainage pipes echoing from somewhere far within the tunnels. The puddle ridden sewers held a unique mysteriousness that he would ferret out.

He was not necessarily a singularly brave person, but was evolving into just such a man. Was it a death wish? He fell asleep in an alcoholic induced hallucination of the singing eel-things at the foot of his bed. In the little efficiency apartment, cheap shag carpet was dingy and perhaps the snakes were under his single bed. He gazed one last time at the news screen of round the clock coverage of the black plague that would come if unresisted.

Antidotes, cures, consumptives, where were they now? He could feel his tainted insides festering and incubating with maggoty diseases viral. it made one feel quite ill, as he wrestled with himself, wringing the shoddy flat pillow and cursing the eel-things mewling and the lost soul of Marlaine Harrison, now charred and blotted in the manicured cemetery where existing plots lay for him and his somnambulist brother and sisters and Dick Harrison. Thomas Mann would have been quite proud in the rotting pervasive decline.

He fell unconscious once more now.

When he got up, he thought, we still have to go to work. Sunday night was like a millennium of stuff of dreams and sleep. He felt new, though festering as he sped to work, muffler exploding all the way, he felt revived, rejuvenated. He went to work only to find some of the boys not there.

"Out sick. Probably got the plague." Half the company wasn't there. Something was not surprising about the absentees.

"We don't have much work today." That's the way it was around the whole city apparently. Same as for a hurricane, or worse.

They let him go home. They shut the company down. The few heroic people to have the moxie to go to work were feeling suddenly relieved that they too could go home until further news was heard.

The city was at a veritable standstill. Shut down for the duration.

Only about an hour after he had been present at the ugly company in the middle of many other ugly companies, he was heading home. There wasn't much traffic on the streets now. There were sirens of fire engines and ambulances all over the place. Was martial law going on or what? No way. People were worried, but the news said that they think there will be a sure fire cure administered after proper testing through the federal government.

Ricky Harrison, in the confines of the rubber room of apartment 318 in Bellevue, Baton Rouge. Saline solution tanks left unattended in his efficiency apartment, the mental asylum for the number one lunatic. The antihero of the epoch. Pantheon of maniacs in greatness. Everything seemed too real. When he was home, he pulled out that card with the goddess's phone number on it. It said "LSU Biochemistry, Faculty Member, Kendra Hoerst, LSU, BR, LA, etc . . ." Three rings, finally through. "LSU Biochemistry Dept." "Kendra Hoerst, please." "I'm sorry, she's not in the area right now. Can I leave a message?" "Uhh, well . . ." There went that confidence. Breakdown of himself beginning already. Come on what happened to that pioneer spirit that will get you through the plague?

"Wait, I think I can connect you with her in the labs, faculty labs . . ." "Thank you." Click, ring again . . .

"Umm, Kendra, this is Ricky Harrison." God, she probably didn't know who he was . . . but what mattered in these panicky times? The place was about to be razed and chock full of dead.

"Oh, hey sweetie? How are you?" "Are you sure you remember me?" "Yes, of course. How's it going?" Adorable she was. Amazon wonder woman.

"Look, I think I believe you now. Can you . . . I mean, I know it is really a bad time. I mean, aren't you on one of the research teams trying to find a cure or antidote before the bad times really begin?" "That's right, dearie." She really was sweet. "It is pretty hectic around here, that's for sure." What are the odds on finding the cure or antidote? I mean, what I hear from the news is really like there's nothing to worry about. Like before it even hits there will be a cure." "Well, Ricky, that's not what we are saying over here. It's so complicated you wouldn't believe it. I don't want anybody to lose hope. Right now it's kind of unsure." "Well, all I was wondering is how the media have all rallied everyone from panicking, by saying the antidotes will come and no one will get sick or die." "Well, I hate to say it, but if we don't come up with a serum, which we are trying to extract from the venom of these eel mutant creatures, in time, we are going to have the whole city empty. I hope I didn't scare you." "Kendra, this is the worst thing to happen in a long time, right?"

"Well, without mercy of both sexes and of all ages, Procopius's account of the first pandemic was AD 541. Five to ten thousand people died daily in Constantinople. Next was 1346, second pandemic . . ." "The one in 1346 was the darkest times, a third of the world died.

They blamed it on the Jews. The third pandemic occurred in Europe during the 15th and 18th centuries. the fourth began in China in 1855. It reached Hong Kong in 1894. They finally realized it was a bacillus that had killed 6 million people in India. They finally figured it was fleas as carriers.

Then the disease reached the United States. But so many people died of Syphilis that it was deceptive to them." She sighed. Ricky Harrison looked about his clammy rubber room.

"You are way smarter than I am." "Look honey, you don't realize some of the hunks I have gone out when my wonder days were during undergraduate craziness. They were fine but plain stupid. Unoriginal Macho energy. Which I despise!" "Well, I hope I wasn't bothering you." "Not at all. I enjoyed talking to you. I was feeling pretty bad at the Chimes. I had just come from New Orleans and press conferences

and big medical meetings." "Well, I thought I used to see you around campus after I quit my frat and became a bum." "Don't be so down on yourself! You are too cute for that." "Well, thanks Kendra, but . . ." "You are. You were dreamy back then. I remember you. You were the talk of whole sororities. They thought you looked like Nick Nolte or Robert Redford or something." "Really?" He was elated, his heart soared.

"You would be surprised what I could tell you. Sorority Suzies are notorious for cattiness and gossip." He sensed she had to get back to finding a solution to the pandemic.

"Well, I gotta go back to the slide show. Call me again sometime.

Maybe we could go out for lunch or dinner." "Sounds good! I will call you soon." "Alright sweetie, I'll talk to you later." "Bye." Click. Unconscious fetterings of guilt lifted from his aching chest; he had his answer. Just think, all that wasted energy on negative thinking. What had he been doing with himself? He thought about it, and put on a movie. The choice of videotape was "Death in Venice." Venice, a dying city. Italian film. Gorgeous strains of Mahler's Fifth symphony, non troppo came blazing forth from the speakers.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

School wasn't quite out for the kiddies. Baton Rouge wasn't just refineries and squalid apartments for the damned dead men like Ricky Harrison. There were high schools teeming with pubescent kids, footballish grunts and embryonic youths. Cheerleaders. Turfs were made not by pissing on fire hydrants that would get washed away in the rain, but the local McDonald's, Mr. Gatti's with Science Fiction and Star Trek Clubs. Gaming shops with Dungeon and Dragon nerds and comic book shops teeming with assortments of bright-eyed boys and girls.

The parents were concerned for their new wave generation that was prepping up for placing out of Calculus, chemistry, trig, English.

There were all the various strains of studentia in these high schools.

There were little arrays of students, the product of baby boomers whose parents were depression era kids. The kindergarten students whose spirits were already broken by that potty training, were too young to fear the magnitude of the impending pandemic. The elementary kids were innocent enough; they were told at various lengths that everything would turn out okay. There was no reason for their parents to leave the city, because the virus was already implanted and evident and going someplace else wouldn't do any good.

The high schoolers were a bit terrified, they already had to deal with AIDS and condoms and the terrors of post-teenybopper ritualistic knuckle boogers. Fist fights between the dope heads and the jocks, homobashing of the nerds. Ogling and probing of teen breasts beneath sweaters and Calvin jeans rolled up in a ball at the submarine races near the LSU lakes. All those cuteish preteen hussies and their steady

boyfriends were ultimately glad that school was out for a while. This was the hottest news since Reagan got six bullets from John Hinckley and Jonestown Kool-Aid (tropical fruit flavor).

There were the awful rumors of course. The LSU campus had a bit more capacity for sense, but the high schools were rampant with tabloidish tidbits of genuine originality. That the Governor put LSD in the drinking water, and that everyone was tripping. That the whole was going to keel over and die three hundred thousand strong, regardless of race, creed, etc. That the federal government was going to get rid of the virus by detonating the nuclear power plant (meltdown), to save the rest of the country, and subsequently the entire planet. That they weren't allowed to travel across state lines and that they were all technically medical prisoners, now under quarantine. That not just the little eel-things were rampant, but that there were Loch Ness monsters of enormous size also dwelling in Lake Ponchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico. That it was the end of the world. That Russia and China were responsible for the soon-to-be destruction of America. Too many of these kids saw the movie "Red Dawn," where a cheerleading squad and second-string football team take on the entire Russian Army.

There were rumors flying around these fertile grounds of vicissitudinal teenaged angst-ridden hordes. Running around the hallways, shooting spitballs, smoking pot. Savage beatings on the most frivolous pretexts.

That these eel-things were seedpods that came down inside meteorites.

They were from Mars or further out. That only grown ups were going to die, leaving all teenagers to rule the schools, cities, streets in one big keg party too underage to attend. That they were all going to be shipped to some big secret military quarantined underground mineshaft city in New Mexico, where they would be experimented on Nazi style, and then summarily killed off.

That this was going on around the whole country, and that America would collapse and other countries take up stakes on their bones grinding in the swamp. That American fighter planes and aircraft carriers would come up the Mississippi and start bombing the refineries, the nuclear plant. That was the only way to get rid of the monstrous huge nests and feeding grounds of the villages of mutants.

That there was a village of unconscious creeping subhumans who ate plutonium and eel-things and were going to stalk the city. And their locations were the Atchafalaya Swamp, Devil's Swamp, West Baton Rouge parishes where all the refineries were. where they could bathe and eat toxic poisons and still not die but become even stronger. The teenaged mind knew no bounds in the pantheon of apocryphal universal imaginations.

The McDonald's on Sharp Road, territory of the Broadmoor High rodents and jockish clodhoppers of demonic libidos and that urge below their belts of dripping hormones outta whack, was populated with essentially the whole of the shut-down student body. Severely structured into quadrants of social class, justly shuffled about until some rational order like sifting layers fell into place.

"Give me a Big Mac, dude! An' three fries!" The blonde little girls said who was growing into a little lady awful fast.

"Yes, would you like an apple pie with that?" "Just give me my screwing Big Mac, Billy." "You don't have to say it like that." He turned away, his scrofulous face gone rampantly apeshit with blemishes and scars.

"Come on!" Tiffany said. Her three girlfriends were sitting over at a table next to those cute boys: Danny Jackson and Paul Roberts, and Timmy Crowhurst. They were so cute! The bracerfaced girls were just sprouting and developing with every minute of the ticking clock. But for now they were indulging in a maniacal French fry eating endeavor that was not uncommon.



Everybody knew that McDonald's had the best French fries.

Wendy's was shitty, and Burger King was, well, full of black boys who would mess with these poor suburban kinds sheltered from life. Free Fabian society, a Marxist miracle of equality and brotherhood. The McDonald's was approaching overkill as far as capacity. This was the first McDonald's in Baton Rouge, before these kids were even born. Used to even have the golden arches until they took them down and remodeled. Every football game these kids came crashing in, mayhem of the best sort. And a small microcosm of high school and junior high perceptions about life, namely that they didn't know anything about it. Their personalities were just remnants, or fledgling gossamer intonations of the fleshing out processes. But they were rather rambunctious, the bombastic jocks were glowing. They had been acting like they were gonna take over the town case of this radiation epidemic. All they knew was that there wasn't going to be any more school for a while. And their parents were treating them really special. They were too alive to be afraid, all the niniom burns, and snuggies (pulls of the underwear in gym class and knuckle boogers. And Indian burns, and noogies were still happening just as if it was Friday night and the girls were feeling cute. And the boys were trying to talk them into making out, getting them into some sort of situation where if they could only get that blouse off, and kiss them. And then get that bra off, and maybe even go alla way! But these were good Catholic and Presbyterian and Methodist girls. And they all had boyfriends if they weren't goofy too much. If they acted all mature. If they didn't treat their girlfriends like shit. If they were cool and weren't badasses.

If they didn't get into trouble and take acid and smoke like dopefiends. If they were cute boys, not nerdy and zitfaced and stupid acting.

Tiffany was looking over at Danny Jackson. He was the junior varsity quarterback and he was just a sophomore. And he didn't even act like a jock. He made good grades and was so cute! Every girl wanted him and they voted him one of the sweetheart couples along with Melissa Barry, that little tramp whore! She was so two-faced and Danny didn't even like her, and they still made them a sweetheart couple. Danny had broken up with this cute girl who had a reputation for getting drunk and acting really weird. And hanging around with college guys way too old for her.

And Danny was so nice to every girl, even the dweeby ones who were so immature. But football season was canceled, there wouldn't be any more games. And there were four left, and Broadmoor had a chance of being district champs even if the head coach was an asshole and the whole team was a bunch of potheads. Pot did the worst thing for football teams.

All the football players would act all big shots and tough. Just because they worked out with weights and had good bodies. Three of the defensive players were the biggest dealers in the school, and the faculty didn't even know about it! Pot wasn't good for a football team, just think what they could have been like if they just got drunk like everybody else.

Tiffany walked over to where Danny was acting quiet and shy, even though he was almost six feet tall. And had already gone all the way, (everybody knew about it!) and his older brother had led Broadmoor to the state championships and went on to play for LSU until he got a knee injury.

He wasn't nearly as stuck up as any other boy would be if they had all that going for 'em.

"Hey Danny, how's it going?" Tiffany said with all she could muster.

She was a definite cutie. Her little petite ass wiggled around. Her pert little tits were just right. The other boys were about to spurt. Tiffany came over, with her friends. Just like she had wanted them to.

"Alright." Danny said. He was so cool.

"I heard they canceled the INXS concert!" "What a drag!" "Yeah, I was gonna go with Timmy and his older brother's college friends." "I mean, all this stuff about the plague, or the sickness is really totally shitty!" She said. Gawd, did I say that?, she thought. I don't want to look too smart! She was smiling at him, and her girlfriends were giggling.

They ALL wanted Danny. And his buddies were playing with them, stealing their fries.

"Give us some french fries!" "Yeah," Danny said. "I think school is going to be out for the rest of the semester." "Really? Cool!" she said. Don't try and look so enthusiastic! Bitch!

"You still going out with Mike Trailer?" Danny asked meekly but politely.

"No. We broke up. He's so weird!" "Well, my dad won't let me go out right now. They are worried about all the shit going on." The plague shit.

Right. "You want the rest of your Big Mac?" his buddy said.

"Yeah, I want it! Asshole!" "Shut up man!" Ah, the privilege of youth. What a hope for the future.

The nerdy assistant manger came over. He looked retarded. Everybody knew he really was. But he was just a spazz.

"What are y'all gonna do while the weird shit is going on?" Danny asked.

Wow, Tiffany thought. He's really interested.

"Nothing," she smiled. Her friends laughed and looked away, nervous by now.

They were all screwable, the boys thought.

"Hey, Melissa, you still hung over from that keg party at Janet's house?" "Shut up, asshole!" She said. Totally asshole. What a geek. But he was second string. But ugly. He wasn't cute. She thought about Timmy Crowhurst. Just because he had a cool car that he raced on Airline Highway against the Denham Springs assholes. They thought they were so cool cause they won their district last year and beat up the Negroes at a riot after the game.

"Would your parents let you go to the Neon Club Friday night?" Danny asked sheepishly. He was asking her out, practically. Oh my God, she thought. I'm gonna die! Don't blow it.

"Yeah, we're gonna be there. Lisa and Terry and Melissa were going too, but their parents aren't letting um. And they aren't even grounded." She sounded so immature, for sure, he thought quickly.

"We are gonna be there," she said, lurching a bit. Her little perfect frame, aching to get fondled by those big quarterback hands. He was God!

So cute! Smart.

"Well, I'll be there, but I'm gonna go with my brother to Fred's bar. You know, Tigerland." "Cool, dude." She waved bye. Her girlfriends were about to pee in their pants; they were about throw up they were so nervous.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Police department of Baton Rouge had been getting some weird calls about break-ins and prowlers in Scotlandville. The predominantly black neighborhood or town north of Baton Rouge, where the shotgun shacks and tarpaper Uncle Tom's cabins, less than opulent, were.

"Goddamn black people. Fuggin crime alla time. Thank gawd I got taken off that beat," Officer Perkins said, to some fellow officers.

"What is going on down there?" a redhaired officer asked. It was coffee time down at the Dunkin Doughnuts at 3 in the morning.

"How the hell do I know?" Officer Perkins said. "Prowlers." Strange calls coming into the dispatch. He resigned after eating that last raspberry filled doughnut. He wanted a refill of that wonder coffee go-juice. The gal working behind the counter was a bit of a mild retardate, probably. She weren't that bad looking, just those ears flapping in the air conditioning.

And that terminal bun. But that look of plumb blessed ignorance and boredom was promulgating all around the empty doughnut emporium on Essen Lane. There were several police cars parked outside. Everyone was taking a break. Thank gawd it was a slow night. Double duty now with this plague thing. Everybody was talking about it. They all felt, well, touched with some sickness that they couldn't define, feel. For all they knew, they could have a six-foot long tapeworm; that's what the eel-thing connection felt like.

Just couldn't sleep as good is all.

"All I know is we got enough problems understaffed with this city practically going fuggin militia and martial law. I got my family to think about. You too, Tom, Dave. We gotta take care of our own. How do you know they ain't starting some riot because of the panic that's in the streets?" "Look, we hadn't had no riot problems since the Black Panthers came in and started all that trouble on North Boulevard, or that skirmish at Southern University." "We got good black officers. Let's not start talking about black people rioting. This whole town's going down the tubes." "What we need is someone to explain this shit to us!" One huge officer said, humbly. "I'm totally confused." "I don't understand either, man." "Another refill officer?" the mild retardate with the industrial strength bra strap quizzed.

"All I know is we got some guys looking around down there, and one officer, . . . who was it? Broussard from Baker said he was some really weird looking people stalking, kinda hunched over. Scurrying around in the woods, near the fringe of that Main Street in Scotlandville, between LTI and Exxon." "Man, I tell you it's just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. There is enough panic around here with us all contaminated with some virus. While the rest of the country just kinda gawks at us. Reporters ain't even coming in to interview us, cause they are afraid to catch what we all supposedly have." The night scanned from afar was surprising callow and peaceful.

The air was surprisingly clear. The people were just sitting back, awaiting more information. The suburbs were filled with fear; it filled the streets.

Curfews were imposed. Some wild teenagers were having a ball, like it was the millennium, or a black

mass, or a heavy metal headbangers ball on MTV.

If we are all going to hell, or we are in hell, then why the hell not stop by K and B and pick up a couple cases a' Michelob Dark, and a couple half gallons of Crown Royal. Or even that cheap ten high stuff. Let's make it worse, let's do the wrong thing. Lets just ignore that shit. But tell the truth, they were all scared right down to their socks. Death hath not a kind little face. It was blood red and grinning fire trails down every back road and lovers lane and hot rod pad in the inroads of this dying, though not old, city.

It was a teen terror on Party Beach for every "Be true to your school" pizza face and adoring Madonna in active esprit designer wear and stonewashed jeans. The girls and boys were given something to reckon with besides whether or not to use a condom if that particular favorite choice ever came up. The outcome of that could be dealt with. But festering in each little lithe frame of bright-eyed boy and sweetest girl was presumed to be a horrid existence. A frightful horror right out of Stephen King movieland, that junkheart of the college freshman girl-reading-Dean R. Koontz-in-abikini in the sun. The rains came. It was rather a strange order of things. It was seasonal, though, after all. No, just the Jenkins Bible Academy thought that the rains coming and persisting were more than a bad luck mood-altering thing. It was nigh when Noah would build himself an ark and take em two by two. Fundamentalists hardly ever used logic to explain how a rich man could go to heaven about as often as a camel passing through the eye of a needle. But those poor little suburbanites, who now ruled over Sherwood Forest, and the vast expanses of Baton Rouge Yuppie town full of Baby Boomers, were living a two-reeler horror show. Mothers took their sons and daughters to doctors. The medical community was amuck with outpourings of calls. There would not be a prom. Businesses tried to run as usual but no, everyone had that look on their face like when the Iranian hostages were doing time during Carter's reign. Utter disgust seasoned with despair, agony, manic hyperactive frenzy. Frustration with no one to nail to the Wailing Wall.

So little Tod, Tad, Timmy and Jimmy with skateboards in tow and thunderbolts emblazed in their spiked hair, bejeweled with precious earrings like little princes, were not going to sneak into R-rated films. They weren't doing much of anything these days. Not stealing dad's Playboys, not running in soccer-sprawled acreage near the old airport. Not going to the Cinema 15 to see Arnold Schwarzenegger pound some faggots into trout meat. Quarantine was slowly settling, like when a cold starts digging into one's kidneys, way down there. Similarly, the little Alice, Tiffanies, Brittanies, Alexis, Chloe's, Daphne's, Brandy's, Crystallines, were all confined to the erudite chambers of yuppie havens. Those miniature Kubla Khan domes shielded from dangerous transmitted diseases. God forbid that one of those creatures from the villages of zombies would swipe that nurturing child from their breast.

Matter of fact, lots of guys in souped up cars were just beginning to figure out how to use this plague thing that had been yawping from radio and television, to their advantage, really. Tell a sweet little girl while you pat her little belly of love, pointing right by her belly bottom, that there is a festering in there. Something unnatural, something bacterial-like, that there is not an antidote for yet. These grease balls and road killers weren't stupid.

They wanted to get all the poon cuuz they could before their privates began to shrivel up. There wouldn't even be time to start getting carded at bars they were too underage to attend. So these girls would let them go under the bra, under that shirt, under that body suit, and even down there. That was the privilege of youth, jailbait being harpooned by jailbait; therefore, everybody wins. But Mr. Death from Twilight Zone would be grabbing all their little girlfriends' hands and making a brown casket for them. So get that pliant nubile flesh while they could, for their male videogamed hands would be still soon also. To disregard malaproped playboys, to kill that spirit below their belts. To cease those strong young men's respiratory systems, to attack the nerves and infiltrate their once strong vessels.

## Chapter Thirty

Jeff Pepper, the leading acoustic guitar in the garage band of Shenandoah apartment trash in South Baton Rouge, took some bong hits of ging dope.

He was trying to tell his buddies about the zombies in Devil's Swamp.

"Screw the practice session." The Headbanger's Ball on M-TV was on television. Women were lounging around drinking low cal wine coolers and hugging their boyfriends. Women were suckers for rock nontalent trash.

"There ain't no Zombie village!" Ozzy (that's what he started calling himself, before he was just John Crowhurst), said with that rhombus of upside down insanity in rock mentality.

"I'm telling ya, John-boy," Jeff said, shaking his mane of blonde hair out like he was hands on an ion-generator. "Our dope connection down at Uncle Earl's (revered hot band bar); Bruce, the California dude, works down at the River Bend site." "Big screwin wowser!" "Don't be a cuz, wheezer John!" "Ozzy to you carrotwanger . . ." They were still miffed at each other for stealing the show down at the Sport's Page on Old Hammond Hwy. That was the night they almost got a DWI while Dirky was in the back seat taking a bite out of a girl named Beverly, in her desirous y-joint.

"I didn't take the solo too long, Ozzy!" Their voices barely carried over the MTV VeeJay yelling at America.

A girl walked downstairs in the sleazy townhouse amongst the Fender Rhodes, speakers, and wires strung out in disarray in the studio. It was a darkly lit pit of thrash metal with good times by Miller beer. They were all holding Miller beers and waterpiping themselves some heavenly hash passed around in freak central. The girl was not wearing anything but a bra and a pair of walking shorts. She had a pair of mou mou's that made one's manhood bristle with rock n' roll testosterone.

The girl walked past and said, "I ain't going to the zombie village." "They are stoned as we are. I'm going to head on over to Village of the Damned for a sneak peak at radioactive green oozing shitheads munching on legs of teenaged hookers." He was the king of weird, kind of like a poor man's Phil Spector with lots less brain damage. MTV just kept on rhapsodizing on skittles sugar candy for whatever rots your teeth. The VeeJay was being embarrassingly smug and pretentious as he was interviewing Jon Bon Jovi in the Hard Rock Cafe.

"Is that the one in LA or New York?" "It ain't the one in New Orleans. Shit you are one stupid bass player." "I should have hacked you up with my razor guitar, hatchet face." An evening at home with the Addams Family. The girl grabbed yet another lite wine cooler and bent over to take a big hit to further create a hollow cavity in between her ears, right in the middle of the cranium.

Like when she opened up a green pepper with a ginsu knife, and inside was a bug sitting there saying,

"Damn it's been cold in this green pepper in the screwing fridge for the last three weeks, it's about time you cut this screwin thing open, I'm tired of eating my screwin way out of this green screwing pepper you screwin hippie." That's exactly what was going on in that girl's screwing mind. Underdeveloped brain. Firm tits that were mashed together quite nicely. The bra folded wide open and her nipples were viewed by all boys and girls in the mousketeer LSD club.

"Sherrie, darling, could you do me a favor?" Jeff Pepper said.

"Anything asswiper, I mean darling," she said.

"Don't show your screwing brown aureoles to everybody," he said, with a hint of death.

"What's that asswiper? I mean darling?" she said.

"That is that dark brown wrinkly area around the protruding nipple tips of your big screwing breasts? Aren't they? I mean, you own them, they are a part of you. I've fondled them many times, I guess I mean your nipples.

I wonder? Have you ever heard of shirts?" "Asswiper, Sorry bout that. But they are mine nonetheless." Truly madhouse. Jeff (asswiper) got his car keys after the titty peep show of this carnival of souls. In the room with a water pipe in the middle of a den with MTV blasting RATT and a purple haze of stench like incenses of sanctimony.

"Let's go dudes." "Sounds like a plan and a half to me," Ozzy said.

"Actually, it sounds like a plan and 3/16's to me." They left as she put her lite wine cooler right down on top of a speaker frame standing six feet tall. Which would have made Jeff Asswiper take a lunge at her in that misogynist way rockers use to make their women feel kinda special. She finally put a shirt on, as there weren't any males in the room to gaze upon her bronzed chest.

"Awesome and polymorphously excellent," resounded from the little Toyota filled with ging dope from Mexico via the River Bend connection.

The Toyota trudged down the slick slab of interstate as they weaved miraculously in their marveling moment. Searching for signposts like ancient mariners, or the lights of Oxford like a beacon to the blind. The thrash metal basically beat in their chests from boom box speakers that made up 50% of the bashed up Toyota. They howled and screamed as they went to a zombie village in the middle of the night.

The traffic was nil; nobody got around since the curfew. The police state terrorist's against hippie booted musicians who knew dominant, tonic and subdominant guitar chords, and could make up five albums of that basic knowledge.

"This is a screwin ghost town." "It ain't no apocryphal legend." "What isn't, Ozzy?" he said as he handed him the joint and ashes flung all over creation in a flash of hot spark.

They would be there essentially in thirty minutes. The Exit at seedy North Baton Rouge, the descent into that good night, to Devil's Swamp.

Inequities unbound, as those longhairs swooned from substances and Ozzy (John) was attempting to drive. No doubt he would have been stopped all the way back by the JESUS \$AVES trestle by the Jenkins Ministries for badly following dotted lines in the street. With a Toyota way out of alignment, but well worth the value from thrash metal gigs and selling office furniture to suckers in three pieced suits at rock bottom prices. Imperialist dweebs all.

"Man this is too much," Ozzy said as Dirky played the beat from "WIPEOUT" in the back seat. Ahead of them, as they drove the car through the vast wasteland of drudgery-induced bleakness, the little car hit the ruts in the landfill. The mysterious pylons and manmade forms of zombie headquarters near the way off horizon of darkness and water's edge in moonglowed drizzle. Wet, warm and eerie all over, was all around them amongst the fetidness. They got out of the car without question; they had a quest.

These wispy-haired lads put one keebler boot in front of the other in that quest to find zombies. The darkness enveloped them like a black velvet curtain. The unholy stench wrapped around each of them. It was a bit surreal in the wasteland here in the middle of the night amidst topographical blemishes in the blasted landfill heath. They wandered about aimlessly, amusing themselves with what was accomplished so far. Boy would they be able to tell their story now, write songs about this Village of the Damned, yet unseen.

Ozzy hoped there wasn't such a thing. He knew enough about radiation from "Nightflight" programs and cult classics and punk rocking slam dancing themes. That you just got radiation and melted your eyeballs, and then keeled over. None of this nonsense about putrefied walking green wagon loads of sputum flotsam caked in shit. He was observing the structures of heaps of organized piles of junk in some sort of fashionable formation.

That was his first mistake: to go near there, past there, and summon the others.

All of them were down by the water's edge. That's where that maze of largest pipes were jutting out, the water level quite down. Up in the treacherous skies where the space pods of viral death per high school informed sources, was something malevolently scrupulous. It was a good night to die. Quite unfazed, Ozzy started walking. Click, clacked his boots down into the pipe into the darkness. He had done such before; he was the rebel for their times. That's what he always had to prove with Jeff's girlfriends.

They would always migrate that way to him. His antics. Jeff started to go in but saw the ultimate shade of black in there, and waited. He could hear Ozzy's foul mouth arresting the mother tongue whilst on uncontrolled substances and then some screaming.

Was he shitting? That asshole was doing a hell of a job scaring him to pee in brown velvet pants. It felt good, but it ain't a good idea. Dirky started in, to further the prank. He went quite a ways, and then the screaming stopped from Ozzy's frayed pipes. Jeff decided that he would go and seek a newer world, to sail beyond his dismal asswiping sunset like Lord Alfred Tennyson himself. He walked with gravity boots to keep him from tripping and busting his arse. He kept going.

They didn't come out. The Toyota was found the next day by some brothers dumping some garbage. Finally, after a few days Jeff's girlfriend reported them all missing. The Toyota was found at the scene after a few flatfooted detectives who had no time for amateurish thrash metal crimes decided to look into the matter.

The bodies of three longhaired boys were being chomped on by a whole nest of eel-things, all large and fat and wide bellied. Gnashing of teeth and mutated slitherings as the village of zombies waited patiently for the nest of holy creatures to get finally full. Then they casually but fumbling took the carrion of what was left, the heads and some flesh and entrails, and gnawed on those until there was nothing left. The pools of yellowish waste were bathing spots to keep that monstrous sickly high rush of radiation to a happy buzz. These creatures that watched and cared for the eel-things threw the skeletons in with all the others. All the missing persons of Baton Rouge were in a heap and the air was rife with dried blood, coagulated. Some of these zombies had uniforms quite shredded by now which read River Bend nuclear plant staff. They had no idea of who they were, due to infection.

There were several carcasses of dogs, nutria. The bundles of slithering eel-things were in some hierarchical order. And the zombies were duly reverent and benign and worshipping them. Cats that had strayed into the tunnels, drawn by the smell of dead rodents. The entire landscape of Devil's Swamp still appeared benign to those whose daily job was to landfill and dump and level out the increasing bile and fodder.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Kendra talked to her supervising Medical Officer.

"We expect the first wave of deaths to begin by the end of next week." Dr. Khan said without a hint of death. Without a nod, without a strain in his voice. Kendra gulped.

"Oh, my God." "Yes, well, we haven't heard anything about a breakthrough in our vaccine for what is coming," Khan said further.

She saw a black wave of Death swath over the entire town. Empty cars, streets sprawling with carrion, bodies of kids, their parents, all forms of life.

"Has the governor decided to start evacuating?" She asked impatiently.

"I don't know." he paused. "I think that is to be decided within the next 48 hours." All he said further was "Yes." to fill in that void where she didn't exactly know what to say.

"Are you staying behind? We can use you." Khan said.

She knew she had to. She walked out of the room and Dr. Khan moved into the other lab rooms of the immense chemistry biological sciences building, which was now housing some of the more preeminent scientists from the best research centers in the world. Onward Christian soldiers, she thought, as she passed a really handsome guy who was extremely preoccupied with his struggle to come up with his share of information in regard to the team effort of vaccination.

**The BIG ANNOUNCEMENT, (BIGGEST NEWS IN STATE HISTORY) CAME FINALLY SIMULCAST OVER ALL FOUR TELEVISION STATIONS AND RADIO: "Hello citizens of Baton Rouge and outlying areas. I'm Governor Thibadeaux.**

**I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT THERE WILL BE AN URGENT REQUEST TO EVACUATE EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH, BAKER, DENHAM SPRINGS, PRAIRIEVILLE, AND PORT ALLEN. WE HAVE A GRAVE EMERGENCY AND IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE THAT YOU BEGIN PACKING AND LEAVING THE AREA BY THE END OF NEXT FRIDAY. I REGRET THIS DECISION BUT THERE IS A REAL POSSIBILITY OF DEATH OF THOSE WHO DO NOT LEAVE. ALL BUSINESSES HAVE BEEN TEMPORARILY CLOSED, AND STATE MILITIA AND SOME NATIONAL TROOPS ARE IN FORCE AND**



WILL BE DECLARING BATON ROUGE UNDER MARTIAL LAW. LOOTERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT. I REPEAT . . . (REPEATS) I KNOW HOW FRIGHTENING ALL THIS SOUNDS, AND SCIENTIST TEAMS OF WORLD EXPERTS ON HIS SUBJECT OF DISEASE ARE WORKING ROUND THE CLOCK TO FIND A VACCINE TO KEEP A PLAGUE From ACTUALLY OCCURRING. I THANK YOU AND YOU WILL BE INFORMED MORE IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE IN REGARDS TO THIS MOST TERRIBLE CHAPTER IN OUR STATES HISTORY. WE ARE A STATE THAT KNOWS HOW TO TAKE CARE OF ITS OWN GOOD PEOPLE. DO NOT PANIC. YOU WILL BE SAFE ELSEWHERE. THERE WILL BE CAMPS SET UP IN THOSE PARISHES . . . THE RED CROSS AND FEDERAL ASSISTANCE FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY WILL BE ON HAND . . ." He went on. He probably wouldn't be reelected, even though this was the most important announcement made by a Louisiana Governor since Reconstruction.

Kendra just stood gawking for a moment at the broadcast as it hummed in the lab. She kept probing the creature all slit open. Vials of fluids and chemical analyses apparatus were strewn all about. The others had left for the night, having been up since 4 am on their particulars.

Ricky Harrison got a call from Joe Thomas. He was frightened.

"Harrison. I got some bad news. Elward died last night at Lady of the LakeHospital. The plague." "God!" was all that Ricky Harrison could say.

"I'm leaving, lil padnuh," he said as his voice grew wise and quiet.

"Joe!" Ricky said, from the dearth wastrel lot of narcissism and self-denial.

"Uhuh . . ." "I'm staying," Ricky said. The television flashed phosphor dots of death in the dim glow of the cavernous efficiency. Right smack on that side of the fence from the projects, he could see people packing, getting in their cars, leaving. The city was becoming dead, a disinfected, dying organic slab of disparate chunks of clans of people. People had now grown to forget their usual injustices, perjurous thought, hatreds, for something better. United against the onslaught of Death, the folks were running their white and black asses out of the city. Across parish lines, and into interment camps in Mississippi, and some in Texas. Louisiana was cradled into Mississippi and Texas like a little spot of cultural wonderment, but now it was going to be a ghost of a dwelling place, a phantom.

"You stayin?!" Thomas said. "You're crazy. You's a fool!" Ricky thought, he's trying to keep his sense of humor, even through his kids are probably going to die before they get past the parish line.

"How are your kids? Your family?" Ricky thought to ask. Joe Thomas sobbed and relentlessly fought it back. Can't have no brother crying in front of a sorry-assed white boy, who didn't know any better, Ricky thought.

"Oh, little padner, we are on our way out. You know me, always looking for that basketball camp, playing against Larry Bird. Going to maybe play ball in the Australian league, or Europe. Something I almost did once.

Got the shots, and everything, and didn't go." "Well, I am going to stay here." Ricky said, in wonderment as to why he kept emphasizing that. Something to PROVE.

"Well, why?" "Because I just know that I have to." "Okay. Look, I gotta go. I wish you would get your Jethro ass outa there." "I'll be all right," Ricky said, with ambiguity that became him.

Ennobled right then and there through his own hypocrisy. A walking misnomer.

A truly mixed up man. "I gotta go, Ricky . . ." His wife was almost out the door.

"Just remember, lil padner, if you do decide to go, the interstate and all roads leading out the city are jammed full of the brothers and honkies all trying to get out." "Alright, Joe." Ricky gulped. He wanted to say something to Joe Thomas.

"Well, it looks like our lives are all full a shit," Joe said in disillusioned reckoning, his voice fading away once more.

"Joe. I guess that at least I got to quote some Lord Byron to all the brothers," Ricky said, half sobbing now.

"Maybe you can do it again. Remember, nothing gold can stay." He said it again, and how lovely it ended in that resonant pallor of muriatic tone quality. Timbre, coming from the head brother, the golden athlete, the hipster who shined for MacNeese where life was fun as it began to fade to memories and mystical legend. The palette of Baton Rouge during the seventies when both Joe Thomas and Ricky Harrison were once on top of the world; slashing through the murky past, once present, new gone, and forgotten.

"I love you guys," Ricky said.

"You too, lil padhuh. I gotta go now. . .," Bye he had said. Bye Harrison had said. Too melodramatic in those days of plagues, locusts, biblical hardships of modern people. The decay of the yuppie from the inside. The anthill of cave dwellers now pulling up their roots and yanking themselves out of their falling decline. Ricky Harrison was going to stick it out. Going to stay there. On his answering machine, with his message outgoing, his father had told him to get the hell out. His sisters left their share also. He heard the sound of Army trucks in the martial law atmosphere now going down.

Ricky Harrison put a little nip of bourbon in a jigger, and proceeds to have other jiggers laid right down the line. Till he was possessed with that malaise of embalming himself so sweetly against the mounting deadness.

The incessant silent white noise of a town being purged.

He watched the cars going by, past his apartment. Mostly black people coming out of the inner city, the industrial lower rent, less fashionable people who knew better. They wanted to live, probably. Was he going to stay? DID he have a death wish? Why had he come to that decision?

Marlene Harrison would be waiting for him in Paradise?

What possessed Ricky Harrison? He knew he was in decline before, with the boozing and depraved poetic stance, but now! It would certainly make good fodder for some black-and-white grainy art film. Ricky Harrison, concurrent altar boy, in decline for drinking the monsignor's wine at those 6 A.M. masses for the little old ladies who felt the Holy Trinity.

Then Harrison put on "War of the Worlds," the George Pal movie. The part where Gene Barry and Ann Robinson are finding themselves in the only possible safe haven, the cathedral. Ricky Harrison cited this sudden connection of body and soul intertwining in some knotted monstrous aberration, a good rough blind spot where he could feel peace. The Martians wreaking havoc, before the viruses do them in. How fitting, appropriate.

Indeed! Harrison believed in something. Harrison believed he would have another drink.

The telephone rang. It was his sister, the now repentant yuppie housewife, whose great accomplishment

was passing the CPA exam. Now she was finding herself nursing the only nephew that Ricky Harrison had, Christopher.

"Ricky . . . It's Karla. When are you leaving?" "Umm. I'm leaving real soon." "We are going to go through Hammond, into Jackson, Mississippi.

We want you to meet us there." "Okay." Ricky knew she was in dire need of something, some reassurance.

"I just want to make sure Chris is alright," Harrison said, truly moved by imagining himself playing with Chris, Nintendo video games.

Being beaten by a five-year-old who was quite capable of whipping Harrison in Nintendo and then peeing in his pants, all over the bed, the next instant.

"I love you, and Karen, and Daddy. I just want y'all to know that." "So you are going soon?" she asked. The anxiety welled up in her exclamation. Yuppie mothers had given their offspring virtually everything that one could buy in a large shopping mall. Or at K-Mart, or Toy's R Us.

But could they watch their little yuppie toddler die, giving way to death and his brother sleep, as Shelley once said? Could they envision the little magnate of the toy kingdom dead and silent, in his Big Wheel? Silent in the crib, now a makeshift grave? Their once perfect world, painting by the numbers on everything sober successful yuppies did so well. Now turned into a rotting freak show of events, a terrible succession of hideous images, the family succumbing.

Ricky talked with her, his mind freed from bondage through K & B liquor. The ghost town was becoming real. He would revel in this knowledge.

A death wish, he now knew, was ten times better than being once promising, and now in decline. You could go all the way with a death wish.

How incurably romantic it all was. The main arteried routes out of the cauldron were jammed with rednecked Okie like families, yuppie vans with 2.3 kids in each. Veritably every permutation of people hightailed out of what was now terrain stunned with the "Mark of the Beast." The fallow ground was now embodied evil. The land, nothing but loblollies and shallow swampy terrain, was now looked upon by the glass eyed frightened gentry as never returning.

## **Chapter Thirty Two**

On those rainy interstate forks, where I-10 met I-110 the folks were bumperto- bumper white-feared. Honking, a certain regained frenzy but united in their cause to flee the cauldron. One could see Volkswagens, pickups and good times vans waiting their turns as the numerous army vehicles in their drab olive green with brave ROTC and regular army guys stationed to watch for looters as if the Baton Rouge riots had

been summarily restarted.

The hejira from LSU was awe-inspiring. Amid the worried countenances of hardworking honest families escaping, there was a convoy of preppy frat rats and their skirt trash in monster trucks. Accommodating the right lane that now featured a rather ugly mob scene of desperate Christians.

There were groups of girls in bikini's adorning the flatbeds of these monstrous big footed steel muscle-wagons. Whorehouses on wheels, the lot of them. Amid the anguished souls in all outgoing lanes of I-10 to Mississippi were the cherubic bikinied, tanned lithe sorority suzies all clutching that Miller Light. Some even had kegs in the wheel wells, death on tap.

They were laying in the sun-god sphere beating down on the entire carnival sight. These girls were exuding no worries as they lay there, striking some attitude there on that passage. These little bun-nuns decked out in the latest shopping mall swimwear, were proclaiming their short lived, but possibly eternal yes by chugging down brewskies. An attitude to the mass confusion of army trucks, armed inclusions of less-promising military bohunks from the various depots. These guy and girls were hardly bringing anything with them. A sort of nihilistic End-of the Word get together for the college aesthetes. They were fleeing too, though.

Folks who were abandoning their second-mortgaged homes and social class lifestyles, were just ignoring the slight strain of youth abhorrent to romantic college girls odes to Sylvia Plath wisdom. They were in the midst of the biggest evacuation. The wide-opened interchanges were filled with families scuttling like snakes going for higher ground when the mud holes get flooded during spring high water.

One youthful group of high school football athletes was attempting to start some version of "Deathrace 2000." Trying to score women, and decked out with their hunting rifles. The army boys up the road a halfmile, by the airline highway exit, followed the clodhoppers. The meaty boys bent on badassed bullshit. With a bit of a struggle and a couple of nutstomping ass-kickings, got the weapons away from them. They knocked out a couple of tech sergeants who didn't see it coming. Meanwhile, the monster trucks hauled ass on the shoulder. They followed the high school jocks, because they saw a flash of weaponry, amid the monstrous coalition of state troopers, families, girded in three lanes bumper-to bumper like it was the screwing SEC title in the offing.

The army troops aimed their carbines at these unfortunate high school punks raring-to-go versus the college pussies. To rip those blouses off the bitches decked out in the backs of these trucks on aluminum lawn furniture.

The kegs rolling around the floorboard with every acceleration from the boys.

The cities' cathedrals and Catholic churches were not empty, either. They were filled with old ladies, madams who went to mass two times a day. Our Savior would protect them. Saying the rosary was the best thing you could do. Lots of priests were almost down to Holy Orders, Extreme Unction.

The ashen foreheads of these ladies were little streaks remarking pollution to all.

Ricky Harrison watched "Death in Venice," with Dirk Bogarde.

He had stashed a treasure of several half-gallons of smooth bourbon from the Schweggman's grocery before they shut it. There was something touching as Ricky watched Dirk Bogarde in rapid decline in the Lido in that dying city, Venice. There was no Tadzio for Ricky to divert his attention from the plague. He could call Kendra; maybe she was gone too? No, she had to be holed up in some lab somewhere. He would find her, even if she roamed to the ends of the earth, which was surely nearby. The national news folks were already too scared to come near the infected wasteland that Baton Rouge had become.

Folks out in the sticks like Prairieville, Faulknerian dilettantes from Sorrento and Gonzales were not leaving their hallowed land.

They were on the fringe anyway, or what those fancy news people were calling the line of death. Reinvention of the plague to come, of terms, misnomers. The vilified facts as they saw them, and from what they could glean from the medical folks ensconced in those high rise hospitals. The highways were still congested.

Harrison thought the town had made it out en masse. The next morning he took a walk in a long arcing perimeter of the cauldron. There were no principalities in the vicinity. Just carrion and carnage. Not a sound was heard from insects, animals, people. Almost total silence. Auto alarms ringing like dirges from way off. Silence.

He loped along Lobdell and walked down Florida Blvd. in earnestness.

The sun was shining brutally as usual. He wasn't he dead? As he walked, he stepped over corpses. Families fell almost together. It was ghastly.

He made his way seeing veritable pyres of bodies. That first wave must have hit. He didn't feel too good himself; perhaps he was finally catching the incubating disease. He had that welcome death wish. But he wanted to live!

Oh, grave where is thy victory, he thought, from that Rachmanikov song.

The little dirges of those rather incessant car horns bleating against man and God, found him humming quietly in his madness. He had rather hoped seeing somebody on this sprightly walk through purgatory. He walked through the mall. Surely there would be somebody. Right past B. Dalton, on to the largish McDonald's and right past the cinema eleven where he had once seen his fair share of celluloid atrocities. Give me Bergman in this suffering. Death walking in a mall, not a beach. Playing chess with Death, he would even be sporting by giving me a few extra moves in the endless game of soul wrenching bargaining. He surely had gone mad, the distilled reality of this sudden affront against death. The bodies sprawled in the indoor mall of a few army troops, having gallantly braved the pandemic. In order to shot a few looters for ripping off the Picadilly Cafeteria's leg of roast or stealing cowboy boots in a brave attempt to dress smartly and indulge in a welcome shopping spree. Perhaps the Wal-Mart down the road was filled with corpses. Their last words heard over the eternal microphone "Attention K-Mart shoppers, we have a special on anything you could possibly want in this misguided free-for-all before you succumb." He was quite hung over, but the mindboggling proportion of humbling actuality of death in large numbers; everyone was dead. So everyone hadn't been smart enough to high tail it, bird dog down the interstate to a border state.

As he stepping over dead souls, there was some wailing coming from the TCBY yogurt place. A middle-aged man was sprawled up against the rising stools, his legs moving slowly. Ever so slowly, his mouth an anguished gash of soft screaming. Ricky walked over pronto.

"Can you hear me? Are you alright?" The man shook his head no. "Ugghhh," was all he could muster.

Harrison grabbed a misplaced piece of fabric, a sweater or something.

Harrison placed it under the man's tired head, to comfort him. Oh, God, he thought.

The man breathed in spasms. He now wrenched in unbearable pain. It wouldn't be long. He was trying to tell him something.

"What is it? Where is your family?" The man appeared delirious.

"I gotta get home. My wife will . . . (gasp) be waiting for me." "Okay. I..." Harrison didn't know what to do.

He continued . . . "I got to meet my foursome on the back nine . . ." and then no more. Delirious.

At that point, Harrison, now witnessing death first hand, retched right by the rum raisin canister on its side. He threw up K & B bourbon.

And then onward, out of the mall, down silent Florida now realizing he was fashionably alive; but it wouldn't be long. He had miraculously not partaken of a slice of death on a slab. He walked down the street. The abandoned cars housed their unlucky owners, who could've have made it, if only they had the sense enough to leave earlier. Harrison would walk these streets in light of this hellishness. To observe, to walk until he too would succumb.

He finally wound up at a pay phone near the Hopper's drive in, after he had successfully raided the Church's fried chicken for a bucket of double battered crispy legs and wings.

It was just a guess, he thought as he pulled out Kendra's card.

Surely, those screwing scientists stayed behind. It rang and miraculously it was her.

"Hello?" He now realized he was panic-stricken. It had all finally sunk into his skull.

"I'M ALONE IN A town OF CORPSES AND ZOMBIES, AND I'M GOING TO BE AS DEAD AS MARTHA MITCHELL, TOO!" "Hello? Hello?" went the other end. He couldn't bring himself to say anything. Finally, he screamed out his vision of world sorrow. Cataclysmic Gregorian chant of raving lunacy. Now in shock. She waited for a moment.

"Who is this?" she said.

"It's Ricky Harrison" he managed.

"Who?" she said, quite rightly raving herself. Why was she still here?

"Ricky Harrison from the Chimes." "Oh. Just listen to me. Get here right away. Go to the LSU campus and look for me at the biochemistry building!" "But I have seen death here, and it hath not a kind face!" He had probably lost it.

"Just get the SCREW over HERE Goddammit! NOW!" Click. He picked himself out in his mania a bright shiny new Volvo coffin station wagon. He had to tidy up by pulling out a lovely yuppie family by their coattails and flop them onto the pavement, sprawling and still. Was he getting hardboiled against this sort of thing? The keys were still in it.

Down the road, he saw people walking around, scurrying, yelling.

Looters whose immune systems had enabled them to loot until doomsday.

Which was in about 10 minutes. He drove towards them in the Volvo.

Peeling rubber, as a Volvo will do when one punches it, and swerve around like a maniac.

Inelegantly he went over bodies instead of around them; their impact resounding thawks and thuds. He was adjusting, alright. The pack of looters, black men, started running towards him as he came up on

them going rather fast.

I've got to turn around, he thought. These guys are killers. They snarled and lunged for the Volvo as it did a 180 degree clumsy spin around and Florida Boulevard and the thugs suddenly became like back screen projection in a Flintstones cartoon or any bad old movie. He hit one of them, he thought. One of them grabbed at the side of the Volvo. One threw something at him, and then one pulled out a pistol and aimed it at him as he sped away full throttle. The gun popped off repeated rounds and the back tail gate plunked with hot lead in it. He ducked and almost wiped his ass out heading towards the highway 61 which would get him onto the interstate and the hell out of harm's way.

He breathed tenfold, his heart pumping like this Volvo had a boom box that would put the Holy Ghost up and down his rib cage with double bass hip hop. He couldn't bear the dismal carnage, cars stopped in middeath.

The sickness, the disease just apparently came suddenly. Death surely had not a kind little face. But he was alive. And there was free food, free liquor, supplies, ammunition, guns, water—supermarkets brimming with more carnage in human form than that rotting meat section. No army regular types; they knew when to get the fuck out. He was the one square dancing with the screwing devil. That Benedictus and Kyrie Elison had a good beat, but you can't dance to it. He sped down the Airline Highway past the wreckage piled up at various intersections. Car leaderships, Circle K marts, Steak and Egg Kitchen, Redneck nightclub, (More free liquor, there would be continuous ladies night, bring a dead friend and we'll give you all the liquor you can stand to wash away your iniquities, cleanse me of your sins.) So, this is what it's like to relive "On the Beach." Was the whole country in this thing? By God, he did not think to check the television stations! What a moron. He didn't know if he was the last man on earth or not. But Kendra was there. Well, maybe he would get lucky, an end of the world extravaganza!

He went from that stray thought to practically spewing the Hail Mary's out the window with no one to listen to in this mind-blowing anomaly.

He ambled by the skeletal metal cars prone on the interstate. A mottled array of abandoned cars where families were struck with the onslaught.

He then throttled it and went past College, past Acadian Thruway.

Up and over until he got off at Dalrymple. Through the LSU lakes, he slowed down to see something up ahead, a commotion. Activity of some sort, as the sun was going down and it appeared on any other sort of day, to be a nice day. He got closer to the red light.

It was a few sprawled corpses of what appeared to have been a family. A foreign family, Koreans. There were, some zombies, wild frenzied renditions of monstrous something or other, munching on these corpses.

Harrison went into sort of shock. They didn't even bother to look up. One was ripping away the flesh from an arm, and another had eaten a good bit of a leg. What should he do? Stop them? Distract them. No. Stay away, he should run them over. The Zombies looked thin, gaunt. Their eyes subhuman in nature, that helter skelter gone gaze. No sentient entity, no realization, just lower-animal instinct like common dogs. He throttled it, ran the light, and hit one of them dead on. They bounced and careened off, wounded mortally, the other casually kept devouring.

Harrison threw up the Church's fried chicken that he had heartily eaten an hour ago near the Bon Marche shopping center. Now he knew he wasn't exactly safe, as some other rustling in the marsh by the city lakes denoted more creatures lurking about. Zombies in the bullrushes, out of their mind, down-the road

whacko. In the valley of the blind, the one-eyed man was king. Or so said H.G. Wells. But in his dystopia, or extreme situation that would remain so, Ricky knew that there was no wanderlust here. There was nothing beatific or remarkable about this situation. His head was throbbing with the anxiety, the remorse, the utter bleakness regarded.

It was untenable, as he careened into the gates of LSU past the Varsity Theater. Other zombies or victims were slowing ambulating, crawling in agony on the pavement, in the last throes of death-grippe. He flew through the traffic lights, and ran out the car into the biochemistry building, fifth floor.

And there she was down the hallway, in her underwear, sobbing.

He saw now that there were corpses stacked up in one end, in white medical smocks. He ran up to her and saw that pouty look, but multiplied combinations and permutations tenfold worse. She was shaking visibly.

They hugged together for a good twenty minutes against the tide of bereavement. He hadn't realized it himself, but he was in shock. She unlocked from his hug and reached to the small table for a few syringes. She wiped those eyes many times as she readied the needle.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

"You're in shock ...(she sobbed), let me shoot you up . . ." 50 milligrams of Demerol. Puncture and immediate fulfillment of gratifying pleasure; a short commuting of his rather immense anguish. He was crying now, as the shock of everything he had witnessed had worn off. They both sat there, in the rank formaldehyde, with an audience of esteemed corpses of the finest medicine studies all gone, forsaken. The radio playing BLACK FLAG from a cassette, new wave manic guitar licks resounding forth as they hugged each other and they cried together.

The end of the world get-together. She hadn't the strength to explain why her colleagues were dead. They began passionately kissing each other, her gorgeous face stunned, both of them, stunned. Then she had almost forgotten . . .

"Here's your temporary immunity . . ." He looked at her, into those eyes.

"There is a cure?" She nodded ambiguously.

"Not exactly." She felt his forehead with her hand. "You look like you wouldn't have made it through the night. You have the signs: jaundice around the eyes, the increased blood pressure, the profuse sweating. In short, you have the symptoms of someone, just before they would normally succumb. The loss of memory, loss of some reasoning, that loss of certain nerve or motor functions." She said that as she regaled him sitting there in her cotton underwear, her little slip and panties. She shot him up with several of the temporary cures.



"How come the others didn't make it?" She brooded.

"I didn't have it ready. I was erroneous in the mixture. I should by all rights be dead also." "Is anyone else alive?" "There are some folks staying in the Varsity Club Alumni quarters.

They have been reprieved from . . . I shot them up." He kissed her.

There were others.

As the radio chugged forth nihilistic chords, they were foretold of this blanket of death that now covered all of them. Ricky then felt some sensibility coming back to him. He was creaking in his joints with the sweetness of the demurral. He felt oddly at peace, down amongst the dead men, the wave of death that came because the toxin serum was days too late.

"There is one thing that I don't know that I am afraid to ask," Ricky said in his delirium. He reached for that bottle of Benchmark bourbon and swigged it down as the formaldehyde began to seep into him in the ether-like funeral parlor pall in the hallway. There were still dissected specimens of the stygian eels in the adjoining labs, lit up as the lights flickered constantly.

"What's that sweetie?" She said as her lips pecked at him, sweetly kissing his face. His unshaven brownish stubble, his blond hair messed up, his handsome features. He had lost several pounds, enough to get him almost thin, gaunt, lean mean. He hadn't really eaten anything substantial; his appetite had waned for at least a month. Liquid diet of scotch and soda and cracked ice.

"Is the whole world like this?" She grabbed the remote control and CNN came on with rushes of new anxiety and urgency. The reporters were whispering death like bearers of bad news. Pictures of videoed masse bodies, carrion all around familiar streets of Baton Rouge. Apparently, the plague had swept Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge Parish, up north to St. Francisville, down halfway to New Orleans and east to Hammond, Livingston Parish.

"You see the world, right? Does that answer your question?" She cried again and he too. They began kissing passionately as the tears rolled down their cheeks, as Mahler's Fifth Symphony blasted forth from the ghetto blaster. The misery of the second movement resounded as they thrust away at each other naked and quivering. Loving each other, striking an attitude of nihilistic love to combat the events.

She was still every bit as beautiful as . . . hell, he loved her. Even if they were the last people on earth, he loved her. Her blonde mane, her heaving breasts, her little butt brown as a nut, her lack of hips, her shape, her full lips, her eyes mesmerizing him from now till doomsday. The worst could be over. He was rambling away in his ratiocination dulled by the demurral running through his brain like cocaine. They thrust ever more so, and they both came together, like it was all written, in some book centuries ago. Everything was meant to happen this way. Refineries, nuclear power plants, all running with no one at the controls, nothing but corpse grinding machinery to run until a cog is pulled, broken, jamming the works.

Out in the demilitarized zone, amid the wailing sirens and that sour quiet of no one alive outside those gates of LSU where Ricky Harrison lay in a cot-bed with Kendra, all doped up and full of Benchmark bourbon, was chaos.

Kendra lay there in her tanned glory, her face wan and slack from the absorption of the sheer bluntness of the events. Tantamount to funeral pyres, bodies at once piled up, doused with Coleman fuel, kerosene and the barbecue of sweet smell of these Dixie sons and daughters rupturing in waves of yellow orange flame. In the etherisation of the medical holding hall of dankness Ricky and Kendra lay next to one another in their deliriousness.

Pills and syringes and textbooks lay about like scrolls, a language of symbols now worthless as the witnessing of the assault of the fallow land come to take back what was taken from it.

Kendra lay there with cottonmouth hangover blurriness in her fuzzy face of waking too early in her sheer fright. The fever gaunts of an all too true destiny as they lay together like the last man and woman on an eerie blue cloudscape of land. The moon glow skittering across the horizon in this surreal portrait landscape. Ricky nudged her with his soft fingers touching her pureness, her little blonde haired arms askance as her loveliness lay there in everlasting glory.

He got up and shot himself up with twice as much Demerol as a man could stand in his blue period, his washed salad days here where he hadn't a right to be. Why him? Out there, all those refineries, those suburbs, that nuclear chemistry set of the centaurs of some mythological fable.

Why was he able to huddle into a fetal position with the most siren-like vision of splendor since Rimbaud went to business college? He knew he was glad he wasn't dead. He went to the window of her office where a doctor's corpse lay stiff but comfortable, died smiling and thinking about sailing to a newer world. Hippocratic oath in his front pocket, medical miracle of those who could not even save their own mortal souls in this slugfest debacle.

Ricky Harrison sat there next to the corpse in Kendra's chair. Smiling through the sweet Demerol and the needle tossed to the floor in his delight, in his blindness against pain. As the huge billowing fires raged where Kaiser Aluminum, Dow Chemical and Exxon were burning like Pearl Harbor. With no one to needle with gauges and dampers and if they were lucky, the whole place would go up in flames before the new armies could control the giant napalm party across the Mississippi River which was magnificent from their seventh story lookout like it was the Hilton or the Pierre. Or the Lido in Venice where he could look with scorn and not amazement at the pyrotechnic fireworks display as these Wagnerian lightships of ghostly mystical-ness flickered in the vast distance as the sun began to come up from the east, to the opposite side. He stood there in his pristine nudity leaning next to the good doctor, gripping the chair and imagining the doctor mumbling epithets of candid holiness. Silent little orisons to bury the dead all round the city, sprawled in and out of McDonald's. Malls turned into Dog Mulch Glue factories, the Wal-Marts and K-Marts turning into allegorical vestiges of Dante's inferno. Suburbs now getting yuppie blood pouring into those well manicured lawns.

Up north the nuclear power plant was probably in disarray also, Monday morning meltdown. Burn a hole right through the earth like Sherman's March through Atlanta. What about Angola State Penitentiary?

The majestic lightning blew in arcs of white heat against the glow of the dawn. The Mississippi River had a black brackish stillness and the bridge sparkled as the metal girders flayed against the smoking morass of chaos.

Kendra got up sobbing immediately.

Harrison gripped her, stroked her back. She pulled away and then fell into his arms.

## **Chapter Thirty-Four**

There was a giant free-for-all going on because of the incursion of that faceless army breathing through filters. The army guys went into Dow Chemical in columns to try to patch up the nightmare gunmetal works gummed up and wilting PVC pipes. The fires were ongoing and it was a miracle that Exxon hadn't turned into a nuclear paddy cake with Mr. Death. The trucks were rumbling through the once innocent campus, now turned battlefield of casualties and carrion. Chimes Street was festooned with maggot infested punk fodder, dead. Silent hippies who had lost their angelic ways in their struggle for iconoclastic dharma-treks. A dog was hobbling on its two front paws, through the now drizzling scene. Not content to be slowly more paralyzed with the disease spreading through his nervous system. Army gravediggers and corpse grinders threw once promising men, children, women, and babies into the garbage trucks as if they were sides of beef, on the hoof.

Kendra looked out the window at two soldiers in air suits tossing a cache of bodies into the meat-mill ass-end of the green truck. She tossed her only manageably edible food into the corner of the room. Nothing would stay down for either of them.

On Government Street, the Army guys were scabbing around for collectibles and worthwhile items in this fashionable free-for-all. Greedy GI soldier blues already tempted by the yard sale now offered to them by the folks at Dow Chemical. The guys were laughing through their templates and helmets and guffawing through their filters at the oblivious humor of it all. The regiment from Tylertown, Mississippi was having a field day amid the street meat now bloating a bit around the face in front of locked pawn shops, photo outlets, radio shacks and Joe Delpit's chicken shack. Death hath not a kind little face. The rail began peeling down now. Sergeants and rifle toting maniacs grinning half mad at the sooty irony of a gruesome eternal jest.

"I'm alive . . . that's all I know!" one man shouted as he walked into a poolroom bar to slake his thirst in the miasma. (The lieutenant will never know I am confiscating this perfectly good bottle of Jack Daniels, he thought).

Before he could tuck the bottle under his arm, a ruddy coal, wan face of sheer madness 10 times amphetamines and reds and bennies and acid and ecstasy bore down on him and he fell dead. Hacked to pieces by the axwielding zombie who lost his way from the fold of dense Devil's swamp encampment where those who went in didn't come out again.

Jocular Smitty, the other army regular came upon a sight of unflinching horror. His new buddy had his head sliced much like a ripe melon with the stench of Jack Daniels and shards of broken glass glittering with the dim light all lacquered with darkish blood slowly dripping off his features now fragmented and unrecognizable. The zombie was heaving in the corner, a piece of arm in his grip. He was hysterically smiling with unknown sinister insanity as he came for Smitty, who was now hyperventilating. A radio tinnily played big band music. The Harry James orchestra swinging to that death beat dirge as Smitty counted in his head the seconds before he would be beat and hacked at like sweet pine. He lowered his head, his frightened stance, his legs shaking, as the zombie man came forward. He began urinating in his pants and singing "Not a mumblin Word." The zombie appeared a scared sight to behold: His bluish face full of toxicity unparalleled . . . his mouth whittled back baring teeth of crooked invidiousness. Inside were still remnants of something indefinable. His hair was caked with some sort of plasmic substance, perhaps internal fluids, organ fodder, and mostly a full head of dried blood sustained. As if he bathed himself in blood in a most despicable design. As if they were in a British Hammer movie but for real. It was Nightmare on Elm Street personified evil incarnate! The zombie had ripped trousers, no shoes. Its feet were bloody trophies of uncaring treatment of walking through glass, other jagged shards without any

remorse or feeling as to injury. The zombie lurched a bit, it's ambulation rather jerked. As if whatever caused the insane translation from human into soaked chemical plant on two legs, had begun to affect the motor and other neuron functions. It rather dragged one of its legs in a sort of wounded mentality. It bent over slightly. It's breathing was irregular, gasping, wheezing. One would guess they didn't have much of a lifespan. How could they still survive the effects of the pandemic disease, while ordinary citizens were dropping like flies on a shitwagon?

Smitty didn't see that spark of hope. There was total despair in the countenance. The radio continued belting out the "String of Pearls." Smitty saw the zombie put the ax down on the floor, dropping it with its melted burned forearms almost melded to its tattered shirt, which hung about like Bruce Banner (the Hulk's) clothes. The boggle-eyed subhuman transformed from mortality into dread.

The Hyde creature with the mark of the Beast seemed to come forward with curiosity. It was insanely smiling like some heavy metal slayer in the gaping jaws of this broiling London pan of intense heat. The stifling claustrophobic room now smelled surely and sweetly of death. The corpse continued to issue, trickle forth more fluid. Blood puddled up in a sticky insolent lake of fire. It came to him and sniffed the man. It was Smitty's helmet that fascinated him. It grabbed the hardhat off and it seemed to like the fluorescent stickers stuck like decals to it. Bright shiny objects would tend to form attraction to someone who had virtually nothing left of the cognizant brain portion.

Smitty tried to shake the zombie's hand, a white man who appeared to have once been something decent. The zombie took a big bite out of Smitty's shoulder. Then "Crack" went an army buddy's rifle which hit square between the brains, at the high arch of the bridge of the nose. It crushed his skull and splattering the brains and other soupy mixture all over Smitty's body.

At a perimeter, a few blocks down closer towards the Mississippi, there were army troops patrolling through the new stench ridden throngs, not seeing much of anything. A young black, just a boy jimmied the lock on a comic book shop on Main Street right next to the Thirsty Tiger. He holed himself in there reading X-men, mourning his mother, who had zombied out in that insular but deathlike grip accorded zombies. It left them alive for a while, the disease of the eel-things. The venom from their whistling lips puncturing the zombies in that huge nest in Devil's swamps. It enabled the zombies some sort of lucky immunity of a base origin, a primitive salve, a little unknown cure, a bump of medicinal luck that had somehow kept them alive. The trance-like state of the "Zombie two step," a dragging of limbs, a paralyzation, a walking death, a touched and tainted brain fever. He was reading the Dark Knight Returns, with MC Hammer blaring like some sonorous foghorn hip hopping with a methodical madness. The zombies came cavorting in, shattering the windows with their pummeling bleeding fists.

Caked with shards of tiny jagged cuts, it was as if through their numbing loss of sensation, that they really dug hurting themselves. With glee as if they were criminally insane.

They were bringing pieces of carcasses of animal and man back to the swamp. It was a long trek, an underground connection, a path trod.

Streets of dead near those shotgun shacks in Scotlandville, near Exxon, where the zombies stumbled like army ants carrying grains of sand. They were somehow redolent of each other's actions, like some empathetic symbiotic knowingness amongst the new breed. The chrysalis, however cryptically evil, was these sickly creatures summoned back to the caves and pipes a dripping sewage, over the landfill. Only to keep their host creatures, the eelthings, happily fed with the consumable arms, limbs, internal organs, raw and safely minced about in their gnashing teeth. They ate there in silence, in some misbegotten nightmare.

The army men had shot a few zombies without realizing that they could have been brunch for them,

because they mistook them for plain looters. Finally, orders came forth through the ranks of this military city staked off. Vehicles moved about like a war zone. Because the zombies were killers, they began shooting the creatures on sight. They wouldn't necessarily go down right away, only if a headshot. The bodies were caked with lime to keep the odors down. The bloated exquisite corpses of the naked and the dead were trucked out of there.

The army folks seemed to have it under control for now. They were all given Kendra's successful serum. She had, through the direction of the medical colony, given the formula to the military who, together with medical teams, made large batches of the wonder serum to all possible people.

The zombies were only operating on acute pain, unrest, triumphing indelible madness. Seeing army guys with those masks and plastic hoods in their biochemical protectant suits was a bit like sitting in the middle of a set of a cheap 50's xenophobic horror monstrosity. Like the road company of "Andromeda Strain" hit the local theaters.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Up the muddy Mississippi north, it curved sharply this way and that like a coiled snake, all the way to St. Francisville. The largest Southern Prison was a malevolent morgue for some, for others it was unmanned by the staff, guards. And some of the men were getting out.

The Dixie mafia types, if they were capable of hustling phone scams for hundreds of thousands of dollars, then they were surely going to get out if the staff suddenly up and died in their shiny boots. Some of the popular were blue and cold in their state issue uniforms. Their lax bodies once rippling from extensive workouts were now expanding with inert gases like a magic trick in their torsos emitting the foulest odors. The spud headed guards had become half dead, half delirious. Somehow, one inmate got free and took advantage of the situation. He began summarily letting free the most cold-blooded maniacs of every race, creed and color onto the East Feliciana Parish.

"Mohawk Joe, you'se with me?" one of the pack said. No dogs out to sniff them down. They were free as drinking water now. One or two of them took to taking out some revenge from the shit pulled on dem in the joint, croaking the offending party.

"Come on, let's go." The murderers spilled into the countryside where the disease had trickled but not entirely blanketing that parish with pandemic, just a smattering that somehow randomly slew different men.

And left others alive.

"What de fawk's goin on around here?" one man asked. They were running to a nearby farmhouse, where they summarily stole two cars and a truck and only beat up the folks a bit for their trouble.

"Man, hadn't you heard? The fuggin world is ending! You's lookin at the only men alive in da world

now. Screwbrain!" "That nigga's lying his ass off . . ." He had the terminal look of a fate worse than the Red Hat cell block where they house a man before he would fry in that antique electric chair.

"Bullshit!" he laughed, and then knew he believed the fugger. The men were on their own now. Some buddies took off in a dodge Charger, not a bad set a wheels for a man just got out da joint. The men in the truck were aiming to kill that fifth a wild turkey. They backslapped the old woman before they raped her sorry country ass. Old woman. Wasn't exactly a fresh harpy for the boys all taking turns with it, getting their jollies while the old man whimpered before they cold cocked his sorry grandpa ass.

"There weren't no cars on the road, no 18 wheelers fulla Willie Nelson assholes, no fuggin nobody. The world musta fuggin ended." Come da rapture, like Mohawk Joe didn't believe that Biblical shit they were forcing on a man! Judgment Day. Was he worry he killed his whole coonass family at the Oil Show? There ain't no fuggin Jesus. Ain't no such thing.

He done wiped his manhood when he came outa that old woman's business.

Was da best piece a white ass he ever done had in seven fuggin years. There was more; you'se is only as good as your last piece a cuzzzz.

The prisoners spilled onto the clean land. The highway 61 was 20 mile down before they could get outa that fuggin pastureland near the Nuclear River Bend Plant. The prison now only housed pieces of bad meat. Badassed men who died in those stinking white walls, never getting out. Worse than a fuggin fire swept thru here.

In Zombie Village, Baton Rouge, Target Zero for the human meltdown of death and limed corpses stack all pretty in a row, there were various strange assorted stragglers and rover packs scurrying through that were not zombies yet. They were sort of in that limbo, that middle ground where they had enough venom in them through weird mishaps, contact however obliviously ignored, and they weren't zombie full fledged.

Three pre-teens outa whack with Walkman's bejeweling their skulls, with thunderbolts emblazoned in each, were in that superior position of having caught a zombie bareassed munching on a pretty fair-sized dog, a mutt who had been dead long before of the plague and now a noon meal.

"You sure this dude ain't getting loose?" "Look at him! This zombie motherscrew don't even know who he is!" They had him tied up at the self-service pump at the Circle K. They had been stealing everything, mostly beer and pints and candy and stuff. The monster zombie had been unconscious for a while, and that was when they had the good fortune of tying him to the Super Premium. Chris was the one that said he wanted to douse the man with gasoline and torch him up like a stoked piece of soaked charcoal. These kids had somehow wangled a trip back into town, sorta too shit as all stupid to think that they might actually die from the plague. The rub was that they already had the symptoms, so they might anyway. So there, Screwer.

Jimmy was gorging himself with candy and trying to feed the zombie.

It looked like it was once a good American, a citizen of high moral character, before his brains turned to shake-a-pudding and he started shitting all over himself, and eating pieces a people's faces, and chewing on bloated German Shepherds which was a smorgasbord for this sorry ass middle-aged piece a shit.

"We'd better bail, you screwers . . ." But Jimmy was going to have a little fun. This was growing tiresome, lighting firecrackers in the zombie's hands and him trying to put the black cats in his wailing mouth. The fuse would spark and the thing would explode every time before the zombie screw could get it all the way in his mouth.

"Frankenstein, you been watching television?" Chris asked, feeling that cherry kick from Vick's Formula 44 and a pint a rum that made him wanna puke all woozy.

"See, he don't even know who he is." They reached into his back pocket as he lunged back and forth like a rodeo rider, his teeth snapping, his face fulla meanness like a cur.

"Looka this! This motherscrewer was a State CPA supervisor?" "What da screw is that?" Chris asked. The other little boy had passed out at the TRON machine. He got this close to top-score-rule before he retched beer up and took a little snooze. In his surfer dude pants and Air Jordans he had pissed used malt liquor all over himself. These little suburban badasses were no older than ten years.

"What's the worst thing we can do to this old piece a zombie dweebie?" "Man, let him go!" the other skateboarder said. "So he can eat our screwin feet and hands and rip out your heart and eat it in front a you like Indiana Jones Temple a fuggin doom?" He laughed. He reached for a tepid quart of Miller Light. "He likes Miller Light." The zombie swilled it as it poured around his throat and into his soiled ragged clothes smelling like a waste dump mostly.

"This modderscrewer stinks like Dogshit!" "You would too if you were eating dead bodies and shit!" The little dudes who once reveled in PeeWee's Playhouse and graduated to daddy's Playboys hidden in the bureau had somehow stepped over that little imaginary line.

"Watch this shit!" He took that Miller quart and broke it against the concrete. He held it up to the zombie's face, not touching it.

"No man! That man will . . . EEEEEEEYUUUUUU!!!!

"WOW! SCREW!!! NEAT!!!

The zombie screwed his face into the jagged edges. Once again, zombies proved that they couldn't feel pain. The central nervous system had shorted out long ago, only now giving mixed signals from the guacamole brain.

Blood trickled down into the man's shirt. His face was hideously flushed with lacerations. He only smiled as his face had nearly been severed off. Jimmy had never seen anything like that that wasn't in an action movie.

Jimmy holding the bad end of a broken bottle and a grown man purposely cutting himself badly. Like this was better than beating GALIGA, Dude!

The man smiled with his lower lip hanging by a thread of skin.

Smiling with less than half a face, losing blood like a good zombie dweebie!

"Mister Zombie! Do you want to take a bath?" Chris laughed.

Spiraling into a violent rush, the zombie was doomed now.

Chris picked up the gas pump of regular unleaded.

"Do you want to take a shower?" The zombie didn't understand exactly, he just smiled and pulled that lower lip off, now detached in his hand. The oozing lesions of serious lacerations, punctures that glass would tend to make even on a zombie's face, were oblivious, like a sincere pleasurepain more like a good shock feeling.

The zombie smiled. Chris smiled, "Coming right up mister! Go get a lighter Jimmy!" "I'm already ahead of you, Chris! Asswipe!" They laughed manically as the clearish yellow gasoline fell about the zombie, soaking into his clothes and skin. He smiled with a mouth now much wider. The gas was being swallowed now by the zombie.

"It must taste kinda good, huh Mister Zombie!" They laughed again, their pubescent tremolo voices crackling with delight. Jimmy came back with the lighter.

"We can't just torch him up! Dude! No!" Chris shrugged him away with one arm.

"No, You listen dude! He is already dead by swallowing the gasoline!

That's poisonous." The zombie's stomach was going like a cuisinart from hell.

He began vomiting up paws and fur and a human ear.

They looked down at the sidewalk at the ear.

"Fawkin Grooossss! You're dead, Mr. Zombie! Can you say DEAD?" The zombie gnarled at them. Intense hate, that's the only thing that really lasts!

"Okay, I ain't gonna do it!" Jimmy smiled and Chris put the hose back on the holder. Chris chugged a Cherry sloe gin half pint like he was trying to be a grown up or something. Too much too fast. Their skateboards stood standing up at the curb. Chris flicked the Bic lighter over and over. The zombie was mesmerized by it!

"Hey, just like YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN! He likes fire!" And he handed it to the zombie. The zombie used his few remaining stumped fingers and flicked it.

Flick. Flick. Flick . . . He dropped it accidentally. Moaning and screeching with glee like a unfortunate in Wal-Mart with a piece of Styrofoam or in toe Hong Kong toy section, getting all stiff over Hot Wheels.

"See, Mister Zombie? I'm your puppet Master . . ." Chris and Jimmy laughed and Chris gave him the lighter again. Flick . . . Flick, (FLAME ON!!!) And the zombie immolated like a walking flaming carrot! Like James Arness as the Thing in "THE THING." Like on TEE VEE!!!!

"FAR OUT"! "Gee!" they exclaimed as barbecue filled the air with sweet Dixie melody. The Zombie was flash frying and smiling at his own burnout! He fell down chained up still, and the boys took off now running with their skateboards in tow, as they now feared the whole Circle K would go up like a roman candle!

"Whooooooooo!" they jeered as they hauled punk ass outa that broken glass parking lot. They could find another convenience store where there wasn't no screwin GI Joe's screwin around and chasing them off. Telling them to get the screw home asking them what was wrong with their screwing parents! They cheered wildly on their skateboards for at least a quarter mile before their final destination! The fuggin Mini Mall!

Cowabunga Dude! This was gnarly! Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Ninja Turtles could kick Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamster ass any day of the week, Chris thought. Every comic book asshole knew that. They looked behind them and the zombie and the Circle K just blew up, like a huge screwin hundred feet high pop! and wham! and more of the same, and fire all over the place!



"WOW!" was the final judgment call accorded their barbecue Mister CPA accountant with the State. Asswiper, Chris thought!

## Chapter Thirty-Six

"I need to screw a cutie babe!" was all that Kenny the rotsie screwer could say, as he pulled the shirt off every dead girl's corpse he found in the street.

"You're a sick motherscrew! Get the fawk away from those dead women!" Kenny rubbed the breast as the bra came unloose! Creamy still but cold. This one over here was fine off her ass, even dead! It was almost the same. Almost. He went around the corner from where the Army guys were eating Big Macs at the McDonald's amidst the McCorpses. He found a real Debbie Gibson cutie miniature girl who was still whimpering! He was gonna poke her!

She moaned and tears were in her eyes. Also, flecks of mucus or some secretion in those corners of her eyes. She was a bit delirious and would probably succumb. There were dried bits of vomit at a corner of her petite anguished mouth. Her sweet complexion wan, her eyes swollen a bit, her face extolling pain from her feverish body.

He unbuttoned her blouse a button at a time. Those other screwers were still at the McDonalds. He got that last button unbuttoned.

"We are gonna give you medical help now! What's your name?" "Tiffany . . . St. Amant" . . . She smiled through her bleary view, her little sweet eyes barely opened. He saw that little white bra with those little creamy tits nestled in each of them. He gasped, breathing heavily. He reached in and felt her right breast, that nipple! Oh, he had to look at it. He pulled the edge of the bra cup away from her breast. She pulled her legs slowly back and forth, muttering "I gotta return my Prom dress. Gotta Go to the Estee Lauder store, for a facial . . ." He rubbed that little pink nipple back and forth and then commenced to unhooking that hook in the back of her bra. Her little back was writhing and she might not have known what he was doing. Fair's fair in love and war! Martial city had turned into Fat City! He had her bra mostly off, those two tits poking out of the shirt. He unzipped her pants and felt down there, that little mound of Venus. She moaned with pain and looked up at him. She looked into his eyes. His wanton rotz weeny eyes as he pulled her Calvin jeans to her ankles. And pulled those panties off and he felt that little tuft and it wasn't wet. He poked her anyway; his little rotz member invaded the demilitarized zone of a valley girl extraordinary. He was getting that pumping primed cunt and she recoiled finally realizing what was going on. She wasn't a virgin. Valley girl sluts! He sucked that breast. She was still alive. This wasn't a bad thing he was doing as he felt her tighten up and wince that pretty pouty little whitish blue face.

"Stop! Stop!" she said.

"I'm helping you get better!" He came inside her and pulled out of her, and she lapsed back into

unconsciousness.

He was pulling up his pants when the other swinging dicks in the field came over to him.

"Man! Look at that!" "Pussy!" They looked at Kenny the rotz bastard nerdscrew.

"You didn't fawk her!" "Noooo!" he said. His face could not tell the truth.

"Man I tell you I didn't!

"You sorry ass piece a shit! You screwin loon!" He spit to the side.

"You are sick as shit!" "You fat screw!" "Cheesedick!" "Well" said the other boys, and they shook their heads with shame.

A pause. Silence. The mall was as quiet as a church . . .

"Sloppy Seconds!" One man cried.

"No!" "Screw you cock bait!" "I got it!" They all pulled their clothes off. She was good for about as much swinging dick as they could sling at her little tuft of black! Those little courtesies were important; offering your bunk buddy sloppy seconds. Those little courtesies, Kenny the dork thought. He watched Harold the fat screw hump the little valley girl's sweet ass. Semen dripped off her little tight belly recoiling with pain.

Guess you ain't gonna get that facial?" Huh Sweetmeat!" Kenny said and they had left him some McMuffin's that tasted like ratshit. He chewed and thought, maybe there will be some more pussy roundabout here. Even screwing a zombie would be good enough for me, he thought!

Nawww!

Booger Thompson and his wife were buck naked in the Wal-Mart on the predominantly white trash end of Florida Boulevard. They had left town just like all the others. But at the Shelter in Tylertown, Mississippi they were done inoculated with that temporary immunity whatchacallit, and were done told that they wasn't gonna die, at least no time soon. So they done packed their two kids from Rita and came back. They was from his wife's second marriage to that asshole welder who used to beat up on Rita so bad. They came back to town to get some good pickings where a fellah didn't need no MasterCard, or Discover Card with that 22% outrageous stuff. They done hit the K-Mart already.

It was Rita's idea about getting buck naked in Wal-Mart. There wasn't no one alive around and besides, they done got some of the best Sensimilia weed that a working man could afford. There was this LSD ranch out in Bunkie, Louisiana, near all them horse ranches, and Burl had done scored them a whole hundred pounds. They had been smoking like chimneys and the kids just sat in the back seat of their Dodge Station wagon with the window's cracked so's they could breathe. Rita didn't think it was bad in front of the kids. But they done left the kids off at Toy's R Us and told them to pick out as much toys as they could carry in a buggy and wait for them to pick em up.

Rita said: "I always wanted to run through a Wal-Mart buck naked, stoned on mushroom soup and shopliftin'." They done used to fence Japanese cameras but this was biscuits and everlastin gravy. This beat hell outa when Booger's parole officer done made him take a drug test and he failed. Or when Booger got caught selling hot stereos in New Orleans four months ago.

"Them army grunts better not come round here is all I gotta say!" he told her standin naked in the cross aisle.

Rita laughed at Booger, his business all hanging out in Guns and Ammo. He done busted the glass and stole him about four hunting rifles and a bright-shiny-new 9 mm automatic. Rita squirted Elizabeth Thomas perfume all over her spavined saggy-ass body. He had that hungry look in his eyes.

"Come over here baby," he said. She saw he was all frisky and before they knew it, they were doin' it on a fake Danish Stratolounger in Furniture. The muzak changed to "Mandy" when he strewed stuff all over.

"You Always finish too fast, baby!" she wailed, lying there, looking at his fat old body. He got up and didn't say nothing and started putting on a nice suit with the price tags still dangling. She done had two grocery carts full of those tacky t-shirts and then some nice knit shirts, too.

That's when she saw a woman standing over in lingerie. But it weren't no screwin woman standing up to the four way mirror, it was a fuggin transvestite man, a balding wispy haired sensitive frail man with earrings bejeweling him, munching on a century old poboy form the putrescent deli, he was pulling off his brassiere with no titties underneath, and shaved all over his body, and he didn't even see her. Her lined countenance with stoned eyes like goliath unwavering, she wasn't exactly horrified, she done commenced to giggling.

"Hey you!" she yelled. He still didn't hear her, he had a walkman on playing some Cole Porter, done swirling outa then chink little earplugphones on his faggoty bald head, he was kinda dancing and kicking like a Rockette, except he didn't have the legs for it. He reached over and carefully cradled some brandy from a decanter than he done found in accessories for the kitchen. In face she done walked a bit closer and he had himself a miniature place is what it was, little doilies, chairs, a fake colonial coffee table and chairs and flowers all round he done stole form the horticulture, he had immersed himself in a somewhat jejune air of classiness afforded Wal-Mart shoppers who had an authentic taste for near imitation classiness.

The opulence of that lingerie section, all the teddies, bra and panties scattered all round like it was that scene in GREAT GATSBY when Daisy cries when Jay Gatsby starts throwing about 50 brand new shirts picked out by a man in London for the fall collection all cascading around the bedroom in that movie with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. He done set himself up a video CD player electronic home entertainment center, and there were turkey legs scattered about the floor rather incensing his guests.

She done walked up right behind him in the four way mirror, her tits flopping about like hanged men dangling form scaffolding, her varicose veins riddling her tree trunk legs, her below-navel gut sported a huge scar form one of them tubal pregnancy things where they gotta cut you open and cut out your utopian tubes and put em in a jar and show em to you so you'se know you ain't gonna have now more kids, and her privates were endowed with a widow's peak of hair that ran all the way up to the navel, the pooch of her belly a girdle-maker's nightmare. She pulled those chink earphones off his faggoty head and he done seen her in the three way, his skirt pulled down to his lovely turned ankles and his no-nonsense panty hose giving a sort of tanness and smoothness about like the way Joe Namath's legs done did in that commercial. He eked out a little shriek.

"Eeeeee! Ohhh!," he said chirpishly, humbled and embarrassed even through the veil of tinctured brandy spilling around his little frame and insides.

"What the screwin hell you doing here?" she asked. He didn't say nothing but sorta stammered, he couldn't get out a single syllable, or string of em, to make a real English word.

"Look my old man is coming over here and he's a gonna blow your nuts off with a pump shotgun!"  
"Ma'am, I didn't mean any harm . . . I'll leave . . ." "Well, you'se oughta be ashamed a yourself . . ."

wearing women's underwear an stuff. Are you on o them queer psycho killers or something?" she said cautiously her lack of better brain matter and current knowledge of watching Dirty Harry movies or such with gay people froth as homicidal murderers as a frustrating conclusion to an alternate lifestyle unpopular with Jerry Falwell's Heritage Bible Academy and Reverend Johnny Joe Jenkins' horndog pussy-slinging ministry had her perplexed, although she done used to hang around Haight Ashbury with a bunch a queers in the Summer of Love, they used to wanna try and screw her and she was doing way to much acid, and they were nice people, fit in just right with the hallucinogenic hayride, making it weirder, the better.

"Ma'am, I was just taking advantage of the open store, I didn't think anyone else was here . . . Please don't shoot!" he begged with that mincy faggot sweet melodious sophisticated kinda tone.

"You is a queer, right?" she said through her long crooked teeth, gaps in her mouth from her brain done split in half on some crystal meth two month binges where she almost fried her brain again, not eating nothing and shooting up between her toes, she was so hard up to find a genial vein left.

"No ma'am, I just . . . like dressing up in smart outfits." He laughed nervously. She gazed at him through a rose-colored Chianti bottle depression era glass all smoky looking, that was her views of seeing the real world with that sense strong ass pot that had a kick like a stubborn mule done kicked her straightaways in the haid! She gave that knowing junkie kinky laugh, now just realizing that he was staring at her abundant breasts, the nipples having expanded like that teat end of a helium balloon, ripe about to fall off, you know. He kinda had that look, do you know that look when a man contently gazes at a naked woman all pretty and stout like and there's a waterbed where he can dive in and she could throw the man a life preserver.

That ocean storm of wobbling cyclic waves bouncing off the frame of the waterbed, and commence to giving her nine inches of real manhood.

You know, this guy, iffun he wasn't wearing women's nightclothes on himself, he looked pretty good. That striking face, he didn't have no hair, but he had himself a good nuf body . . .

"Baabeey! Whatcha doing?" Booger said, his red prickled face and lit up slits a foggy eyes caught a sight a this man, and he done cocked that shotgun at his nuts . . . He had been target practicing in the washing machine dept, he done plugged himself a few Maytags, bagged a few Frigidaires . . .

The Wal-Mart lay in ruins, edified, still the allegory, the prehensile legendary setting as if it were Stonehenge itself, incarnate. The junkie darlings, the international white trash couple had tied the transvestite to a makeshift plywood pillory (it used to be a goodly house wares shelf ) and was summarily castrated, and with much aplomb and wholesome glee. The couple left him in tissue bleeding form the waste down, dripping and unconscious, their faces radiant with pharmaceutical offerings from the robbed K-Mart pharmacy where no one could beat their prices. Laudanum when cooked down was the greatest thing God ever put on this earth, said William Burroughs, the couple were draping each other with potting soil and frolicking African violets, Hydrangeas, ferns palmy in the drenching cognac splashed about his remains, as the cleansing muzak riddled about the hollow inner circle that the Wal-Mart had become.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Above Baton Rouge on Highway 61, a town called Jackson was noted for its mental facility. It had not changed one iota since Uncle Earl Long was Governor. He himself had been committed to the Mandeville mental Hospital once.

The rumor that Julia Adams heard on her shift of bathing, stripping beds, and feeding unfortunates was that the black men took them in the back and beat them up. One can get awfully pissed trying to help the poor retards and all they wanna do is beat their meat as if all sense Gawd gave em was knocked out of them. One never saw something more horrible than spending a week on her shift. She had that look of hard work about her. She would undoubtedly spend the rest of her life mopping floors, smelling vaguely of Clorox. She did a hell of a job of it, too. The state gave her 850 bucks a month. When she was on unemployment she didn't have no more than 5000 bucks a year in which to feed, care for her little one, the meanest SOB in his playschool. Her ex was a heroin addict on the lam in Chicago. He often would call and leave distressing messages while on his cherry highs, the rigging of his mindset via the heroin Jones.

She stayed on when the other staff mostly left out of there to the internment camps in scenic Natchez. She was caring for the whole degenerate class of unfortunates wailing and sobbing and screaming. She thought she was going crazy. They would try and grab her. She would have to give them a good RAP across the face. Hell, they didn't know who they were or that they even existed. She might have been better off as assistant manager of that Sicily's Pizza in Hammond.

Rufus kept coming on to her, trying to get her ta just pull that shirt off and let him diddle around with her little scraggly blonde self. But she kept a telling him to lay off.

"I know y'all take these things back in the back and beat em up. I done seen them black eyes and bruises. So iffun you don't lay off me, we gonna have words. Or I am gonna blow your Negro ass to hell," she said with a Christian conviction.

But Rufus didn't care none. He was a big guy. He would just laugh and continue to harass her. Until she went ahead and locked him in the pit with a whole naked swarming mass a unfortunates, all scary looking and all. She didn't let him out and had taken his keys, until he promised.

See, she was all scared that her little rug rat kid was gonna get sick of that biblical plague and all. So her momma and TJ (her beloved Christ child) went to Natchez. They would call every once in a while saying, "Come on up here. Leave them creatures be. There will be some state workers showing up sooner or later. You ain't even had ya'lls shots yet. If you ask me, they ought to no t even waste them shots on those jug headed waterbabies. Gawd just screwed up on them unfortunate idiot kids, they don't live long no how." And Julia would say, "Momma, they is already dropping off. I have a stack of these retardos out in the back behind building A12. Dead smellin' bodies of these unfortunates. I done called the state board about coming up here with those inoculations . . . what ever ya'll call em . . ." (She didn't know how to pronounce em and all . . .). She would go home and wouldn't even think about bedroom business. Her sex drive was all bottled up from staying up 20 hours in a row on a triple shift caring for these jacking off wonder boys who wouldn't stop screaming. But she done got Rufus to stop beating em, and the other black men. Cause she done went ahead and slept with Rufus, cause she wanted to. But now all the other men wanted a little bit, too. So what was she gonna do? Rufus done wound her wristwatch. Darn, she didn't remember how good it was. Them laying up in the staff office

all naked, Rufus sipping on some Mad Dog. Her momma would kill her if she knew she done slept with a Negro. Now what would happen if she done had a mixed baby? She had done stopped taking them birth control pills. She even thought she might be afflicted and maybe start getting unfortunate-like from serving these jacking off water heads!

Save her soul!

Then when she done finally got some relief help from the state workers, that's when the massacre occurred. Them prisoners done wiped out the whole ward! It was all over the news, her hand ta Gawd!

It was a good thing that she was laying over at home with a shotgun laying by the VCR. Cause she heard it on the news. That very next day after she done finished her last triple shift they told her to go home. To call em back at the end of the staggered shift week to come back to work. The four prisoners done came over there in Jackson which was a little bitty town (ain't nothing there but a Sinclair Gas Station, she done remembered that green dinosaur sign there she done past it every day coming to the unfortunate bin). She didn't like to talk about those retarded unfortunates, especially since they was all shot in cold blood. Like hogs in a pen slaughtered.

Her momma called home from Jackson fearing TJ's poor little mother, her only daughter, was kilt and maybe even raped by those godless cons. But she sighed a relief like she was singing at the Grand Old Opry.

She got that disability for that plate in her head cause they had done put it in wrong and all and that was what was causing her those migraines and hearing tiny voices in her ears. She done talked with Julia, and told her "mind you don't go back there, withun' out they put men on the road to the unfortunate farm with a shotgun each!" The sheriffs had got inoculated and they had that task force thing trying to round up cold-hearted killers loose. She done even heard a rumor that they was gonna go around wherever everyone had hightailed it outa state to Texas and Mississippi camps. To rape and steal and take money and stick up places where folks was maybe in a few weeks gonna come back and start their lives all over again. Excepting of course unless them scientist doctors didn't find that permanent cure. When they done shot her with a hypodermic needle. Now that done scared her. She didn't want to catch no AIDS from no needles that drug addicts and faggot junkies done been popping their veins with. Jabbing her with no dirty needle! This plague thing was bad enough. She done been going to a little Pentecostal church outside Natchez. Where that minister kept a talking about Revelations, the end of the world. How all of them is going to feel when Judgment day comes and the Lord will be there. Taking names and kicking ass and deciding who will be spirited off to heaven just in the nick a time while all them godless humanists, Russian commies, and homosexual faggots and crooks, will all burn in hell, once this plague done come down. The Earth was gonna just turn into a prehistoric world once again, she was done told. Like the Garden of Eden. She done been reading her scripture. Smoking Viceroy's, at least three pack a day. She couldn't even get no decent "National Enquirers" and the "Weekly World News" to find out about what Liz Thomas and all them others was doing. She felt like this world was still all right. It was just here in Louisiana for some reason that Gawd wanted everybody ta die. That preacher done said that the reason Denham Springs was flooded every year come Spring was cause them humanist scientists done kept launching them Space Shovels, into outer space. This lady done told her seriously at the tire store in Natchez that was one of the reasons for the Apocalypse. Men tamper in Gawd's Domain, she said. But Julia was safe. She secretly hoped Julia wasn't gonna ever get bothered by them engross on the staff of the night shifts for trying to get in her daughters pants. Now if they was white and didn't have no prison records or nothing it would be a whole nuther ball game. She knew TJ needed a daddy. One who didn't shoot up with junkie needle works. Hell, he was probably a faggot dying of AIDS. He might as well move to San Francisco, junkie screwer!

She mumbled ever since all this was started. But she was on God's football team, Reverend Wiper done said. Just keep making that Vow of Faith, and God'll get you anything you wanted. A million dollars, spiritual contact with Elvis, (he musta been joshing her, it was kinda weird the way that fat little bald headed man could be so serious one minute talking about holocausts and rats and plagues and disease and John's trials and tribulations, and then joke around like he didn't have enough sense to unzip his britches to take a piss!)

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Billy and his full time night woman, the acid squaw he packed named Gail, and their new dope connection just made it back into town.

"This is the partying place to be!" Billy said as he peaked on a couple of blotters and saw shit as they tooted down I-12 at about 100 miles per second.

"Look at the fuggin' smorgasbord!," he said. Nobody was saying anything. No time to worry about that. He hit the Sherwood Forest exit at about Mach 1 in his El Camino. The classic-rock station played antediluvian heavy metal. Slashing fuzztones coincided and bounced all over their interior. Hell, he could see 'em.

Gail laughed. She must be having one of those, again. He looked after her when she tripped weird. The car hit light speed. Billy couldn't see too good. The Cuervo he snorted to take the edge off his sharp tattered soul made him see the road all fuzzy, swirling around. He couldn't focus through the windshield; he focused AT the windshield. God gave a man the right to move his molecules around until psychedelic substances came forth and they were good! This acid guy next to him and Gail had last seen sanity back in 1985. Just a glimpse before he ran into a Catholic Church with nothing on but a Golf Cap. He had run up to the Altar to look for that bone fragment from a Saint 1700 years ago. He told them once that he knew it was there somewhere. He remembered from his Catechism classes, which was in the Age of Reformation.

He asked the priest that if he would "Chase him around the vestibules and the stations of the cross he just might get lucky and catch him by the organ!" Then he squatted on top of the Altar, ordained by the people in the audience. He commenced to defecate right smack dab into the Chalice, splattering the wine as the holy fecal bits fell. Then he started yelling that "Pope Innocent the 3rd, when he wasn't having so many orgies, said that "Shit was vile spittle." According to what he told Billy, the altar boys melted into statues with stigmata coming forth. Christ's wound (or perhaps St. Sebastian's gaping wound where you could stick your finger in there and squish around).

A song came on: "The Long and Winding Road." "Hey! That's my all time favorite noise! The Beatles! I got blistah's on my fingers!" Gail began seeing Flying Wombats like as big as that ROC in the Popeye Cartoon of Ali Babba and the 40 thieves.

They all sang in ancient Sumerian tongue, vessel instruments of God.

"The Long and Winding Road" played at least 14 times, according to the scriptures. Blessed be the name of God. The Holy Mystery could not be understood, and the Holy Mystery will never be understood! That was the beauty of it, Billy thought. In biblical pageantry, Billy saw camels and three wise men as he slowed down on the machmeter and the car finally touched the Earth.

"Look, it's zombie Wisemen!" "There ain't no such thing as Zombies! Unless you try and perceive that they have a whole community somewhere." Billy recapitulated for the sixth time since they flew through Livingston Parish, holding their breath all the way. They breathed once in a while, involuntary vagus nerve and all that.

"They have discovered a whole new way of life, not like our antiquated system." Gail suddenly laughed as the acid dealer squeezed her breast as Billy smiled at her. Her nipples turned into eyeballs, and winked at him like Henry Matisse drew a painted beautiful eye converging at the zenith of what it was all about in the first place.

The acid man, whose name was never really remembered because he himself had forgotten that he even had a name, sucked on Gail's white breast like Tintorelli's "Madonna With Child." Gail sang "Onward Christian soldiers," and suddenly the rock station began issuing forth through sinister invisible penetrating electrical XRay's, Gregorian Chant, with a disco beat.

"You know the ancient monks used to suck on microdots!" Gail cried like Aeschylus at the Olympics. The incognito acid man started dissolving and then solidifying as his lips nurtured her nipple.

The Gregorian chant blew in multicolored layers, like sheets of sound. Like John Coltrane.

"Is he sucking your right nipple?" Gail laughed. She knew Billy was looking through his eyes at her as he stomped it through red lights. The accelerator pedal was a time machine clutch, and would take then a million years into the future.

"I think he really is. He told me he used to go back in time. Go visit people and start lynch mobs throughout Europe. Do nasty things to famous people to screw them over real bad." Hee, hee, she giggled. Shake a pudding swirling around, banana flavored medulla served with a beverage of your choice.

"That's right," the acidhead said.

"I used to go to the Louver, the New York Museum or Art. And right in front of God and everybody, I would find a Gaugin with great big aesthetic titties and toss off." "I tell you, I graduated from Swank, Stag, Gent, Cavalier, Hustler, Gallery, and Reader's Digest. You know, you can just about even jerk off to Hyromenous Bosch, Picasso, Early Picasso. Yanking your crank while staring up at the Sistine Chapel." He found he could not blink his eyes anymore or make a fist.

Billy began proselytizing about the matter.

"You know, there is really a central Nest of these mutated Bolsheviks, these teenage Trotskies, these Schoolboy Lenins." Gail tried to touch her navel with her tongue, on the inside.

Couldn't be done.

"Gawd said it, Gawd meant it, even though he was diagnosed as a severe paranoid schizophrenic regarding the matter. . ." "Go on," Gail said. "You got our attention." She giggled to high heaven. The acidhead actually believed he was munching on a Goat's udder. Like the poor children in Bunuel's "Los



Olivados." He sucked back the transubstantiated whiskey and remembered to swallow once it was in his mouth.

"And yea, they slew the goat, and came forth . . . Okay, there is a sort of blob, nest, like that movie, "Them," in the drainage pipes with Eelthings infested inside this greenish goo." "How do you know?" Gail said.

"I heard it from my connection that's in the Army. He and some other heads were scouting around Devil's Swamp. Sucking back Nitrous Oxide that they had copped at the dentist's office. They were full up with pharmacy stuff, all they could cook down and shoot up. And they saw this BLOB!" It was the way he said it, she thought.

"How big?" "Don't you ever say anything? If I really thought you were sucking on this Woman high Priest's breasts, I would drop you off at Alpha Centauri." "Just finish describing the gelatinous thing." The Acidhead stopped his breast-feeding and she put her rack of sweater meat back in the constrictive apparatus. She was still twinging from arousal, truly ordained like the Madonna with child.

"Okay. It's big like 100 feet long, and it's coming out of the drainpipes.

And it is maybe alive, or not, or it's symbiotic with the snakes. And there is this big queen Eel-thing manifested from all that.

"You got lying eyes regarding the matter!" came out of the blue from the lizard King reincarnated. All sliced eye slits from beneath fancy euro trash sunglasses.

"He has spoken!" Billy said.

"You actually speak!" Gail said.

"Okay, I saw the damned thing!" Billy yelled rather amusingly.

He put his arm around his earth mother, Gail. They suddenly saw stacks of corpses, rising flesh. A rather putrid ambiance all about the white elongated slab. There were cars like locust shells. Perfectly good Chevies, Ford, the ying and yang of American Motors. Plymouths, Chryslers, Volvo's, and Toyotas. All pushed to the side by a yellow Caterpillar with a man in a spacesuit at the helm! Was he going to catapult like a brick moon into the harnessed heavens?

"Are you seeing spacemen around?" Gail asked.

"ROTC bastards! Honey, those are ROTZEE men. Lean and thin and raping and pillaging us good people!" "I tell you, they are SPACEMEN." She lingered on that thought.

Spacemen, coming down from the fleecy skies. The smoke fog banks of chemical plants burning in the distance. In the direction of Exxon were funneling clouds of smoke just incredulously billowing up. Inversions, curvy mushroom pillars bursting forth, shooting ever upwards. The sky was where the spacemen had come down. Keep watching the skies! Heed me! Keep watching the skies. The rock n roll requiems of sacred music were blasting from the cabin of the El Camino.

Billy slowed down. Perhaps it was a denouement of his LSD trip, a surceasing, a quelling, a sobering? Besides, men in space suits were flipping him off. Waving at him, as if he had the audacity to go 100 miles per second. He was barely humming at 88 miles per. Tunneling through the morass of dead and dismembered. That foul odor hit them and they slung psychedelic chicken nuggets about the small vinyl chamber of the El Camino.

Keep your eyes on the road. Or was it the skies, from whence spacemen jumped their mother ship. He was harping on the BLOB phenomena. The blob, the gelatinous blob.

"Okay, I'm telling ya, about two months ago I was dropping some incense with some Catholic priests down at Devil's Swamp. If you don't believe they were priests just ask me. They wore black robes, they knew Latin, what are you gonna think?" "Tell Easy Rider here the true facts now," Gail giggled.

"Okay. It was a bunch of my outlaw Mississippi friends, we had just come from a long death ride from Franklin County. It was Jimmy Craig, David Allen." "We found a dead possum that we dropped off in Bude at the Quarters where the brothers live. I put a couple bucks down on that floating crap game in the back of a Ford pickup truck. And lost. They did give us a half pint of Jim Beam for the possum, fair trade." "You're starting too far back. Get on with it!" she said. The acidhead tried to use his eyes like electrical x-rays to see those Madonna milk duds beneath her angel shirt.

"Well, we came down Highway 61. We thought we saw the Nuclear reactor at River Bend melting. The concrete terminal just melting like a surreal dream. But it might have been those microdots cleansing us." "By the way, did y'all hear about the prison thing? Every goddamn killer on the road is outa the pen! They massacred all those unfortunates at the Jackson Facility. Hey, that sounds alliterative ... The Massacre. Let's see, how about the Unfortunate wipeout?" "Now that's not appropriate talk for a good Christian acidhead.

What would God think?" Gail said, seeing more corpses stacked. They whizzed off the Interstate to Airline Highway. Highway 61 where God said "Abraham, kill me a son." The men in spacesuits rummaged through everything as dusk hit the place rather condescendingly. Evocative of a splashing in the air of golden clouds with silver linings amidst the orange and crimson soon to follow. In fact, the sky appeared to be bursting through a dense motley group of clouds that had formed in the exact shape of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. The mop-topped lads from Liverpool smiled at them and their perjured vision.

Their eyeless in Gaza blindness like Aldous Huxley must have felt when he was munching Peyote buttons right under the Hollywood Sign where his house was. And D.H. Lawrence was kicking cans in the Hot Arizona desert, pining for socialistic communes in the Wild West amidst bleached bovine skulls.

They were wizened and struck peculiarly by the offbeat cloud formations, as the rock n' roll cascaded into the car. The El Camino careened through stacks of corpses and rotz spacemen filching their own black market treasures of Captain Cortez.

"Now Honey, you know God is playing Bass in the Allman Brothers band." "Quite right!" she said and lit up a badly rolled double-papered dread monstrosity of locoweed. "One of these days we will find out the story." "Okay, now we were rummaging around the Landfill down there, looking for our respective heads, you know how that can be . . ." He began to pay more attention to the El Camino.

"We started wading through that maze of sewer pipes. We observed a whole menagerie of withered kooks, which were the zombies. All laying in some greenish ectoplasmic egg sac with eel-thing snakes twitching.

I mean, it filled a thirty or forty foot area in that maze of tunnels. Right where they all drain. Now these nests are in pockets of geographical intensity.

In the Atchafalaya swamp, in the Comite River out near Denham Springs. In Thompson Creek, and across the river by Dow Chemical. It was too much for the Madonna with Child, posing for Tintorelli. The salty nipple plucked from his gums, the acidhead, just like Lady MacBeth.

"So these nests of monstrous evolutionary egg sacks are growing, expanding. Full of poisonous and disease carrying insanity." "Right honey! The whole parish and border parishes are right back into like the Middle Ages!" The acidhead shook his head. Billy thought he saw him remove his head with his own two hands and put it in his lap. Really good acid. Far out.

"And we probably shouldn't be back in town either, right?" Gail said.

"Well, we can go north to Mississippi. Or we can go south to New Orleans." "Let's hit the French Quarter! Flaming Dr. Peppers at the Gold Mine bar! Pat O'Briens' watching the two hags playing "Sally Swinging on the back door gate" and pass out in a large plant pot that holds just one drunk." "And puke in Faulkner's old apartment in Pirates Alley, or step in fecal matter from bums right next to St. Louis Cathedral!" "Or better yet, hit the voodoo shops and get really wicked." The El Camino zoomed on I-10, back on the terminal concrete slab as nightfall hit. New Orleans, the Emerald City beckoned them out of the Middle Ages.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

East of the Pandemic, on the fringe in Livingston Parish the High School football team often feasted on Taco Bell at two o'clock in the morning. And were Quad A champs more often than not, and hard liquor was not sold on Sundays. Some rural urchins who had ambled back were inoculated and ready to prowl for zombies. Outer space seedpods incubating into identical duplicates of their favorite town leaders and neighbors of goodly white trash.

They had begun the odyssey of tracking down that mystical rumor displayed from mouth-to-mouth gossip. They would have no patience regarding aliens, zombies, and rioting in that township known as Denham Springs.

This was where Justin Wilson lived, the Cajun chow hound. And the Grand Wizard of the KKK lived down Highway 58 towards Walker, where be vies of trailers and monster trucks festooned the wooded thickets.

Debbie and her badass boyfriend were sick of staying cooped up with nothing on Television but international news about shit going on a few miles down the road. They wanted Nintendo, cases of beer to loot from that Junior Food Mart. Before the assholes made it back to the stores where one could steal their pickled eggs and pigs feet, and potato logs and fried chicken gizzards. But most of all things like hefty video games like Mrs. Pacman, which her boyfriend swiped with his high school blood buddies. Along with 30 cases of beer, virtually wiping out the entire freezer coolers. Along with Oui, Penthouse, Playboy, Hustler, and other skin job magazines like Swank, Nugget, Stag, Cavalier, which the boys adorned their mob hangouts with like amulets of luck in their asskicking adventures.

Tod, Debbie's steady badass tanned bohunk, had come back in his own Jeep. No doubt to lengthen his list of crimes as he and everybody else knew that looting and pillaging were second nature in a situation

like this.

They had tried to hit the bank. Then the pizza hut, where they were chased off with a couple of rounds from a 357 magnum.

Now they had knocked over everything from the Chink restaurant, the Exxon station and the McDonalds. Half the fun was just destroying shit while loaded on reds and Jack Daniels. These were a deadly combination, when mixed generously with handguns, rifles and bad attitudes.

They camped down at the beach of the Amite River. They got some heavy metal babes whose forte was popping Crystal meth until their heels sparked and their eyes lit up like pinball machines. They would constantly screw these boys because it was exciting for them. These twentyyear- old boys came from Christian homes and trailer parks. And they deserved to rip off some skank every time they got that look in their eyes and the feelings below their blue jean belts started stirring in a rather carnal way.

A slice of life in Denham Springs was this: Ordering Domino's pizza and going to the video store religiously for the pablum of commercial hits. ESPN football for the ensconced dominant husband, who was literally the reigning monarch in a three- or four-bedroom home with satellite dish.

Professional wrestling, caching teen coin to see new cinema extravaganzas like "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II." The mother constantly shopped for mall luxuries, new dresses for the boys and girls. Smart shopping at Wal- Mart. Teaching the kids about Jesus and Football, and making sure none of em turned out liberal or weird, or faggots! Christians with muscle is what it was. Prom dates, Junior kicking ass at Nose guard for Denham Springs (who should have rightly been neutered).

The Taco Bell was sanctified holy ground like warrior graveyards somewhere long past. Pissing on every fire hydrant before pep rallies. Getting bare tit off the finest piece of nubile teenage skank was way up there on the short list. Not thinking about college. More of construction work to sweat away that ambivalent teenage angst. The daughters were getting puberty damage. It was so the mother, the bitch didn't even recognize the pups anymore. The father would kill anyone who touched his daughters.

Now it was: rotted refrigerator spoils, a wrecked looted suburban shack, cars stolen from the driveway. Pets lay about like road kill yet unbloodied from any auto incursion. Young toddlers dead in their Nintendo hideouts. Daughters lay about, bloated carcasses. Once little redneck princesses to their French kissing fathers. Now gutterfodder, rottmeisters of maimed rendering beyond recognition. The mothers and fathers who did make it out would never be the same again. A trial by fire from the cruel twist of dead children strewn about the playsets and tire swings, unrecognizable and horrible. The little palaces of teeming children were now charnel graves.

Down by the Amite beach there were six monster trucks parked like steel steeds, their huge rubber tires a precursor to monstrosity. The teenage orgies, boys and girls screwing, fighting and beer guzzling with a medicine kit of drugs from the various pharmacies. Little pillboxes of splendid ecstasy. Junkie Heaven. Good turned bad, gone wrong. The girls were little screwing machines; they couldn't stop humping even when the little road masters had ejaculated. All were duly cranked on any sort of drug made available and brought to them by Parke-Davis.

They found an egg sack about fifty feet wide under a set of tree branches and trash that floats until snagged by fallen obstacles. They saw hibernating snake things. One boy even said "I got a prize once for catching the biggest eel, but we got em ten feet long here." They busted the sack. One boy got bitten by the razor sharp monsters as they spilled onto the beach and scattered. They riddled them with their ammo and shotguns; blew them to hell. One kid wanted to cook em up, but they nixed that. He was out of it anyway on a month-long acid high. There were a couple of zombies found in the sack too. All

yellowish ochre green and striped and blotched. And still alive. They tied them up to the bumper of the Bigfoot, Jimmy's pride and joy. They were barely alive, in some sort of embryonic trance. The boys scattered the ectoplasmic gelatin that surrounded the curls of snakes which had slumbered before the boys had ripped it open. The clear skin sack jiggled just like the blob.

## Chapter Forty

In Acadiana parishes, a sovereign swampland, the folk's second language was Cajun French. At football games the cheerleading yell was "Hot Gumbo Cold Cush cush, come on USL, Push, Push, Push!" In these parishes, everyone knew the meaning of red cayenne pepper. How to make Dirty Rice and Jambalaya. There was always deer sausage on the stove, and a gumbo full of oysters, shrimp, crabmeat, chicken, Andouille sausage would brim green bubbling.

To BreauxBridge in the East, to Lake Charles in the West, to Opelousas in the north, down to Golden Meadow below Abbeville, the entire Atchafalaya had turned into a big Jello mold. That's what it looked like from the raised interstate above WhiskeyBay where one once could see boats below.

"Da whole swamp looks like it done covered up with jelly or something," Guidry said. The gumbo on the stove was rather unusual all brown and full of seafood.

"I ain't eating none of that snake food! Naww eeeiii! No sir!" "Jes tray a lil piece dar, Paw paw!" Guidry said. He speared a chunk of gutted monster meat turned white and nibbled on it.

"You' is crazy, yeah!" "Dem doctors way it ain't poisonous once it done been dead. And I cleaned it an cut de head off. And put about ten feet a Cajun devilish eel in dat gumbo," as he stirred it and chewed on the whitish meat.

"Son, ain't you got respect of de dead?" and said the Cajun prayer silently. He looked the other way about the formicaed kitchen in the cozy little house that his paw ran had been living in with Maw Maw for 30 years.

Outside were catfish ponds and crawfish farms. It was getting cold cause autumn was there. They had ben watching CNN every day since the mass tragedy.

"I like tryin new tings, pawran," and stirred it some more. It did smell delicious.

"Just because some crazy man bought Louis Catorze's heart and cooked de pickled ting dead a century ago or two, and ate it, dos dat mean you is gonna too?" "Where did you read dat?" Guidry asked, looking out the kitchen window. The oaks and cypress had lost all their leaves, giving that stark grainy but nice browns of ground. The sun glinted off the water in the crawfish farm. Landry had to come and scoop the ponds because of the Jell- O on top of it.

"Dat's one weird ting ta talk about, Pawran!" "Please for the Holy Mothers sake don't eat no more of

dat devil gumbo! Bless da Holy Saints, Fadder Gawd an Sonny Jezus, Couchon du lait!" The old man shrugged his head. His face was bristling with stubble.

He hadn't been able to sleep for days. His daughter was still over there where the plague was. He done told her, get outa dere!

"Alright, I'm taking da meat out! But da Gumbo is still fulla shrimp and oyster yeah. See, I'm taking dem out!" The Grandfather sighed. He didn't care about no monster gumbo. He hadn't heard from Lawilda, no!

Was she all right? He didn't care about dat crummy bruther-in-law, no. But she loved him, so maybe he ought so set aside one Rosary for him, too! He couldn't count da Hail Mary's and Our Fathers that he done said since he talked to Father Couvillion. The Holy Father said she was in God's hands.

She would get in touch with her paw paw soon enough. Said all communications was not working properly.

Curse dem eel monstas. Maybe he would eat him some Gumbo!

If he could eat dem, dem maybe he would feel better about dis whole Ting!

"Put dem pieces a meat back in dere, Son!" "What ya mean, Pawran?" He looked at the old man. An acadiana man of strength, though it didn't show much. He knew Pawran was praying all de time, da rosary yeah! He must mean it yeah.

"Okay dere!" He put dem all outa the sink and they went plop in dere. The old man watched him do it. He finished.

"Now make me a bowl dere, boy!" He still couldn't manage to smile yet. There would be plenty of Novenas at Our Lady of Lourdes, yeah.

But for now he would conquer de enemy by devouring it.

"Pawran, you just sit down dere and I got some nice brown rice yeah, and watch out it's hot!" He put the bowl down on da table as the refrigerator was making noise in the otherwise quiet. A nice sort of quiet. There, right in the cool front in Breaux Bridge, where they were starting to make eel po-boys, eel dirty rice, fried eel monsta, yeah. All dem little country groceries where you could buy potato logs an spicy chicken; now alongside da boudin and hogshhead cheese you could devour da monsta like dat man musta felt when he ate Louis Catorze's heart in England! The snappy air blanketed the stark leafless trees. The cypresses leathery like stitched leather. Da Holy Trinity was dere, right dere above dem all. Dat was why dere wasn't no dying round dere. Go to Mass and you would be safe. Dat Grand Coteau church was 250 years old, Pawran thought. And he would be buried in dat cemetery out behind it. But when da good Lord want him to be, he thought, not now, and not his daughter and his grandchildren.

"Dis tastes okay, son!" as he cooled a spoonful of brown rice, gumbo and lots of seafood. His enemy flesh he commenced to digest, and he welcomed every morsel of it. If anything would happen to him, den he would join his daughter LaWilda in da Throne of Gadd, yeah! He went ahead and finished dat bowl and had three more. He didn't know he was dat hungry!

It tasted kind like Garfish. He thought it was a trash fish, yeah!

Things died down. The army got most of the bodies off to wherever they send dead humans in large quantities. The refineries continued to blaze. Dow to the Southwest of Baton Rouge, and far off in the distance the Tenneco plant was kind of a free pyrotechnical display. There was a continual noxious smell

in the air, a kind of thickly stench like creosote and a chemical chlorine aftertaste.

Ricky Harrison and Kendra Hoerst found themselves in a colony of interesting people. Faculty professors, Theater instructors, Music professors, a Writer-in-Residence, Philosophy Professors, English grads with brilliant précis'. The Faculty Club was a 250-year-old French Tudor mansion that had come dangerously close to being torn down to make way for a natatorium. But fortunately there were enough old ladies with aesthetics and nasty dispositions that fought against the entire Athletic Council.

In an upstairs bedroom Kendra took a bath in an old fashioned wrought tub. Ricky poured himself some sherry. They had long run out of Demurral, Laudanum, morphine, and the various other drugs that she had filched. Downstairs in the dining room and drawing room was engaging reverie of intellectuals who had forgotten that they were alive. They had drenched themselves in endless semesters of boredom.

Kendra got up naked, glistening droplets on her tanned body. She dried herself off with a fluffy large towel. She wrapped it around her hair darkened by clean water. Ricky drank in with his eyes her Teutonic beauty.

Her cassette player was pouring forth "Brahms 1st Piano Concerto." It felt for both of them like being in heaven. The carnage was outside, in the foul air. Here they were safe as long as the inoculation held out. It would possibly time out in rather complicated medical terms; Kendra knew that. She had injected everyone in the mansion a week ago, before she had finally come to the Faculty club. Emerging from the shrubs and landscaped lilies, Magnolias, Gladiolus and Hydrangeas, as the air had then cooled much and the end of late summer was marked by the first cold front that had brought cleansing rain which had pulled down the chemicals that the bursting refineries were issuing forth. And the sidewalks had finally been cleansed of death rattled corpses and fluids promulgated and seeped, by this long rain.

But now she was in Ricky's lap with her panties on, his girl for the end of the world now.

"You know you're a national hero, don't you sweetie?" She smiled, feeling much different than when the events of their reuniting when the death rattling began. "It was your cure that has saved a lot of people in this whole state." She kissed him.

Close to his face she said, whispering, "Are you proud of me?" ever so quietly, and he smiled and nodded. He had lost a lot of that gutty weight from not eating for about three weeks during the whole nightmare.

He was lean, his handsome face much different without that gutter pudge.

He was irresistible to her.

"I am alive again," he told her. "I have changed in some conscious way." "I know," and she did know.

Born out of chaos an emerging chrysalis, a large bird leaping out of the foul dust. They sipped sweet sherry and lay down on the king-size bed with satin sheets and immaculate comfort. They slept for a good while like cosmic outlaws, healing themselves whether they knew it or not. They awoke together.

A husband and wife had concocted all the while that they would endure the tragedy as it had unfurled on national television. Round the clock, it was a private screening for everyone, glued to the large screen television that once had shown LSU highlights.

"Honey," Harrison said before she bounded down the stairs, "I've got to take a life affirming walk." She smiled and looked at him.

"How long will you be gone?" "A day." "What?" she quizzed, and then nodded.

"I think you are going to walk a good ways." "I will be back in the morning. It's just something I've got to do." "Well, go ahead and walk, but please be careful." "Remember I found that extra biological suit from one of the army reserves guys. And I will be back in the morning." "Now where exactly are you going?" "I am going to go downtown, maybe walk through Spanish town, by the Governor's Mansion, past the State Capitol, take a walk over the Mississippi River . . ." "Is this one of those time you talked about?" "Let me assure you, one of these times has only been around since we entered the Middle Ages, darling." "Just be careful, Ricky." "I'll be wearing a spacesuit. Why, do you want me to carry a weapon?" "Well, you heard those creepy reports." She brushed her hair with her hand. Her lips moved ever so sensuously, without her knowing just how sexy she was. She was as always a knockout, and she was his. As long as he didn't go flaky on her. Was she just with him because of all this? Was this whole plaque here for his benefit? He was crazy or something. But how long could he have gone on feeling sorry for himself? He, in his ambivalent way, was slowing killing himself with liting bourbon-puffed melancholia.

It looked beautiful in the movies but it wouldn't wash in real life. Besides, it didn't feel that fun at the time. It was awful, he realized.

"Okay, I'll find a gun somewhere. There ought to be a pawn shop that will accommodate me." "That's looting." "Honey, this whole town is one big super mall giveaway until the folks come back. They won't see me, so they won't shoot me. I've never stole anything in my life. But the worm has turned." "Hello, Ricky," Dr. Perill said. He was reading a book on John Ford.

"Hey, Dr. Perill. Everybody." The folks were lounging around. They were putting away the best of a couple of fifths of gin, smoothly mixed with tonic water. There was a fix-it-yourself sandwich buffet going over there by the kitchen; cold cuts, deli meats, Dijon mustard and mayonnaise. Kendra made a monster sandwich and bit into it.

"So Kendra, when do we take our next shot?" Dr. Mary Hart, the ex-hippie-turned-computer-science guru asked.

"I think it will be tomorrow or the next day. I've already been told by the medical staff at Oschners once they got my serum, that we can go get some more at Lady of the Lake. I'm going tomorrow morning. They im- proved it a little than what I had." "But is there a chance that the second shot won't be as effective?" "Well, yes." The room which had been relaxed and chatty was suddenly palled over with quiet.

"I'm going to be back tomorrow morning, about noon or before," Ricky said.

"Going to take that walk, huh?" Mr. Roth, the calculus bum said, pleasantly.

Mr. Roth was that peculiar species of faculty at a huge campus, known as that calculus and differential equations\linear algebra dharma bum.

Known for their shabby appearance of oversized knit shirt and belly gut.

Unshaven and that mystical look of freedom accorded bums, with topsiders or some other bumshoes. If they did not possess vast mathematical quantities of theorems, trig and three-dimensional integrals, they would be rifling through dumpsters looking for scraps. A paycheck and professional tennis matches on television and a couple cases of beer to get them through midterms until the inferior students dropped out. That was all they needed, aside from fast food and an occasional wank on the pud or talking a grad assistant with manageable tits to perform Avogadro's number worth of sexual perversity upon them. Before they would again sink down into that pathos that was marked solidly upon all men who knew too much for their own good.



"Yes, sir, I'll phone from the governor's mansion if I am in trouble.

And y'all just send over a jeep or something to get me out of harm's way." Dr. Perill snickered. That smile that was worn many times from viewing great Stanley Kubrick movies, Robert Altman and Peckinpah ventures.

"Just don't become some noon meal for a Night of the Living Dead reject," He said balmily as the gin was making him more charming than the absence of gin made him bitchy like Kenneth Tynan or mean like Peckinpah many times. Recovering Alcoholic for 8 years until all his friends died off, and he's back on the sauce. But unusually tolerable, like a zombie given audible life force, back into the social world again.

As Harrison exited from the Tudor House, the stifling aroma of carnal fodder hit him hard. It was quiet, dark as he walked down the wide parade grounds. The music building across the flat, the law building on the other side, the bell tower looming like an ominous monument. He grabbed a couple of 12-ounce beers from the Death Valley Shell store. Past the vacant ghost of the Varsity Revival house. He swigged back the beers. The familiar winery carbonation sweetly tasted in his palette. There were Army vehicles parked in obtrusive lots. In the distance, he heard fire engines.

Sirens of city police busting zombie ass, sheriff's deputies given free license to kick black hiney, and target practice to boot.

Harrison walked down Highland, past the White Horse Tavern, which had long ago changed to Shenanigans. An Irish misnomer that was once polluted with frat trash and coed meat. Next to it, the Brass Rail had indeed gone through its assortment of silly misnomers also.

Now he was at once frozen in time, thinking back on one hand to the mid to late seventies. Traversing forward in time to these perils, to bars with unknown names. Cadavers stacked up really neatly. The refineries were to his left from Highland, over the River and blazing like nuclear bombs gone off. The fires had been constantly lighting that horizon that still couldn't be checked by the vast numbers of corporate thugs trying to save their million dollar chemistry sets. Melting down into that stuff of which they made telephones.

He thought about Kendra, his blond dream come true. She might actually love him. Not back then when the world was on its ass, but now still.

She was now truly a real identity to him. Not just a transient image of remembrance. Not just a goddess implanted from the first night he met her with Juan in the Chimes Bar when it was still normal. Just the fringe before the big meltdown, where he saw the punk rockers playing pool hall billiards whilst on Acid, he had a taste for her. Unthinkable to the Old Harrison once unfettered by a real live woman; he had wanked himself via tattered Playboy centerfolds. Images of ethereal fantasy, not a three dimensional babe who was slowly cleaving to him. And he was . . . hell, he was getting his life back. So why did he have to look around, and see about fifty corpses lined up prettily in a row by the Baskin and Robbins mausoleum there in the parking lot? Why did he have to walk by Joe Delpit's Chicken shack only to see smashed cars, shattered windows? Remnants of rioting?

Why was he endangering himself upon hearing shots coming from Roosevelt Street.

Now his eyes were filled with an ambiguous mix of joy and sadness: joy from rollicking around with his newfound goddess, sadness regarding this plague. He sighted the projects as he trudged further down Highland Road, near the defunct television station up on the hill, Channel 2 of this hillbilly paddock. There were some looters off to the right, busting into a defunct liquor store, helping themselves.

They heard him approach. With a stunned, dazed and confused look upon their faces strode towards

him about like Festus on Gunsmoke.

Wait a minute, he thought. That central nervous kick to their walk . . . only one thing . . .

ZOMBIES! He ran past them. They stumbled after him. He easily outran them. They gave up. No noon meal for them! He paused and huffed away out of shape. You see, he thought to himself. You have long since become an old man. What was it Joe Thomas had said to him? "See that guy? He's already an old man." Did he realize that he could have been pulled apart like a human piñata? Look out of every corner. You know, there's still time to turn around and go back. But no, he had something to prove.

He kept the intrepid journey going. Past government Street, past North Boulevard, into that lawyer crypt that downtown had become. He hooked a right to the interstate entrance, up onto that concrete rise.

The sight was magnificent. How many times can you walk down the interstate on purpose and walk right onto that high-rise exit like a roller coaster. And walk way up above the Mississippi River, on that monstrosity, the bridge? He was straddling the epic poem now. A peace and utter absolution came over him as he scanned the raging infernos of Dow Chemical, Exxon, the wonders of Kaiser aluminum. Smelling all that coffee burning at the Community Coffee plant by the Port Allen locks of the Intercoastal waterway.

Someone had to start those fires. A lot of these chemical plants just didn't start by themselves. They were put into some sort of holding pattern, a stasis. So maybe these villagers of the damned were smarter after all? They had some overriding knowledge to do some harm. He saw fire engines run by. Huge diesels and men staring at him. Just a child here on top of the miracle dictum of the Bridge. Looking down, not even thinking about jumping. This was perhaps his epiphanic moment, a manic spiraling crescendo crashing about in his sensibilities. He was virtually alone for all purposes, in the dark but lit evening. The city all but abandoned. That is, until the good natives came back, which they had already started doing.

That inoculation was good for so long, they were told, the medical intelligentsia had told them don't come back! The viral poison is still active. Until that final cure could be found, you could still die! Still die! And yet they were starting to come back. Like lemmings he thought, as he thought he could be such a thing himself. He would have jumped right then, if he hadn't met Kendra.

He scanned the Baton Rouge junk heart, the few high-rise structures and the old buildings. He tried to imagine it a hundred years ago, during Reconstruction.

So, what was to happen in this maelstrom? Would he get a posse together? A medical team? A Green Beret crack troop division? Where were those multitudes of redneck sheriff's deputies and state troopers and city cops when the real crime was going down? At home in some internment camp in Tylertown, Mississippi watching the Cotton Bowl, in Natchez getting their wicks dipped at Nellie's whorehouse? There were only so many twenty-four-hour stretches of watching CNN one could stand! He couldn't stay cooped up in that grad school colony forever.

He scanned the horizon, the ships still passing through down below.

Hundreds of feet below as he, clown prince once again, walking huge pipes at Exxon refinery.

"So, what did your discriminating eye see?" Kendra said.

"Sweetie, I was standing there, looking at the vast ruins. Edified remains of Baton Rouge, industrial city, lain to waste. I was on the Bridge." "It's not that far. I roamed around the river road underneath the

risers. Then I walked back onto the I-110, and walked up the steppes to heaven's gate." "You're so poetic!" she said. She walked up to him and hugged him. The CNN new channel was rattling on and on this "National Crisis.

The horrid situation." That was about right. He smiled at her.

"Some Zombies almost got me. I could have been a noon meal in lieu of some poor Labrador Retriever." "No shit?" Her face went slack.

"Honey, don't you ever do that again," she lightly smacked him.

He kissed her radiant face, those animated lips drenched in utter sensuality. She was a godsend! That brown face, those blue eyes. That perfectness, the utter precision of this veritable queen. She put all others to shame. And she loves ME, LOVES ME!, he thought. He still hadn't hit ground yet.

"Can we make love before we pack?" Ricky said.

"Come on honey, I already packed." She smiled at him again. He let go of her and looked at the suitcases they had borrowed.

"We packed?" "Yes Mr. Harrison!" she said with shining resolution. She really wanted to get the hell out of the maelstrom, the hallucinogenic hayride.

Baton Rouge, the Quatermass smoking pit.

"Let's go Kendra, little cutie wootie darling baby wabey, oinkie boo." "You know. You've got devilish sarcasm." "Now look honey, I was just clowning . . ." "No, I don't mean it in a bad way. You are so brilliantly clever but have no common sense. You navigate by emotion. You probably had a girlfriend once that said you had a mean streak." She smiled. The brown woods of the room shined, the sunset backdrop. The filtered autumn, the huge parade grounds out there, the chiming of the Campanile bell tower like a lighthouse, a beacon to find their way back in the blackness.

"You know why I have the mean streak?" "No. What's the matter? You look . . . don't get upset." "Wait," she said.

He choked back between breaths. He sobbed. Tears welled up in his eyes. He was unhinged, that rubbery face like he got at his mother Marlene's funeral.

"You're mother dying?" "Ahhh..." He wiped his eyes, the moisture warm and she reached there and wiped them and held his face in her hands tenderly.

"What is it?" He gushed forth: "My brother's, is . . . Dead!" he cried and held on to her. She tried to sooth him.

"How did that happen darling?" "That's terrible," she continued. She stroked his hair, his blonde straw like Robert Redford. That beautiful face of his was all contorted, long anguished face.

"He refused to take the inoculation. I called my sister before I came to see you." "It's going to be okay, darling," over and over to him. He got himself back to normal, a great relief evident on his countenance. His eyes dry, not red and wet, his handsome face back the way it was.

They went down and greeted the coterie, the Colony of Brilliance.

Dr. Parril had managed to find on WGN Chicago, Stanley Kubrick's "Paths of Glory." They had their

suitcases, borrowed from Mary Hart, the philosopher turned Computer sensible woman. What anarchy she once had was now replaced with kindness; a great bridge across the chasm of her atheistic nihilism. It was a wonder what her newborn son had on her manifestos.

The parlor socialism, the hippie outback, the Abbie Hoffman Whole Earth Catalog; destroyed every scintilla. She was now spoon-feeding the child in swaddling cloth and designer diapers, some strained carrots.

They took the Volvo Turbo Coupe out of LSU, onto the interstate, across the bridge wherefore was spawned the epiphanic moment where Harrison had lost himself in the brilliancies of revelations. Lost all sensation of time, and now driving right by the exact spot where he had seen the undulating belly of the river. The barges floating like monsters patiently waiting. Kendra lay back in the passenger seat.

Ricky headed down highway 1 with his full time night woman, the squaw that he packed that he must have found in a Vogue Catalog. A statuesque piece of work, her eyes closed for the nonce. They went through Thibodeaux, Golden Meadow. The nightfall sky met the crashing surf of another grand arabesque of the Gulf of Mexico.

## Chapter Forty-One

The shrimp boats were coming in. The porpoise were gliding in and out of the water. The fishnets, shrimp nets like draperies hung out to dry. The vast array of camps built on stilts commanding the ocean to strike them down. The beach was empty. The moon above, the same Quaalude moon of 1978 where the whole episode which was Harrison's documented remembrances.

Karrie Capshaw naked and pristine white matched against jetblack raven-haired siren. Kendra sound asleep in that elegantly feminine but powerful look about her, striking.

"Honey, wake up. We're here." She lifted her pouty face up as he put the gold Volvo in park. The radio off where came out Faure's requiem with Mexican skewed radio waves skittering from a ways further down the globe of man. She woke up. The camp of Dr. Peterson, the etymologist professor was in front of them.

They climbed the wooden steps in the raised camp. Underneath the camp was a nice looking ski boat, and a variety of garden hoses.

They settled in, sitting together on the porch. The sound of the surf crashing against the wet sandy beach was lulling them into a rhythm.

Kendra had that ill repose upon her smooth features. Something had been bottled up in her disposition, and she could hide it only so long.

Harrison wondered what was going on with her those last few days.

She had been back and forth from the Faculty House to the Biochemistry building. For her trouble, she could almost win the Nobel Prize or something.

The waves came ceaselessly from way out there, where blinking oilrigs beacons stood miles away. The clouds were silhouetted by the moonbright enlarged moon. It was dreamstuff, them being here, away from the pit. But what was that extra mental baggage she was carrying around?

Was it him? They swung in slow ease on the wooden porch swing, mesmerized by the immediate sedateness, and then she spoke.

"There is no permanent cure." She winced a couple of times.

"What?" He looked at her in the absence of lighting.

"There is no vaccine. We are all dead." "So how do you know?" Ricky asked, scanning again the beacons from the oilrigs like it was West Egg across from Gatsby.

"I just know. Believe me." "Is that what had been on your mind?" he asked.

"Yes. Wouldn't you be kind of under?" and she gestured wildly with her hands. The silky blonde hair on her brown tanned arms was what he noticed.

Then he looked up to her face; those lips glossed with pink screwme lipstick.

They sat there somber, silent. The bad news sinking into Ricky Harrison, absorbing it all. The waves crashed silently onto the beach, the wind bristled through the screen. That open sea air was the only thing invigorating. Kendra took his hand and they sat there for hours.

A shorter life, what a bad hand Almighty God had dealt from the bottom of the deck. Holding that hole card in his sleeve hem, calling their bluff. Unoriginal behavior from a better thought-of Being, how thoughtless was His plan.

And so the folks came back to roost, to the soil that they owned in their triple mortgages, where one could think about the oil crunch again, to reclaim their heritage. The traffic was building. The roads were bumper to bumper. It wasn't dead souls anymore; there was animation, movement, social clashes to be had. The Volvos, pickup trucks, college pricks, mothers and fathers who felt it was a race to get back to see if their houses in the suburbs were still there. They did not know that where would not be another chance against this disease malady.

## **Chapter Forty-Two**

Catfish Joe, Mohawk and Hose were grabassing some teenaged little buns that they found pillaging Cortana Mall. It wasn't half bad balling little 14 years olds. If there was grass in the outfield, play ball! Yessir. Catfish Joe was pumping hard against a little girl who might have made it in her flight.

If she hadn't decided to hesitate by looking at the Jewelry displays and trying to break the glass. Her little beautiful features were deathly pretty after he snapped her spine. Just one clean break and that was it. It was extremely rewarding to kill her, after he rode her hide good enough. Finally, Hose had had his share of the last little girl, who had fainted. All of the girls were screaming, crying before they were knocked unconscious. They knew they were going to die. Marsha Simpson, the little Debbie Gibson miniature woman with the Pink Floyd T-shirt had a face of beautiful exquisite death.

Once blood rushed out and white paleness ensured, it proved that "Death hath not a kind little face." They killed the three girls. They lay there in their Esprit outfits. A bag full of "New Kids on the block" stolen from the CD Record Bar that they would never get to play were laying sprawled about the smooth floors in the sniffing maze of hallways next to Mervyns and Sears and the Piccadilly.

Each one of these poor little creatures had somehow only won a "Dream Date with Richard Speck, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, or Charles Manson, as the Tiger Beat magazines could have foretold in this hellishness.

"We are gonna hit the Bon Marche Mall now. We got our pick of the best automatic weapons that you can buy, and I'm aiming to try em out some." Mohawk and Hose were pulling up their pants, breathing heavy and hearts racing after snuffing those Valley girls and pumping against those little cute panties and violently beating them around in the process. Hard work but rewarding.

"Were you just kidding about going to their River Bend or one of them refineries and making the place explode?" "Yeah," Hose said with trepidation and a lingering of hard liquor that he had confiscated at the Oyster Bar. He drank down the Wild Turkey like it was lemonade.

Catfish Joe lit him up an expensive cigar that they got before tearing apart the "Tobacco Pouch" store. Now they had screwed some women.

They had got mean drunk and smoked up cigars, and still hadn't killed each other yet.

When the liquor ran out that they had swiped they headed down Highway 61 to the Interstate. It was like free reign at the Bingo parlor. And there weren't no screwing Sheriffs to screw with em.

"This here car was one like my daddy had. BMW. Pure driving class." Mohawk cut eyes at him and winced.

"Catfish, this here's a screwing Mercedes SL-5000. You is just about as dumb as a screwing cut-off Catfish head . . ." Catfish Joe beamed. "Why you all thinks I got calt that?" Better to have him laughing. Last time somebody crossed him he burnt down his deer camp and hung the guy up by the tree like a deer and dressed him out.

It was his grand reputation in cellblock #44.

They careened down I-12 past the last of the abandoned cars. The corpses were long since disposed of, but they knew the smell of Death. It was not unlike a chicken farm when the air conditioning went out for a few days. Poultry wasn't human flesh but it all rots the same.

"Where are you going? This ain't the exit!" "I was thinking, Hose . . . we done got a lot of stuff from the mall.

We done screwed some pretty little whores and kilt em." He smiled broadly.

Mohawk's face was as ugly and scary as a deranged wildman. He remembered all those times his momma made him watch her turn tricks.

Screwing Negro men and talking to him all the while. He finally turned the tables. It was feeling good to screw your own momma. He had tied her up for a week at the trailer in Belle Chase, and did every sex act to her. Strung out on crystal meth, he didn't beat her until he felt he screwed her enough to where he paid her back. He almost considered keeping her alive, she was such a good feeling woman. When he was a kid in Walker, he and his sister were fooling around and before he knew it, he done been screwing her for almost 9 months. Then she done got pregnant and that's when his momma stated hating him. He loved his momma though. In more ways than one.

It wasn't being twisted screwing your own momma. A piece of ass is still a piece a ass even if you was birthed through it. You can crawl back inside, you can mate with it. Dogs do it, screw their bitch mommas. The bitch don't recognize the pups no more anyhow, so she don't mind. But he was sure he wanted his momma to know. He kept saying, "Momma, does it feel good?" as he pumped and thrust on top of her. He had let her have some moonshine cause she begged for it so bad. It was like, he thought, his momma was the best piece of ass he ever had. So then he had to cut her head off. You cut off the head, the body dies.

"I'm getting off here, I told you where I was going." Catfish laughed. The Jack Daniels sloshed around in the bottle. "He's going to the convent to get a whiff a pussy!" Ha Ha they all laughed. Mowhawk fingered the special edition commemorative M-1 Viet Nam combat rifle with the silver plaque on it, carved and initialed. The one out of "Guns and Ammo" that cost 5000 dollars. He done lifted it free after hacking away at the legless vet holed up in the gun shop in that Mall. Right before he held it to the little teenaged girl when she done commenced to suck his business.

"Quit your laughing!" "No. Is that where you'se going?" "Now I done told you for two months where I was going when we was knowing we was gonna get outa the joint." "But you can't screw a nun!" Mohawk was starting to get a conscience? Sister Catherine.

"I'm gonna blow the habit and head both off a that screwing mean ass nun that used to lock me up and beat me just cuz she said I was the meanest kid, the . . ." "Oh, yeah . . . She said you were the Antichrist. The dark Beast.

Like Aleister Crowley, whoever the screw dat was." "Man, I wouldn't let no screwin priest call me that!" Catfish said, now almost out of it off the charcoal flavored Jack Daniels. He was drinking it straight and fast.

"This ain't no priest. These is women!" "Lock and Load!" Mohawk said, as they skidded to a stop right in front of the St. Joseph Academy orphanage. They busted out of the car like a hit squad.

They busted open the door of the large white building. The foyer was empty, and Catfish Joe looked at the Guest Register book with white feather quill pen.

"Should we sign this?" "You don't know how to write your name. Just make a mark," Hose said. "Decorum," said Mowhawk.

They bustled down the hallway, making Rebel Yells to signify their presence.

"Come on out you screwin' nuns! Whores!" they yelled.

A garbed woman came out of the sitting room, next to the chapel.

She just finished a special rosary for the victims of these times.

"Who are you men?" "Get out!" "Drunk," she said, glaring at them, defying their guns. She did not know

she was soon to become a Catholic martyr. Another chalk mark in the register on High. A statistic for the Ecumenical Counsel.

"Get down on your knees and start praying!" "Out Loud!" Catfish said, as he started ripping her clothes off.

She wasn't too old to look good without them clothes on. He still couldn't actually think about having her, until them clothes was off her. It was just something about that nun outfit. Didn't do nothing but kill erections. Not like when he used to peek on them showering when he was a kid. There was a few good looking nuns that you could kind a feel making you stir a bit, only when them clothes was off.

"Start peeling the costume, honey!" She began crying, and the other nuns bounded down the hall. They saw the weaponry and their beloved sister, now mostly undressed. That pallor of victim was not new to her. This would be a gruesome end.

They all began praying for their ruthless executioners.

"You hear that?" Catfish said.

"Yeah, they is praying for us!" Hose said. "I like that one there.

Take them clothes off!" They all did. There was still something reverential about them.

"Just do as they say! We were going to heaven anyway sisters, from the Plague. Just die quietly, and beseech thee oh Lord, wash away my sins, the iniquities (they were crying now). Oh Dear St. Peter, Paul, John, Matthew, and all your disciples. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be." (and Catfish pushed her down) . . . "Your Name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done. . ." I want this one, Hose thought, and started squeezing the blessed woman, laying her down quietly.

".. .on Earth as it is in Heaven. . ." Three nuns were now being violated, all sobbing, praying intently, with all their muster.

"Give us this Day, our Daily Bread, and Forgive us our Trespasses . . ." "Why are they saying this mumbo gumbo, Mohawk?" Hose said, as he came easily inside the virgin woman.

"Just don't pay em no mind! I never did," Catfish said. He lifted and aimed the commemorative rifle to the two other nuns against the wall, and squeezed the tiger. A burst, short but sweet, and they all fell down.

"This ain't right, raping these holy women!" Mohawk said.

"Alright." And they got up.

"But we can at least kill 'em!" and they all fancifully killed their humbled sex partners execution style with a few bullets not blessed in Holy Water. The nuns fell down dead before they hit the ground. Their white chaste bodies lay there, in a rather quaint offering.

"Well, I done feel a whole lot better." "I say we go find some little girls, like them little cuties in the mall." "There's probably deputies and others patrolling around, now that all them people have come back into town." "Well, let's head on to that Nuclear Plant! We done wore out our inoculations." "Alright boys . . . head out." And they walked out without signing the register.

"Now you're a saying that you wanna make the reactor leak out some poison. Why?" I toll ya, cause momma always said that I was such a beast that if I could place to little bits. . .," Catfish said.



"So what makes ya think you oughta really go ahead an' do it?"

Specially since we's the first one's ta blow up? I don't wanna blow up! Sheeit!" Hose smiled, and licked some blood from his shirtsleeves. The Mercedes was just flying down I-110 past the Mississippi River Bridge. Armageddon was coming just as sure as Wapner would be on every day at 5:00.

The Mercedes shined and reflected off the bright sun even though the chilly snappy air made Hose, Catfish Joe and Mohawk feel like there was a gonna be a White Christmas. But if there was gonna be different looking snow than just white. Pinkish red, glowing ground fulla nuclear meltdown breakfast cereal that's gonna every glow like Reddy Kilowatt real good.

"I don't know bout this here meltdown. They says you can burn a hole clean through to China. I don't wants to be falling into that hole. Now you wants to maybe fall in a hole, so'es maybe you can screw it!" He laughed at Catfish Joe and took another bottle of Jack Daniels to his black lips. He saw Catfish Joe glaring in the rear view mirror like he done looks at ya before he is gonna dress you out like a deer.

"Now you see know I'm just kidding. Hell, I don't know if there's a hole, and I wanna screw it too!" and that Jack Daniels swallow was just too much in one pinch. He managed to get it down hard. The Mercedes got onto the Highway 61 merge where I-110 had stopped, already way past the Governor's mansion where there were more sheriffs' vehicles. The State Capitol looking like a little bitty desk ornament that you could buy at Expo '68. Goddamn Mary and Sonny Jesus, Mohawk was screwed in the head.

He done took a whole shitload a K-Mart Pharmaceuticals and didn't know whether they was women's birth control or screwin kiddy aspirin. All he knew was after he took em, that Jack Daniels started washing debris ashore in his tummy ocean.

"You don't think I got it in me ta take a atom bomb and light it and watch the folks turn melting green?" "Or make a hole in China so's I can screw it?" Catfish leered. Mohawk and Hose gulped a bit. The copper smell of fresh blood was getting em all friskier than working in a slaughter house for four life times. The Mercedes kept going. It was kinda funny cause they were heading straight back by Angola State Prison. They was always maybe gonna go back from whence they came.

"I still said we shoulda gone to Bourbon Street!" "Fawk!" Hose said. "The last naked woman I saw was a priest woman (A nun)!" Catfish said. An' I wanna see if I can eat more pussies than oysters!" He laughed and felt like he already had done it.

"You wanna get out and hitch to the fuggin French Quarter?" Or maybe you wanna go straight to Orleans parish prison." Catfish said.

Who the screw was this asshole telling me a free man what's right and wrong? The Mercedes was going there where John Jay Screwin Audobon was birdwatching. Screw 'em, cook 'em, pluck 'em and eat 'em. Don't screwin paint 'em! Hollywood folks to come film their stupid movies like "Mandingo," or shit like that. It was a pretty screwin picture though ain't it?, Catfish thought.

He could see if he done made a A-bomb outa "Popular Mechanics." Or shit, something like 'et. And his momma came home and she's standing her in the doorway next to the screwin' Jimmy Rodgers pictures.

And I's just press that button and the screwin' blast gets my momma and me mushrooming atop the mile high cloud. And it's all pretty. And there me and my momma are on top 'a that cloud in the stratosphere, screwin away.

And it was pretty there, but we was both dead. And that's the way it should 'a been.

"Nows if Catfish said we can get outa dere widout turning into incredible melting mans . . ." He looked at Catfish. Mohawk looked up to Hose in the shotgun cradle, fingerin his gun like he wanted to play wid it like it was a codpiece or sumtin.

"Haw . . . Incredible melting man." The inside of the luxuriant Mercedes with fake leather smelling like rawhide and linseed, was playing that easy listening shit make it sound like a dentist's waitin' room. And the smell from that pharmacy was lingering about too. They was living like they had a right to.

"You and me know we's gonna get haulin' ass outa there an straight to the Bourbon Street. Straight into the French Quarter, and we ain't stopping the car until we spot the first good-looking hooker who ain't no fuggin transvestite. And we are gonna nudge this car's nose-see that hood ornament like a peace sign? That is gonna nuzzle up right against the crotch of the best goddamn whore in New Orleans. And that's when I'll put her her in park." "But the whole point is that we can't stay in Louisiana no more cause it's all dangerous. And that's where everybody has done been robbing places. You can't just knock over a liquor store in Gulf port or Biloxi cause them people didn't evacuate themselves! The plague ain't reached that far!" "Looks, you know as well as me, that all the people that left Baton Rouge parishes has done come back. They are all sitting waiting with a shotgun pointed at your screwin head! It ain't no different. All the good lootin's already been done!" "Let's all take a swig on it! He's right! Sheit man, I thought you could be President of these United States cause you are one screwin smart . . ." "Just pass that bottle . . . Damn, you got a little blood on you, didn't you?" Hose said, to Catfish, who was sopping with red crimson now crusty people juice. And he really felt cleansed.

"There it is right there!" Catfish said. They got out of the coupe and hooted and hollered as they busted inside, the radium piles quite near.

They ran around hallways, past engineer's desks. The building was empty except for the Control Room for the Master of the Universe, Tool Room Johnston, who was about to have company.

They followed their noses, looking specifically for a room with switches gauges and computers. "Jes look for a place like the Bridge on Star Trek! I'm a telling ya, if we do it wrong we could be fried quicker than frozen okra!" Hose threw the almost empty bottle of Jack Daniels. It smashed against a laser printer. Catfish was looking around on top people's desks, looking at the engineer's pretty wives.

"Fawk!" Mohawk said. "We don't know how to make this baby cook! Where in fawk is the control room? Fawk a Star Trek! I never watched that sheit!" They trotted now where the hallway turned yellow and safety green and black. A concrete hallway said restricted and danger!

"Yea, hey, Danger, like the Robot said in Lost In Space!" "You don't know nothin'! I tell ya, in that Star Trek, first Spock's dead, and then his body's dead, but his brains alive. And they put a new one in! Stupid as screwin shit! Mamma done told me stuff like this is just dancing with the devil! You'se tampering in Gawd's Domain!" They walked now. They brought guns but found no occasion to fire them. Cause there weren't no flesh for the bullets to lodge into. Hose was rather disappointed.

"Shut up about Star Trek! You act like you ain't been in a refinery before, or chemical plant! What was you, some kinda hairdresser?" Mohawk cold cocked Hose a good one that must have surely cracked his skull. He went down and blood commenced to trickle from both his ears. Kinda pretty it was.

"Hey! Nobody supposed to be in here! Get the hell out!" a man said on the other side of the glass doors.

"Open this door!" Catfish said. He knew he was gonna kill this guy. This skinny Abe Lincoln looking zombie. It was Tool Room Johnston, having been there a good 88 hours in a row, the longest stretch yet. And he hadn't slept well since his family died and started spoiling like luncheon meat. Wrinkling up

and turning crisp, oxidizing and getting a bit gamey shiny.

"Go home and fawk your mamma!" Tool Room said. Catfish quickly brought the rifle to his firing position and fired, blasting the glass and the door. That pussy fancy electronic lock popped. These was all famous scientists like Charles Darwin or Einstein. Dead, Bourne a two midwives!, Catfish thought, spoiled logic confounding his schizoaffective delusioned brains.

Hose had, earlier in the Mercedes Coupe, handed out some Windowpane stamps to all present and accounted for. Jack Daniels and a handful of reds was not only a bad mixture, the casual death of many a gnarlyfaced hell's angel. But storm trooping your way into an empty Nuclear Power Plant sitting on a bluff by the Mississippi River with a couple of killers crazed on five or so microdots worth of low grade acid (windowpane was the brain bender of choice for these trendy folks) made Death Row seem like the Tonight Show Guest lineup. Catfish Joe, Mohawk and their little stone cold mascot, Hose, now forgotten, were inside. And the rabbit was running back into the foxhole. Hop on away, rabbit, Catfish thought!

Catfish and Mohawk, crazed out of their death row minds on wondrous speed-like thrill kill pussycat acid, busted through the gaping shotgun wound to the blistered door. The electronic wiring hanged about like Ganglions in "Fantastic Voyage," where them people got real small . . . Shit, that acid was spiraling them. This gaunt rabbit-legged lanky son-of-a-bitch. How did he know this Abe-Lincoln-looking rabbit weren't no zombie? He had a good right now to kill him till he stared at 'em without blinking. That's real dead. When the mortal coil is shuffled off and stomped into a slinky that won't slink any more.

"Follow the Bunny Trail, here comes Peter Cottontail!" Mohawk sang, more like a rebel yell.

"He's in here! Are you tripping?" Catfish said to Mohawk as everything was getting blurry and he couldn't really focus too well. It is not recommended by the AMA to mix Reds, vast quantities of Jack Daniels, neat, and windowpane LSD together. Do not operate heavy machinery.

Do not go on a killing spree. Do not gut nuns. Call your Pharmacist.

"I think we got us one!" They went inside the Operations Room where Toolroom had laid up valiantly, a large lanky six-foot bunny rabbit who looked like Abe Lincoln with a lobotomy. Toolroom Johnston.

The computer CRT's lay about. The whole place did not look exactly like "Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan." But the nice white-tiled floor, of heavy lead to support the immense computer, was a weird swirling patter of bending black lines that should have been square. The computers and tape drives whirred with that overall hum of air conditioning Honeywell monstrosity. This kept the whole chamber, all glass, surrounded like a huge fishbowl, at a brisk 71 degrees. The little line printers printing out dump alls of binary digits, decimal hex dumps for glitches, were chattering by themselves. There was a pretty big pile of printouts laid about the place, stock paper from the high-speed Japanese printers. The intricate display of modems connected to sources somewhere mysterious in this huge awe-aspiring Master Control of the Galaxy, was impressive.

"What do you want, boys?" Tool Room said. He looked like he had taken a swim in the thickest messiest coffee. He was obviously sleepdeprived and probably knew he didn't have a good chance of getting these boys outa here without being a dead man in the process, and then would still fail. The balloon was going up.

"We just want to tell us how to make this here nuclear plant go apeshit and spill and leak out and later go ahead and blow up," Catfish said.

They weren't wearing State Issue Angola outfits, but the clothes they stole from the Mervyn's in the Mall

were caked with Holy Nun blood and Little Girl Blood.

"Now, I can't do that," Johnston said. he looked at their guns pointed at him. What could he do?

Mohawk went over to him after Catfish nodded at him knowingly.

They definitely had the upper hand. Hell, they had the thing rigged like a fixed Turkey Shoot.

Mohawk went up to him, and taped a Shotgun to Tool Room's forehead.

He had Tool Room taped up so good the shotgun practically held itself up. The leverage and weight of the gun tilted poor Johnston's head to one side. The double barrels aimed true and would scatter gun his poor self to a newer world.

"Now, we is gonna ask you some questions, on how to make this here thang go up. If you don't answer us, we is gonna shoot off one toe at a time . . ." Toolroom was blindfolded now.

"Now what can I do to make the thing overflow, or leak out?" Toolroom was sobbing now, thinking about his wife and kids in Livingston Parish. He could have been home by now, eating fried turkey. But no, he had to be loyal to this mess of cadmium rods and piles.

"Over there by the ODT monitor, type in the mix number of 3333 with a priority of 50." "Hell, we don't know how to do that." He pulled Johnston's blindfold off.

"Okay. Do it." Tool Room made one lunge to swing at Mohawk.

The big brutish boys wouldn't stand for that. But they didn't just blow off his head.

Catfish put his pistol to Tool Room's big toe.

"You know, Mohawk, I did a lot a lit-er-a-ture reading in prison. I done found out that Albert Camus was just a auto parts clerk." Blam! went Johnston's toe on the floor, blood everywhere. Just like in the movies.

"AHHHHHHHEEEIIIIAAAA!" went Tool Room, hurting really bad. "Okay! AHHH!" they gave him a breather. After all, he only had eight-and-a-half toes now.

"Now are you gonna do it?" Catfish said?

"Now," Catfish continued, covered in more blood now. His trousers were speckled with red.

"You better have this thing set to blow up or leak out. I don't care which. But don't let it blow up until we get the hell outa here." "Okay Mister," Mohawk had his gun, the pistol ready to blow the other big toe off. Symmetry. Balance.

"Now, Norman Mailer was just a Engineer who didn't know how to rig up a flashlight. Ole Cole Porter was gonna be a lawyerman. That faggot." "Shit, Catfish. You'se one smart motherfawker!" Mohawk said.

He pushed the severed big toe round the room like a little hot wheels car, with a trail of blood, on the white floor, with his shotgun nozzle.

"An that Rimsky Korsakov, that screwin Russkie, he was justa Merchant Marine and Chemist! Now how come all these guys was no good at anything halfway interesting?" "I don't know," Tool Room said as he brought the computer down to a half, overriding all emergency procedures. The peripherals were

going down fast. It was a matter of tripping the switches with a shotgun to one's head. Bringing down the air conditioning and security systems, the heat gauges, temperature thermometers. The whole network was ceasing and having itself a li'l old nervous breakdown.

"Now, that William Faulkner, he done won that Nobel Prize an when he got to Denmark he done declared himself as a Farmer! Another screwup!" "I'm getting ready to blast offun this other toe real fast if I don't start seeing sparks and atomic radiation coming outa them big towers over there!" Mohawk said with anticipation.

"Now, you take your George Gershwin. He was a screwin cashier at a screwin restaurant!" "Little Jew!" "An Somerset Maugham was a fuggin Doctor man! I don't know bout you, but I wouldn't go to no screwin doctor who didn't know hospitalin' cause his calling was to write sissy books!" "But this man here needs doctoring real bad, because . . ." Mohawk said, and Blam and the other toe went flying, cut clean off. Tool Room fell to the floor, he had basically done what they told him to. Wouldn't any other man? He didn't want to got down in history as the man who sent Baton Rouge into the stratosphere or beyond. Here everything was turning orange . . . He gasped and cried with supreme edged pain.

"Look here, Catfish! He's done reaching up to the heavens like screwin Verne's statue on his grave! Haw, Haw!!!" "Shit, Mohawk you is getting too screwin' educated! Just ease on down a notch or two!" "Jez hold up and go trip on out shithead! I ain't finished!" and he turned to poor tormented Tool Room.

"That screwin Cervatezzz? What did he write? DON JUAN?"

They done said he had a low I Que that he was a screwin IDIOT!" Catfish was ready then and there to celebrate that final taste, that hint of death, which he would share and partake of.

Those immense concrete fortified piles under the cooling towers held large numbers of tritium, strontium, Plutonian. The cooling towers held contaminated water to cool the cadmium rods. Laced with tritium, which some say had been used to water the luxury golf course up there in St. Francisville. Not far away, just a bit down south was the Rollins plant, which would take millions of tons, 3.2 from their own special brain cancer, and die. The Oak Ridge had sent their share of waste to be disposed by Rollins, and the DEQ was investigating the whole matter, concerning whose figures were correct. The Rollins plant had only been fined 10,000 dollars for this thing. The Savannah River Site, a nuclear weapons plant in South Carolina, was pleased as punch that Baton Rouge and Louisiana was the asshole of the universe. One large specter for the bacteria infested mote dust globule of our sacred Mother Earth. So the folks around this aperture were essentially bacterial microorganisms around a cloacae of magmaed earth.

The crust of the earth abrasive and acne scarred cosmically. Shaved away leaving rashes, blemishes, lesions, shanquers, scar tissue, on the baby-faced world riddled with eternal questions that all said the same thing.

Tool room's gaunt face was hollow, his black sockets now filled with moist death, which he would witness until his dingy way to die followed through and he was charnel fodder. He would have croaked of his own cancerous sound loudly. Scarily "MAAAMPH MAAMPH! MAMPH!" over and over. The light blinking above their heads, the sound of the alarms all outside. Then more alarms and again like a dagger piercing his heart with its finality and seriousness. The nuclear plant now armed and dangerous and contaminated water boiling away and draining, leaking badly.

"Damn, listen to them alarms!" Catfish said wondrously.

"Look at the lights!" Mohawk said.

"I guess this little bunny rabbit done really made it go apeshit!" The acid enhanced the scariness of the

severe piercing screams of sirens all about them. It could be heard resounding all down the Angola Highway all muddy and caked with deep rivets and mudslinging soupiness.

Within minutes, the worst kind situation had come forth. This made the Rollins plant seemed like a Toys R Us store in comparison, a little cakewalk through the mall. The plant could very well go up any minute. The reactor cores were furiously going awry. This great infernal machine a la Cocteau in his worst nightmare was screeching for someone to throw a monkey wrench into the turbines of the complicated trillion-dollar mess of structure now badly malfunctioning. It was the worst nightmare scenario, making Chernobyl look like somebody pissed in the sandbox down at the Christian School.

"Well, you is one badass boy!" Catfish said to Tool Room. "We best be getting outa here! We done probably soaking with invisible electrical rays shooting all over creation!" Tool Room was in deep terminal shock now, the loss of blood evident as the alabaster well lit floor puddled with precious blood. He was going fast, and he was agonizing over what he had done. Loyal stouthearted High Pockets would die before seeing his little girls. Livingston Parish now seemed like the unattainable heaven. Those mystic swamps and deer stands festooned in the luscious green waters and cypress arcing cathedral like silence.

God's silence for good country Christians who interpreted the Good Book literally, because their grandparents before and before that did the same. Good poor people that used to listen to the Huey Longs and Earl K. Longs and built the state out of the stone ages. Now the balloon had gone up and Louisiana would be glaring and glowing with strontium birthday candles so bad it would look like the Northern Lights had skittered way down south in Dixieland. It would be the Rapture, when Jesus whooshes all the saved Christians up to some nether place in the clouds or universe so fast it was against natural law.

They rifled their way out of the hallway mazes, leaving Tool Room ohnston in his own personal makeshift morgue, a knife in his eye just for luck. When they got to the Mercedes Coupe, they looked up and back at the concrete Parthenon of cooling towers amazingly steadfast.

"Does it look like it's gonna blow up ta you?" Mohawk said.

"Hell, no! But he done like we told him. . .," and then suddenly a sobering rush of manic frenzy went through both of them like an invisible X-ray. The sirens were blowing away screaming decibels of very scary Danger!

Cry!, and Mohawk threw his rifle into the back.

"Let's get the hell outa here!" "Faaaaaaaawwwwwcccccckkk!" Catfish Cajun Joseph Monistere said as he threw himself in.

The engine revved and the car laid down some rubber in that cool crisp autumnal evening. The Flag bathed in evening lights waved and way behind them the cooling towers housed some very disturbing reactions. One could barely hear oneself over the Doppler Effect of the Sirens crying out. A lashing dropping whine as the car got further and further away. Down to the main highway, through St. Francisville and flying like a bat outa Wayne Manor in Gotham City. Mohawk screamed all the way. The fright and excitement on both of these men whose mothers had told them they were the wickedest boys in the world.

Radioactive laced waters overflowed from the surplus tanks used to house it. Alarms went off at scientific sounding board sites which were offsite from the River Bend plant. Emergency actions were immediately taken by the teams of scientists who had just come from there only four hours beforehand. From a controlled situation to now all out Armageddon in Gomorrah, Louisiana. Teams of men put on

radiation suits and went into the plant to discover Tool Room Johnston lying there with a smile on his face minus a couple toes and a knife in his eye like it felt good or something.

They worked on getting the mainframes up. The extremely urgent measures that were called for in this desperate situation.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Ricky Harrison and Kendra Hoerst were having the biggest Mr. and Mrs. argument at the Gulf camp on stilts. Arabesqued ululating waves of water crashed, oblivious to the teneral arguments.

"You quit blaming yourself! I don't care what your brother did to you!" Kendra yelled, that whiskey tenor lightening a bit.

"You don't even know me! Maybe I am not good enough for you!"

I learned to live with negative thinking! My own brother locked himself in my mothers house and didn't say a word to me for 11 years like I was a Hassidic Jew!" "Look! My parents divorced! My father had triple bypass surgery!"

I had boyfriends who looked like they were in the punk rock movement. I took Ecstasy and did whatever those guys told me! Do you want to know where they are now?" she said, steaming and her talons extended.

"Where?" "Let's just say Billy called me from jail, using his one phone call!" "Well, it looks like I did it again!" she said. He walked outside, down the stairs and headed to the beach. Kendra just sat there, drinking a maverick screwdriver. She turned on the TV.

She discerned something from a scientific report about the ongoing traumas mounting ever higher and a special report from Johns Hopkins specialists.

She watched with amazement. Inklings of, scintillas of understanding crept into her through that hugely arrogant shroud of hate that had developed within her. Knowledge earned.

She whisked down the stairs in her bikini. That bronzed body trudged, almost skipped onto the sandy beach. The night air hit her; that moon above remained censorious to the situation delineated like a bad dream.

She found Harrison sitting by a shrimp boat docked. The crab nets were laid out to dry. The smell of seawater was salty with a slight funk that came with it.

"I know what the problem is!" Kendra said. She came over to him and kissed him. He was simply gorgeous. Not eating for a couple weeks had sweated all that baby fat off him.

"What was the problem?" "I just saw CNN reporting from the medical teams. It's our dopamine little boxes being crumpled . . .!" "What?" "Have you ever heard of the cherry high?" she asked, smiling through her obvious pain.

"Uhhh," he said and stroked her brown arms with that wisp of golden hair on her lithe but strong Aryan arms.

"See? When somebody shoots heroin, or snorts coke, their little inductor box in their brain is crumpled up badly. You see, all our lives, inside our brains, we are drug free. And we have these little sensitive boxes in there that take dopa signals. But if we take a strong drug, that little box gets crumpled. And that is the cherry high, that we will never fell again as long as we live. Because it stays crumpled, no matter how much cocaine we snort we won't get that cherry high back." "Okay." Harrison said. His blonde hair was fluffed and feathered by the cool sweet sea breezes coming in from the Gulf Stream far away, where past those blinking oilrig lights men navigated by box compass.

"This screwing disease of the plague, it has been known to attack the nervous system. Remember when you showed up at the Biochemistry building? You had trouble walking straight? Hunched over? Well part of that paralysis was the dopamine. The zombies roaming around Baton Rouge are on this constant high. They have been succumbed very badly, which you and I only got a taste of, poison. And they can actually get that sensation of a cherry high over and over again. It's a medical miracle!" "Some miracle!" he said.

"And the reason we are so mad is we are experiencing that withdrawal from this sugary high of plaque poison. We didn't become zombies.

But I think they estimate people all over the place have been arguing a lot more than normal, perhaps even killing each other!" "That's right. The news teams did say that a whole bunch of crazy things. Murders have been taking place!" "So thank Gawd we weren't in the last throes like that." "What do we do?" "We've got to go back there. There's too much at stake to be sitting around here like it's spring break." They got up, dusted the sand off each other, and walked back hand in hand. His arm was around her brown shoulder. Her figure beckoned him through his anger suppressed from the reverse cherry high. They packed and got in the car and took off, heading back up to the Quatermass Pit. The Maelstrom, dark wherein the grave my friend is laid. The hellish-ness of Pireaus.

## **Chapter Forty-Four**

At the Old State Capitol where armies of doctors, medical staffers, television media hounds, reporters, the buzzword was "hatred Syndrome." Doctor Thompson released his sound bite regarding the strange phenomena of hating one's neighbor with ensuing adeptness and uncalled-for reasoning. It was ephemeral hate-spreading without a permit, coming out of nowhere like St. Elmo's Fire.

Doctor Thompson was a character; tweed jacket, smoking Luckies, long face, eyes not lined up too



good. Maybe he thought Damon Runyon was his creator or something.

"So what you're saying is that this plague has a side effect of making people hate their neighbor? Enough to kill them?" the female reporter for the New Orleans Times Picayune said, answering her own question.

"Well, perhaps a loathing with an intensity unparalleled in the history of the human race," Thompson remarked, putting out his 15th unfiltered cigarette and looking rather absentmindedly like a sui generis brilliant genius.

"Uh, right," she said. He looked around, bored already. Ready to move on to another algorithm to solve. He loved solving algorithmic perplexes.

"So all these acts of violence, murders within families, squabbles out there in the streets between looters and army soldiers, are because their nervous system is attacked. And instead of supposedly making them semiparalyzed, it makes them get pissed off?" "As you see . . ." She looked at a rundown short list of murders within the last month.

589 altogether, at least those were the ones discovered.

"And these zombie rumors? They are the final stage of this disorder?" Ah, the zombies. His little children of discovery. A new order of science. The first actual transcendence of man to a truly ennobled animalistic stage right out of Robert Ardery, Desmond Morris. Man at his most basic best. Or bestial.

"Well, we don't call them zombies. They are after all good people who have been and the whole matter is being studied quite thoroughly." "What do you see happening to this scenario now? Escaped prisoners from Angola, every one of them loose! Two or three break into the River Bend Facility. Lots of radiation leakage. They still haven't determined how much poisonous waste and radiation has been emitted, now wafting in and out of various parishes. This one, for one . . ." "Madam, I realize the situation doesn't look good." He sighed.

"Look good?! Your people tell us that the initial serum vaccination is no good anymore. A more specific one has to be targeted to the everchanging diseases and maladies. The different stages . . ." She looked miffed.

". . . We've got more of the gentry back in their own houses. All miraculously cured at first in those army cot villages set up in Texas and Mississippi. But we couldn't keep them there. They thought they were cured so they've all come back home to roost. Except that the bacilli has landed on its feet again. Changed course, throwing you guys a curve. In the suburbs, convicts are murdering little boys and girls. Looters are still looting.

The refineries are blazing away. People are murdering each other because of some scientific reaction . . ." "Yes." Thompson said.

"Well, what could be worse than that?" "I don't know. How about if we can't come up with the accurate enough serum this time?" "Are you joking around about this, Doctor? If you are I will hand my editor a story that says something you boys in white won't like at all . . ." "Perhaps you wouldn't lay on the threats so thickly if you weren't yourself affected with that pseudo zombie stage where the hatred just starts to seep into your head. Remember, you've got to fight it." She didn't know what to say.

"That's all I've got to say. We are talking about a cure within the weeks." "Permanent?" "No."

## Chapter Forty-Five

Kendra and Ricky toiled along Louisiana Highway 1 when they heard over the radio again what Kendra had gleaned from CNN.

"I told you. People have been murdering their neighbors and loved ones . . ." Harrison smiled. They found that stoking themselves on antidepressants like Valium, methadiazapan in the low 100 milligrams helped.

Outside the starkness of winter in the swampland was evident.

That cool crisp air injected up from the Gulf Stream swept down from the arctic regions. The cypresses, oaks, pines, birches were all about, earth tones.

The little highway was last added on during the Huey Long Administration.

The couple of feet on either side to widen what was once narrow enough for model A fords, or buggy horse carriages. But for now they were spiriting along in the borrowed Volvo Station Wagon.

The radio once again bleating out news like the war torn situation it was: ". . . River Bend nuclear plant had a semi severe leakage due to sabotage by Angola prisoners Thursday evening. One man was killed, Richard Johnston of Springfield, Louisiana. Engineers and scientists managed to stop the damage and stifle the leakage. Environmental Quality Department officials are in an uproar over this; what is perhaps the worst US nuclear accident since Three Mile Island and could perhaps be worse than the Russian Chernobyl accident in 1988." Kendra slapped the dashboard in anger.

"I can't screwing believe it. We are in worse shape now than when the actual plaque hit!" "Come on! You're exaggerating." Harrison said, stroking her left thigh. They flew down through Thibodeaux, Golden Meadow, in the night shrouding them in that mysteriousness of this age of apocalypses. So this is what it feels like to be in an Ingmar Bergman movie? To be any creature trapped in the emulsion of some terrible existence. To be preyed upon little creatures of the universe?

They made it finally to the grand mansion on campus, rounding the curve amidst the armed incursion of army trucks. It seemed, Kendra noticed, that the army bastards were starting to bring in more troops. Why?

Was there a big slumber party going to happen? Was there going to be a row? A war?

They fell asleep in each other's arms upstairs in their lovely drawing room. Not exactly from the blaming antidepressants, but to their bearing witness to the new age of disillusioned dark ages, the pandemic super bowl, perhaps.

"My own brother-in-law's a screwin' zombie!" Buster raved. In the paneled den Buster Collins was a bit frustrated.

"All those sheriff's deputies are gonna get to the bottom of this here Zombie crap!" The television flashed bluish white patterns about the dimly lit Collins home in Zachary. 'Nuclear plant done pissed in its pants,

green.

Are we in hell? When did we arrive? Buster thought.

His better half was in the kitchen trying to stay away from Buster when he got like this. She was making Red Beans and rice with minced garlic, soaked beans, onions, hot Manda sausage, peppercorns, celery. The aroma wafted throughout the rather modest but comfortable collective suburban home in one of those way-the-hell-out-in-nowhere developments. Where your neighbor was a nice guy but his screwin bad ass kids killed your kid's cat, threw it against your front door. Beat up your second son so bad for no reason. Making his life hell in a despicable way. What would a man like Buster Collins do? He shot their dog for rooting around in his tomato and corn garden.

"Honey, get me another Milwaukee's Best." Buster said. He switched from the rampant coverage of a radioactive cloud invisibly soaking into him and his wife and family over to "The Fall Guy" just to see that wiggling woman, from Bimbo Central.

'My own Goddamn Brother-in law!', Buster thought. The screwer never did have no sense. Kept talking about the Luv of Christ. Shit! The only sign of anything good last year. Scanning Lawrence Welk show reruns to get the drop shot on the pussy slung all over that big TV. Sure, once in awhile a good Steve Seagal movie would cone on. As far as Kicks to the Head go, that was one of the best! But his screwing religious brother in law kept telling him to go with him to get laying hands on at Reverend Jenkins ministry. Bullshit! He wasn't gonna pay for Jenkins whorehouse bill down in New Orleans. Just because he looked like he was crying and having holy business personally on TV, but that was just the whiskey sweating out of the screwin loser-bird.

"Now honey, we don't know for sure that Michael is actually in one of those zombie towns." "Now you know that Brenda told you that Michael done finally lost his mind, even with them schizo drugs. He started gettin' bad again, hearing voices. She said he saw him heading down by the sewage ditches and treatment plant down by Thompson creek. Where the closest zombie village is to us . . ." "Now honey, that's just a rumor. We don't know if there really is zombie villages around." Buster emitted a beefy burp after sucking back that pisswater beer.

The radiation was penetrating his brain and right in his own living room.

"You and me know the Sheriffs, police, and state troopers are fixing to have an all out screwin war. And we know there's one in Devil's Swamp, Thompson Creek, Comite River, Spanish Lake, and God knows where else." "And it don't look good. They still ain't got a cure. And the screwin' nuclear plant is leaking radiation. And we gotta sit here and soak it up cause we are all gonna die if they don't find that screwin cure serum!" Buster said.

The "Fall Guy" theme was blaring and he clicked his fingers to the groovy sounds.

"Well, we should worry about your brother-in-law," his wife said.

She brought him some red beans and cornbread.

"Screwim," Buster said. "Goddamn Christian schizophrenic Psycho!" A commercial for River Bend environmental bullshit blasted forth before he could lose himself in "The Fall Guy" again.

"You're not a Rigelian Asshole," Mike Alonzo said to the little dude at the Mr. Gatti's on Essen and Perkins, where the Star Trekkies Club and Fandom Association met every Monday. Yes, the city was thriving, inundated, with kids as well as their parents, regardless of the perilous times.

"Quit talking Bizarro universe language," said the little Dungeons and Dragons sucker.

"I am going to stuff a hundred-sided gaming die down your Kelvin throat, if you don't roll the screwing dice." Claude Parrish was just coming in from the T-Shirt painting spree that was his job. At Cortana Mall, where the cops and security people were trying to get windows and plate glass put back. To repair the damage the looters did during the dark ages, not long ago.

"Hello Denebian Slime Devil!" Alonzo said. He lifted his right hand and parted his fingers in half like the Vulcan peace sign.

"Eat it Luke Skywalker's lesbian mother!" Claude said. His inane grin spread all over his face. They were perhaps in arrested development; constantly quizzing each other on which Star Trek episode their trivia could connect to.

"I am Brahms'. . . by Spock." "The Lazarus episode, written by Jerome Bixby, who is a science fiction writer. He had Spock playing the harpsichord in that episode. He wrote . . ." "Uh, 'The Holes Around Mars'," Alonzo said. He whipped his head back to the little nimbus creep who was dribbling all over the Cult world gaming table. The pizza was getting worse tasting by the minute.

On the big screen were CNN reports of the nuclear disaster.

"If they would use Dilithium Crystals, we wouldn't be going tits up!" Claude said.

"That's okay," Alonzo said. He rolled the die and gave the little dungeon master a Three Stooges finger poke. The kid flinched annoyingly.

"What?" Claude said. He stuffed a pizza slice down his mouth and then zoomed the slice around the room like it was a star fighter piercing the atmosphere after successfully fighting Darth Vader on the Death Star.

"Act your age. What do you think? You got your Vulcan ears in that unfortunate accident with a mechanical rice picker as a child?" Alonzo quipped once again.

These barrages were the touchstone of the fun of loving "Detective," "Daredevil," "Batman," "Marvel universe," "DC" crap, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." Showing up at Science Fiction conventions with actual samurai swords and decking some punks in the Hucksters room.

"I know that episode. Harlan Ellison's "The City on the Edge of Forever," where Joan Collins plays a social worker in the ghetto. The nazi's get the A Bomb built before us. And Spock builds memory banks out of old radio tubes." "Yeah. That was easy. Besides, Gene Roddenberry wrote it for him I heard. Ellison had everybody dead in the first 10 minutes." "That's bullshit!" "Besides, haven't you heard, Pencil neck? That the Zombies versus the Sheriff's Department, all the cops and state troopers are going to have some serious warfare in a day or two?" The little kid looked at Alonzo. For that was the first serious thing Alonzo said.

The kid asked, "Is that true? My older brother says we are not going to get that serum in time. And we are gonna die too. And I heard it hurts when you die slowly from this disease." "That's Rigelian hogshit, punk!" Alonzo said. "Do you think we would be here playing babysitter for a booger-eating Martian like you if we were gonna die? They said they have already come up with it, and we are gonna get inoculated again. And this time it's for good and we don't have to leave." "Well, what about the screwin' H-Bomb cloud of radiation that we are in?" the punk asked, moving through the Dungeons and Dragons country in his mind's eye.

"Well, do you mind shitting glow in the dark Lego blocks for the rest of your miserable life?" "Screw you, Alonzo." "I know you are but what are I?" Alonzo said, resuming Bizarro universe tactics.

The next morning Patricia Morton brought her son Brandon home from the hospital. The little yuppie whose born days were heralded as yuppie endured as though he were a Japanese royal subject. Brandon had radiation poisoning.

"Mommy," Brandon said. "Daddy's gonna fight the evil zombies, huh?" He sat in the back seat of the Turbo 240 Volvo Sedan, with a gristly 'Happy meal' Burger from McDonald's laid to waste aside the plastic icons of transformers that were perplexing puzzles. Interchanging from jet to robot, car to robot, water to wine. Comic books could have been Byzantine frescos from ancient times. Patricia felt somehow her life was crumbling invisibly. The very backbone of her life as a yuppie mother rotting away.

She could now envision her little six-year-old son Brandon dying within the next few months. Perfectly fine children succumbing . . .

"What dear?" she said. The cassette player was singing away Fischer Price's greatest hits. Her mind shut away from the hurt, her husband, the lawyer. A recovered cocaine addict. AA meetings attended faithfully by them with other promising yuppies who went astray from the boredom of neighborhood birthday parties and arrivals of yuppie offspring. To wild orgiastic wantonness: snorting parties off beveled mirrors, finest crystal holding devil's brew, Johnny Walker Red. Enough of those and that cute little wife of Bill down the street suddenly started making little striptease motions and pulling you off into the empty child's bedroom, where you could fool around while your wife is next door in the bedroom. Going down on your golf partner while the Caddyshack party in the den was turning into a modern day orgy. Home video cameras previously used to document yuppie offspring, were now used to make pivotal mise en scene porno with all the cuddly yuppie mothers going down on the young urban professionals who wanted something more. Then that cocaine started messing up. Apologies and embarrassments down at the Jean Vienny Catholic Church amid the flying gossip of the parish. And you find you and your sexy spouse bent over a cup of coffee and Alcoholics all round the tables in a circle talking about how much they craved alcohol and how they could be joyful, happy and free if they just followed those 12 steps. And got so sober they wanted to kill each other in the same of the Serenity prayer and God and man.

So now her son Brandon was very sick. And her husband had resorted to snorting again off beveled mirrors. And the finely-constructed world had been destroyed and everyone was running around in shock. The world according to law partners and dentists down the street was unknown anymore. And she would witness the last days subject to the final heaving of their kids that they had bought gifts and preened and nursed and babied and spoiled. Only to have them die like mangy dogs only had a right to.

"Mommy. Daddy is going with all his friends, all the policemen in the world? To fight the monsters? Huh, mommy?" His feverish feeble voice crying out like a wolf pup left alone in the tundra to scrounge around for mice. Like Bambi without a mother. Like Dumbo without his mother.

Like Little Foot the dinosaur in "The Land Before Time"; like Fievel the Jewish mouse corked up in a bottle in the Atlantic basin.

She couldn't take it anymore. She had to scream. No, her son needed her. She wanted to be close to him, to hug him. She knew he couldn't die!

"Yes, darling, Daddy's going to fight the monsters." And she made that turn into Brentwood Estates, the home of after work coke parties, Caddyshack orgies, and sex videos with the other primevals in the tribe or clan. Each nice white-collar house that left no indication that White Trash could afford to buy their

way into the subdivision. All those Wal-Mart Shoppers and Denham Springs imitations. But now she would gladly live in the shittiest little backwoods trailer and consent to be sodomized by the grizzliest toothless cracker. If only she could wangle a deal with the Devil.

Like maybe Satan is a realtor with Century 21. Or perhaps hell was really a very nice but tortuous shopping mall that one could not escape. If she could sell her soul so her yuppie flesh offspring could live to score his first piece of little yuppie girlfriend ass. Run off to Europe, a junior partner in Granddad's law firm. Or finish school and begin to assume a lethargic lifestyle of scanning pussy at the elite golf course. Cheat on his beautiful sorority formed wife, and get a paunch from lite wine coolers and too many trips to the Virgin Islands.

But Brandon would be that incongruity of an unfulfilled life. He would die within three months and die without being formed, grow into adulthood. A small expensive coffin for the best yuppie road kill. She turned into the driveway and cursed River Bend Nuclear Plant and all the screwing chemistry sets of the gawds. The refineries and waste treatment plants that dotted the landscape across that now shoddy brine River of Death.

## Chapter Forty-Six

John Ed got the police boys, the sheriff's deputies, the elite cavaliers of the mighty blue Louisiana Troop A State Troopers. And every veteran of the last three wars together for the biggest, kickiest shitfight. Teen rumble between the homeboys and the Zombies.

It was Wednesday night, a very important night. There had been numerous mysterious burglaries. Actual cannibalizations by zombies of blue collar couples in their own beds. Kids kidnapped and brought into the tunnels and swamps never to be seen from again. Baton Rouge wasn't gonna sit too long for that kind of bullshit to slide from some no good communist outsiders coming in and doing their thing.

They never saw so many Jeep Cherokees, Dodge Caravans, Chevy and Ford double-axled pickups. Mean-looking men who hadn't been this riled since Guadalcanal or Pearl Harbor. These men slung big shotguns on their shoulders. Their heavy coats were filled with rounds and shells. There were catahoula hounds and police dogs wagging their tails from the K-9 units, ready to go sniff out monsters. There were vested state troopers with death stares into the starry landscape. Ready to commit swat tactics and basically blast their way in and out. No prisoners. They even got some free hand grenades from the ROTC boys for good measure.

There were five pillboxes and nests as far as they knew, at least that were that important. The rest could go shit in an Easter bonnet; they weren't the real targets. A good bit of these infernal thugs had alleged shake-apudding for brains. Walking around with soiled Calvin designer briefs and blood in their once coiffed hairdos. They couldn't necessarily see straight and of course could not render one amp of logical reasoning. Unsentient devils. But there were active combat type members: those that actively sought out

victims to bring back once killed. To feed them to the seamy pits of mutated snakes these unfortunates. They knew these creatures were once productive members, but once they were touched, it spread and all was lost.

They were going to hit the Atchafalaya Basin. The lime-green foam gelatin by Gross Tete. Those boys took off for across the river long ago. Then there was a unit of Zachary veterans that showed up for a briefing of the good old boys. Then off to Thompson's Creek. Then the Comite drainage ditches. The Amite River filled with whopping egg sacs of bur-geoning monsters.

The men had flame throwers. Many carried plenty of coleman fuel, kerosene and plenty of gallons of unleaded Texaco from Cracker Barrels along the way. Donated free by every Acknahd and Mohammed holyman from the Moslem temple that each store had become. The wives stayed behind, hoping that their husbands would come out in one piece without losing the arm, leg or at least with a face. They shuddered at the stories that wafted throughout the downed lines of communication.

At the church of Reverend Johnny Joe Jenkins, there were four lay secretaries in bed in the upper prayer chamber with a heavy set man who got that way from imbibing the grape once too often.

"Come over here, baby, come do stuff to me . . ." Johnny Joe said.

The pretty woman leaned her head over and began as if she had a bit more of that Jack Daniels into a Chalice that he had been given from some poor sumbitch.

The women laughed, writhing around as a slide show presentation regarding the plague was fraught upon the wall in the cloistered den of iniquity.

"Now don't do it too hard, woman!" Johnny Joe said. He nudged Brother Dodson who was also being serviced by a woman who had a great deal of faith. But ever since Brother Johnny Joe and Brother Dodson had slipped a Micky Finn into her cocktail she was bouncing up and down on them in a whole month of Sundays! Praise be!

"Now, none of these whores is gonna get us into some kinda . . .

whatcha call it? . . . a scandal?" "Screw no, brother Dodson. I threatened to kill em if they did something like that." "Brother Johnny Joe, you wouldn't do nothing like et, would ya?" Brother Dodson said. Johnny Joe was just a squeezing the life out a these big set of titties in his face. He put one in his ear, and one in his mouth and tried to dial Tokyo.

"Looka this, Brother Dodson! Haaloo? Halloo? Who is this?" Of course this woman's tits were not electronic phone equipment. Brother Dodson tried the same thing with Julie. That little screwin Whore. A flash came to Brother Dodson, right in the middle of diddling these four women.

He watched the two women on the other side of the mattress going down on each other.

"Brother!" Dodson said, after a bout with the windy radish disease from eating too much cabbage and black eyed peas at that screwin fundraiser for some shit as all stupid orphanage in the Philippines. He was rather suddenly come over with malaise.

Brother Jenkins lay back, now finally hearing Brother Dodson's serious tone.

"What is it, Brother Dodson?" he said, reaching down and slapping that chaste white butt of woman so smooth and . . . but he wanted to sleep now, up to his eyes knee deep in Christian women! Amen! sayeth the lawrd!

"Brother Jenkins, I think we are really going to all go to Hell!" he said, sinking into a depression like he did for months at a time since Mrs. Dodson had lost her breasts to cancer and then died on him.

"What? You mean the plague?" Jenkins said. She smiled, and fell into unconsciousness. That Micky Finn done put her to Disney Land, but not before she done it! The poor man never had a chance to screw around wid the women before, back in Texas. So now he took as many women that could stand his mighty holy sword and swallow it. And he didn't even have to think about the Ex-Italian. So what if he done "Fulfilled his ex," like he said. Just don't take my money, whore! And then he wanted to go into a trance and pray. To ask God to forgive him and Brother Dodson's slinging activism. To get right.

"Yessir!" Dodson said, laying down on the satin pillow resting on Mrs. Connie Riche, the finest piece of Christian that was married or single!

"Didn't you know that our donations to the Christchild have doubled since this bullshit?"

## Chapter Forty-Seven

John Ed and two Sheriff's deputies, (one of them looked like he was just a kid, gangly screwer) trudged down to the Comite Bayou through the undergrowth grabbing them by their boots. They got to the thick water's edge of the ten-foot-wide creek where one couldn't see anything. The water splashed a bit as they trudged against the edge. The clay and sand bank was a treacherous walk. The two cops were supposed to be behind them. There was an awful stench in the air; emoted near the far end of that bend beyond, flayed against the strong current. Here it was getting wider. They walked onward still against the malevolent topographical blemishes made even more sinister by the bleakness. The hideous quiet, and the overall muddiness of the trail.

And what was going through those men's mind? It was a walkingtalking nightmare, a two-reeler horrorshow, John Ed thought. He had lost his brother to the plague, and his wife had gone apeshit in the head. So bad that she was forever gone. His army boots tore into that muddy stretch as little splashes came from unknown corners in the river's eddying but flowing trickled torment.

"Y'all know where this big fuggin egg sack is?" the gangly boy, Mark Bodine said. He fingered his revolver in his plastic jacket windbreaker.

The other boy had been muttering since they got out of the truck to meet and make the final plans, the war outline.

"Now, it's just up here!" John Ed said. His huge body cut through the greenish vines and sticker bushes.

"Now, no more talking because these things will be let on to the whole thing. Check your weapons," he said. Gangly Mark liked that. The first time he could fire away at a human. Hell, but these weren't human.



Well, what the hell.

Up ahead, there appeared to be a pyramid of poles and limbs, about twenty five or more feet across in its base length. Four-square against the water's edge like a beaver mound too close to shore. There was chattering and whistling in little warbly sinister echoing, from one clay high shore to the other. The boys saw before them about thirty feet away, the beginning of the bound-together underwater, egg sacks of foamy green and white. The translucent sacks held embryos of eels and a couple of human carcasses who had willingly given themselves as food for the drones on up to workers, and queen.

"Now hold up here," whispered John Ed. The ex-college linebacker from LSU had more of a paunch now. The men stopped away from this pyramid structure which undoubtedly held the zombies. They looked all about them for the half-conscious mute zombies collecting fuel, food.

Or whatever they were deliriously went to do for the betterment of the commune of symbiotic nurturing. God, thought John Ed, seeing the twenty now or so huge twenty foot egg sacks laying like blown-up beach balls. He saw through them, filled with layer after layer of embryos. The gushy squishiness of the one closest to them was being prodded by the other sheriff's deputy. His gun was cocked, ready for the touch of his stick. The little creatures insides were seen, their little dormant mouths gashing in stifled disturbance now. John Ed looked down to his left, as this deputy prodded it.

The former human bodies in the water reached up and grabbed this stick from inside the wretched eggsac!

The unconscious zombie who was half eaten away from the little baby eels, was somehow functioning even halfway submerged from within a sealed saran wrapped existence. John Ed shined his light, which now was the only one. It very dimly shrouded by a cloth cap on the end of it there in the openness of Comite River. He shined this light directly on the human form of food fodder. The human looked up at him and silently an anguished cry for desperate help came from him. The more mature eels were feeding on the left side of his mushy torso. Rendered carcass meat, it was a wonder he was alive; just a head and half a body. One leg askance.

"It's grabbing my stick!" the gangly deputy said, pulling back, letting go of the stick. Then he grabbed it again, now poking the creature with it. John Ed backtrud to see what the boys were doing. Off in the distance at the pyramid structure, things were coming to attention upon hearing the disturbance.

"What you boys got?" He looked down in the middle of the creek and saw inside the translucent sac the rolling around lazily of little teeny snakes. And three humans inside, only one alive.

"Mother of Christ at halftime!" John Ed said, inching forward.

The second deputy leapt back in fear, much more than just astonishment.

All flushed white, all realizing that the shit had indeed come down now.

Where were the backup boys?

The zombie had quite a firm grip on the stick, and the deputy wrenched it from him again and began whacking the gurgling creature as it whimpered shrilly. It had a totally deranged look in its eyes as they leered wobbly and unfocused, in a trance. But he still had enough strength to out wrestle the gangly boy-man. But the deputy was getting riled now, he fiercely began whacking away at the thing. Then the other deputy pulled his revolver out and took dead aim at the torso swishing around. Now the egg sack had split quite open. Once popped it spilled out ectoplasm and rotted flesh that had withered off. The symbiotic zombies used it strictly for nourishment for the burgeoning eggs of eels in greenish miniature

eggs within the large sack. It was now spilling out that green Jell-O and the most foul odor pierced the air.

After that shot rang out suddenly out of the pyramid nest came five zombies limping. They were oblivious to the men until they heard the rustling against the underbrush and the stomping of the awkward trot stumble. It was an ambush that now escalated to a mini war. They had sticks, fashioned weapons however clumsy and primitive, and John Ed fired a shot right at one man who was still wearing a three-piece suit, which was hardly recognizable.

"Shit! Come on! Open fire! Open fire!" The two deputies were basically stunned from the whole encounter which had happened within the span of about twelve seconds. John Ed caught one of them in the hip, and another in the neck. They didn't want to fall! The gangly deputy boy finally got a shot off before he was tackled by a zombie, who immediately bit his ear off. The whole area was sudden activity of hand-to-hand combat. John Ed was jumped by one but pistol-cracked the huge zombie over the head. It looked dazed and fell to the ground, wailing in absolute pain. Still all the zombies were deranged, fell from Hades it seemed. The gangly boy was creaming now that he realized his ear was a separate entity. The singing of the eels began as they came forth as if tuned into the actual combat.

"Shit! John Ed!" the second deputy said. They heard shouts from the backups who had been caught unaware that things had gone down.

They appeared through the thicket and these hunters, good old boys, leveled their guns and got one—two—three—and the fourth one wouldn't go down. The big one, as it mauled brutally the gangly boy, the egg sack and Jell-O spilling. Some of the guys started shooting at the ambulatory watercress zombies rotting in the sac, wailing. It was that screaming, the whistling of the full-grown eels. The queen eel was in the pyramid, and one good old marine lobbed a grenade into there. Another two boys chucked a grenade apiece into the egg sacs in the middle of the river.

"Duck! Gawddammit! Incoming! Grenade in the water!" They were all yelling. The fear in their voices, the white cold frisson of fear while fighting for one's life in the middle of a made-for-TV episode of "Twilight Zone," or "Night Gallery?" Gawd damn, muttered one man after seeing the gangly boy lying in a pool of blood, severely injured, his chest puncture badly, his head missing one ear, blood streaming down.

"Momma! Momma! I can't find my gun!" the boy said as he lapsed into shock.

The whistling of the eels stopped as the grenades exploded quickly, and then there was nothing but silence. John Ed looked into the murky Comite river morass, and saw the little hundreds of mouths of baby eels mewling and slithering now over the bloody carcass of that first zombie who had somehow miraculously survived being either half drowned, or waterlogged, or turned amphibian. They weren't no scientists.

The zombies were all down, the pyramid lay smoking in ruins now. Two old boys carried the deputy back, as other men were now just coming onto the scene.

"Took his screw in ear off, and chewed on it!" "Damn savages!" "I ain't never seen nothing like 'at!" one boy said to John Ed, as he was finally getting back to normal. Breathing not as hard, not hyperventilating; adrenalin swam through him like a cold little fish in his veins.

"Bring that scientist back here to see what the hell we got here exactly!" a rather old veteran said, his face pitted with severe blood vessels from forty years of rethinking Iwo Jima that happened 50 years hence.

"Yes sir," John said as the men poked at the egg sack, kicked or rolled the dead zombies over with their

boots, just to take a look at them.

"Gawd damn!" "What is it?" John Ed asked.

"This here's a Catholic priest!" and the others went 'What?' "Nooo!, one old boy said.

"This man here used to be a priest over at Lady of Mercy, I'm telling ya. Father Samuel. That's it?!" "How in the Hell Jesus could that happen to a man of the Cloth?" They swooned with disbelief.

"Guess it attacks like Aids. Don't matter who you are. Hell, Governor Thibedaux himself coulda been a zombie. It strikes right out of the air itself." "When I was a kid playing CYO softball he used to coach my older brother's team." "Well..." John Ed didn't know what to say.

"Look at these others. A black man." They turned him over.

"And this guy, he looks like a south Baton Rouge suburb type.

White collar." The second sheriff's deputy was puking at the water's edge, away as far from the egg sacks and Jell-O carnage smelling everywhere, making them all ill.

They scoured the vicinity, burned the snakes down the next morning long after the boys had left. It had been a victory of sorts. The sun came up over the monstrous little encampment breeding grounds. The Comite River was flushed of the egg sacks, all taken away by the marine biologists left to do their job after the makeshift patrol of men had cleaned house.

They surely did lock and load down in the Atchafalaya swamp too.

Fifty Cajuns with their own shotguns and pockets full of shells had just laid to waste a huge nest, or series of nests, all thirty foot wide. Some forty-foot square bases of logs stacked like pyramids, or tepees, as one Cajun had called it. They had found the nest from the reconnaissance of bass boats that flotillaed through the legions of attached egg sacs. Some huge, fifty feet across, as big as a sunken air balloon, covering the entire open sweep of a clearing of cypresses and stumps jutting out above them. The continuity of these series of egg sacks, some badly formed, some exquisitely perfect.

These Cajuns had brought ice chests full of beer, in the boats that were in the rear ranks, away from the action. The chain of uninterrupted sacs coiled about like a rosary lying on a church pew. Like a series of intestines, chitterlings, plastic tubing, from some giant monster. The thing that got to the boys in the Swamp, as well as the boys in the Thompson Creek closer to River Bend nuclear plant, was the little trying mouths of these unhatched embryos. They mewled as the balloons were summarily destroyed one by one. One Cajun was burning them out with gasoline poured all over the vicinity, the bass boats blackened like Paul Prudhomme's Redfish. The boats sped away after the swamp area in questions was lit, and it looked like a futuristic parable seeing this flotilla of bass boats, ski boats, flying away through a parted wave of flaming glory. Truly that biblical lake of fire and come hither.

## **Chapter Forty-Eight**

Cajun Joe, Mohawk, in a bandanna from his stiff, dead comrade that Mohawk had cold cocked back at the Nuclear Banana Split. They were zooming along I-10 into a trajectory-New Orleans, instead of Biloxi. Hell, in Biloxi they could have hid out in the strip joints along the frosty little pitiable beach redolent with jagged broken glass. Cheap hotels only fit for college infidels and a view of some dogshit oilrigs and floating gambling casinos that headed out into international waters when there wasn't a big call for national emergencies.

"You know what it feels like," Mohawk said, now heavy lidded from staying up way past his bedtime, about 56 hours. On a big slide down after crashing from crystal meth and acid that had blurred his perjured vision.

"What it feels like to shit all over these good citizens of this here state?" They put me away, he thought. He realized Catfish was in the back, sprawled with a snooze alarm made of knots of Hypson, Morpheus, a and his brother Thanatos.

They were spiriting along the interstate that was only built after the college engineers learned how to build things like interstate pylons and hotels on soft clay. There was just Old Hwy 61 before the superslab. But he was thinking, French Quarter. Johnny White's bar, and a fancy hotel room that oughta take his money. The Dauphine, the Royal Orleans, them people making you feel like a million bucks. The streets festooned with wayward masses, but . . . was that radioactive cloud following him, or hell, was that damned mushroom cloud, invisible as it were. Them gama rays already ahead of him, and they were bombarding that Mercedes? Or BMW, whatever it was. Rich folks little Flintstone zombies. It didn't matter. Car metal didn't protect from no nuclear fallout. Them zipperheads that got stir fried in Nagasaki or some shit. Didn't they all have melted eyeballs like eggs easy over, bodies covered with charbroil like a roasted marshmallow that catches on fire and you blow it out. And you got a lump of carbon, and inside is gooey stuff, however sweet? He killed that lanky highpocketed fellah down there in the pit of hell itself. He just about cut his hand shoving that knife into his eye, just to see him take the metal in.

The car magnificently zoomed along, past Laplace. The weather fair, drizzling, probably some of that nuclear rain must fall, baby. Mohawk snoozing better than a Ubangi toddler, and just old smelly assed Cajun Joe (no, He was Mohawk, and that guy back there was Cajun Joe, it was a bad sign that you gotta slow down on popping them microdots . . .). So now that Mohawk knew who he was, letting that cruise control that them screwin fancy executives use cause they too screwin good to just drive like a real man. Gawd, he was full of vitriol, a spleen so big you could cut it open like a watermelon and the bile would ooze out like Mrs. Butterworth's syrup.

He was going further away from the little holocaust he did, all by himself, and the French Quarter was up ahead, and he could get them assholes to take his good money, and check it to some hotel, and send down for some call girls to who were clean. But he still had a groin ache from violating them sisters of the Holy Church. He wondered, laughing to himself, what kind a score he tallied up in Jesus' scorecard for bumping doughnuts with a sanctified nun. Why was he so bad? The wickedest man in the world, who did grow up after being the wickedest boy in the world. His momma, still the best . . . he drove the rest of the way in silence, the radio quietly playing Classic rock from KCKW in Laplace. There was the Spillway, over which soon would be Kenner, suburb of Nawlins, and then Metairie. And then the Kubla Khan crystalline spires of downtown. Over the High rise bridge, past the airport and the hotels. Those high risers were built because they figured out a way to make up stay on soft loose ground, and he was gonna be king of that there hogpen.

He parked at the rest stop cause he got tired of holding in that bladder, and fell asleep, him in the front.

Cajun Joe in the back, both not knowing exactly who either was, or who each of them was. Sound asleep, after their hate crimes had been so nobly done, one had to snooze sooner or later. Or go head on into an eighteen-wheeler, grinning all the way. When they woke up a few hours later, they got back on the I-10 back on track.

Now they were all fresh and revived for full Bourbon Street titty pinching and that there Mardi Gras where them women show their bodies for some cheap plastic beads!

Catfish and Mohawk got all duded up, slinging hot cash around, buying ill fitting suits from Brooks Brothers, not even waiting for the tailor's suggestions to make those thousand dollar suits fit properly.

"Get outa my way!" Catfish said to the man.

"Let's go!" and they hopped back into the cab back to the Landmark Hotel on Rampart Street, just skirting the French Quarter.

"This here's got to be a open bar, and free food." Catfish said, shaving all his straggly beard off, giving him an affected appearance of clean-cut savvy. Mohawk hadn't even bothered to take a bath yet.

"Now, just a go on in there and take a shower or something." "Now what I don't told you? I don't wanna. . .," Mohawk, said, munching on some of them fancy hotel cheeseburger and home fries, watching the "Golden Girls" on New Orleans cable channel 8.

"Now, how you expect them women to make funny stuff wid you if you don't wash your screwin self?" Mohawk thought about it, as the sit-com went to commercial, and then grumbling went in there and made himself get a taste of Irish Spring little motel soap. He came out, feeling like a new man. They went downstairs to the lounge, unknowing scowls and that invisible sense that they didn't fit in to society exactly.

They went in the French Quarter, and went to the mud wrestling area. It didn't really start flying with business until some drunk would come forward to volunteer himself to take on Queen Godzilla, the half-woman, half alligator, ex champion of the Southern Wrestling League. She was demoted for Lesbian activities and steroid use to living in a dive above a gay bar and showing up to wrestle out-of-town creeps for a measly 25 bucks a pop.

"I'm telling you, I done pinned her down!" Mohawk said, in front of the whooping fraternity boys and the mélange of Barbershop quartet conventioners who had been dismally stuck in New Orleans during a middle of the dark ages. Quarantined don't guarantee they had been living it up in the quarter on forged social security checks and shams, until they would be allowed to go home. Everyone waiting for a vaccine and the whole deranged sensibilities of the French Quarter was essentially missing. The French Quarter, for all practical purposes, was basically dead as Martha Mitchell.

The actual miracle of Pat O'Brien's bar being essentially empty except for dykes and butch boys who lived around, shucking hurricanes reduced in price. Anyone knew Pat "O's" bar had a line down the street waiting to get into the piano bars. Outdoors the barkers in the quarter had moved to the tenderloin underbelly of the Frisco Bay area, to set up shop elsewhere.

Mohawk and Cajun Joe Catfish went into the alleyways behind Marie Laveau's voodoo shop to buy crack after going in for looking around at the spells and potions. Goofer dust, dried blood, after that weird lady told them in there with those weird black-pupiled eyeballs. That mysterious talk.

"What she done said in there?" "How did she know about us a killing people?" "I don't know. She was in some trance, all quivering, and shaking like she was having a fit. And that black guy, too, holding a

boa constrictor or some shit. He came over and said, can I smell that blood that is all over your bodies from killing?" "Yeah, something about how she could tell we was killers, killed some holy people. How in hell did she know we killed some nuns?" "I would 'a cold cocked her but my mamma was might fearsome of voodoo. He said if I was to cross a woman, she would put a hex on me, and I wouldn't shit right and die until I reconciled with the voodoo queen that done put in on me." They were there in that cold brick-walled alley, smoking it up with their homeboy, Brutus.

Brutus was looking at them like he was nervous or some shit. Something in his eye.

"Brutus," Mohawk said, after puffing down a deep lungs full of cracked smoke. The little gas lighter torched up a little blue flame, melting down the rock candy.

"Brutus, do we smell like we killed anybody?" Brutus knew this was Fat City. He fingered his knife, pig sticker in his leather jacket amongst the vials and a Virgin Mary statuette that the down found next to the Pirate's alley by St. Louis Cathedral, amongst the bums and shit where folks did their business. Brutus knew from the expensive suits that these guys had cash. Mohawk was fingering his wad of twenties, a few hundreds in there for show.

"Time for you guys to see you daddies in hell!" Brutus said, and plunged the pig sticker in Mohawk, real fast. Lightning for a man doped out in this alley waiting for a good kill. And then real quick to Catfish Joe, staring and lunging back after seeing Mohawk sputter. Blood coming out of his mouth, his eyes flung open, his face white with internal hemorrhaging inside his gut, 'I got it in the stomach'.

They didn't even know what to say both mortally wounded by a Creole dope head over a measly Italian suit and a wad of cash that would be a good nuff chunk Judge Leander Perez to live on for a couple days.

The voodoo woman came out of her shop, smiling and peering into the alley. The black man in turban with snake slithering, tongue darting but like a premonition. Incredible, Mohawk and Catfish got cut to death and were lying in the alley. The black man forked over a wad to the voodoo queen. The turbaned man laid the snake onto the bloody bodies of the two dead, cold-white convicts in their Italian suits. The voodoo shop was closed. The voodoo woman walked down Royal Street a left onto St. Ann by the queer bars before the cops found the two men. A mist of fine dread filled the quarter that night. The Vieux Carré had been a small Kabuki Theater performance for the boys from Angola State Penitentiary.

## **Chapter Fourty-Nine**

That hatred syndrome brought in by the pandemic plague of the epochs, was creeping south and north and every which way. Everyone was killing that wouldn't have exactly done that. Hatred filled the atmosphere, and everyone was psychotically receptive to that malevolent cursed sickness that blanketed this little muggy state. And the folks knew that they were psychotic from the plague as they pounded one another. If there couldn't be a cure, it wouldn't matter much anyway. It was getting really close now.

And the point spread, the line in Vegas was that they would be shoveling dirt over every woman, man and child in the Quatermass pit, smoking with death.

The FrenchTudorMansion on Highland Road across from the vast stretch of parade grounds on the LSU campus that once housed ignorance and its brother twin, intellect. It was the only site of human's living through the brunt of the plague. But now, everyone was back. Faculty members hungry for knowledge, still stunned by the events. There certainly wasn't any student body, they had splintered up a long time ago. Hardly good time to attend classes. The plague was just in its infantile stages.

"Kendra," Ricky Harrison said, as they lay in bed together, not used to loitering around the opulent upstairs room replete with cable, luxury afforded movie stars, and VIPs.

"Huh, what sweetie?" she said, laying there naked and wheedling beauty.

"They want up out of here tonight. Everybody." "I know, Mary told me a day ago, since we got back from Grand Isle." Ricky waffled his hair, then Kendra stroked it gently. Stroking a once-bloated pig's arse, wonder cow (Ricky had described himself like that from imbibing too much K & B drugstore cut rate bourbon), to this chiseled down swanky hunk. He was a hunk. He had a scar on his nose that he told her he joked to folks that asked him how he got it. It ran on the right side, straight across, and blood vessels were starting to appear since a year ago, from the ripped cartilage that had since healed. "Fencing at Heidelberg," he would say. Kendra thought about that and smiled. She looked over at him in their closeness, not closure. He look at her gladly. He had a sheepish quality that shows through all the problems. It was nice.

"Where do you want to go?" "Well, I was staying at my older sisters condo in South Sherwood Forest subdivision.

"That would be better than my French garret only good for punishing oneself and drinking oneself to death." "Is that what you were doing?" "Yeah, I was jazzing myself that I was pitiful, so therefore I was saintly, only much worse." he smiled as he reflected on that.

"No, from what you describe, that wouldn't do." "Right," he said, stroking her tanned arms, looked at all of her.

"It's really elegant. She was married to a filthy rich guy." "What do I do for clothes?" "Well, for starters, we have to get rid of everything you own." "Okay. I can't afford . . ." "I know, but my daddy pays off my MasterCard, a five thousand dollar limit, every year on my birthday. No pillaging malls for us. No hate crimes in our heads. We have to overcome this plague. We know there are only a few days left until they can come up with the cure. They have left me out of it now. These guys are the top. They took what I gave them, all my notes, my culture dishes, my specimens. They have the best in the world, the most brilliant men. That's what should have been done in the first place.

Not just the pseudo genius's that I was working alongside." "Well, we gotta start packing. But what is the use? Aren't we all going to die?" "It's much worse than that. Dr. Sajjhi said he heard from some French specialist and we aren't going to die right off. First WE ALL GO CRAZY!

"So we will suffer badly. We will eventually die, but for now we will start what? Getting into the advance stages?" "Yes," she said solemnly.

"We are all going to be violent psychopaths?" "They aren't sure exactly HOW we are going to act, we are going to lose our normal sensibilities. Those of us are going to be affected more than others." They dressed and went downstairs, just to see the same thing emoted forth on the wide screen television. Insanity before Final Exit, DEATH.

The big screen telly pronounced thusly: "The Special National Conference on this worst disaster of the twentieth century, in peacetime, has concluded that everyone in a one-hundred-and-fifty mile radius of Baton Rouge, will be susceptible to psychotic actively. This is due to a determined hypothesis that the later stage of the ongoing disease of this Pandemic is that of psychosis simulating in otherwise normal people, that of schizophrenia, paranoia, perhaps violent episodes." Dr. Parrill looked sadly away, thinking about his deceased brother from long ago before he ever fell in love with Stanley Kubrick movies.

Kendra did not gasp for only one reason. The inside information had cushioned the onslaught of this information. Ricky let it sink in. All the folks who were going back to their own houses were not crying only because they hadn't time for this one and all still mortally wounded and weakened wholly with ongoing pain.

Kendra and Ricky walked outside with their bags, suitcases. They headed to Kendra's deceased older sister's swanky townhouse in South Baton Rouge. Outside on the way, glorified battalion, legions of hackey sack mongers, frisbee and flag football squadrons, softball national pastimers, and a whole mess of nature reduced mystic soothsayers out to commune with grassy sod beneath their bohemian bloomers and undertaker-for-the-artworld flashers. Folks leisurely strolling at much happier times, before the wave of bible-epic do-see-doing came forth to rattle their cages. Kendra couldn't wait for a new change. The television show said there were special pharmaceutical pillboxes in various locations. Every Savco drugs, every K & B liquor drugstore. Every Wal-Mart was now issuing almost any antipsychotic medicines of a last ditch effort against this latest card hand dealt by Mr. Death. The acidheads, thrash metal goose steppers and MTV heads were ecstatic over the news that there would be as many free prescriptions for their little mental ballets: Prozac, Melleril, Dalmane sleeping agents, Darvon for headaches and migraines. Doses of Navane and Mantrax for those just a bit off kilter. But knee deep in Valium mixed with Tequila Sunrises, that crimson fruity mixture that would send the youth into the Lagrange points where gravity nulls out between the earth and moon.

## Chapter Fifty

Kendra and Ricky made it to South Baton Rouge, into those manicured subdivisions like Shenandoah, where streets were named after civil war battles, like Manassas, Vicksburg, Gettysburg. The golf courses running through Shenandoah; the huge tracts of fancy townhouses, neighborhoods that were mostly predicated by white folks who made enough money to get as far away from North Baton Rouge. That migrained melancholia induced by living in the maligned and homely industrial area where now no more hookers were trading sex for microwaves and other household appliances. They were probably the first to go by either plague, radiation, or the appetite of a few zombies.

Now firmly ensconced in ground zero of the radiation cloud fuzzily indefinable but pervasive like a dream whipped up by a puritanical Jonathan Edwards furious god. He was holding the little mortals above the lake of fire, raking them over the stoked coals, like a spider over a fire pit. Ricky began taking those Thorazine, not caring a whit about the side effects. But then again they were sitting pretty in radiation coming in through the skylights, seeping through pretty bordered coroneted and matching wallpaper.



Through beveled mirrors, into their being as they poured themselves a healthy dose of world's finest scotch, imported. They took Thorazine, mixing it with scotch awaiting their critical and most monumental fear, that of losing sanity and losing control totally. Kendra slinked around knowing they were digesting rays however sinister and watching pay per view cable movies on a huge entertainment system fit only for the indulged spoilt growing wan and indifferent.

On the news now in the midst of a swell of drug-induced euphoria.

Only minutes ago it had Kendra and Ricky wrestling on the floor like a two-out-of-three free for all, like frisky animals in a frenzy. Ricky pinned Kendra down and planting a loving kiss to his beautiful stork leg, that flaxen haired myth that had given meaning to his penchant for dotting the eternal punctuation mark with a cosmic flair pen.

Kendra was laughing, herself too warm and animated by those mixtures of Darvon for her ongoing headaches, and a delectation for diet kamikaze's as if it were happy hour at the Hilton on an ordinary day. Harrison looked into her eyes as if to savor what was his for now. She did love him, that ironclad strawhaired swain with doses of unlearned suaveness. A sweet man who cared about nothing anymore, circumstances notwithstanding, but to possess her, to covet her. Their passages in the Old Testament and literally find allegorical translatable passages that would unlock with an unknown silver key those very eternal questions that no one ever dwells on but science fiction writers with dementia. And poets with scarves whiled about their neck like noses, and melancholic pursed lips spouting scrambled kinetic blocks of pure modified passion. That was what they had in their little villa on the Mediterranean. Two very youthful and handsome opposites as a cosmic couple. The kind of love fettered about, banded about that made old people smile giving to one another in this true state of static decline here now spending out in their villa smack dab in a dreary subdivision of duplicitous ordinariness. It was in their hearts, their central primal understanding of something that came naturally to those who could not taste the unfamiliar badinage that one could not possess, unless the universe melded and entropy itself had reversed. And attention to such wondrous love only spawned more happiness and good well in such a despicable and tyrannically unfair universe with cold equations governing such matter in what was supposedly Gawd's eminent domain. But ample supplies of scotch and ice from the hereafter only promoted a lucid activity of sweetness emoted from Kendra and Ricky.

It was just too bad, Harrison thought, holding Kendra's arms down on that fine tapestry, as uninterrupted reports documenting the tragedy now, came through in spurts in the middle of some soap opera otherwise unencumbered by the rest of the continental United States. Kendra smiling at him, he saw true love in their little irrational mushroom cloud of love, radiation only added their heads into a still further headlong swirled love pattern.

Love at ground zero was tasted by them, as long as River Bend didn't explode and melt down, whereupon the Nagasaki stir fried eyeball melting would definitely put a damper on an otherwise undisturbed Camelot in the nuclear age witnessed firsthand.

Finally, they sat up, Ricky looking spectacularly handsome despite the roentgens cranking through out him in toxicity levels unparalleled.

Kendra slightly feverish by the ravages of the disease. There was a ticking time limit on this cartoon bomb of their getting a hint of tap-dancing Death.

But it only made them feel more alive than ever imagined by Hemingway even tanked sprightly on the best morphine or grog in a French hospital, recovering from shrapnel. Harrison's whole took on full broad meaning in the middle of this frenetic mosaic of slam dancing, a town rocking in the age of the rat, ravaged and pillaged both. Psychically raped and emotionally distraught if such a thing could be

personified by some, Harrison wondered for a moment how bugscrewed he would slay himself before laying a finger on Kendra. The melancholy Dane in the two-act play would devise his own improvisation. There would be some tenable shred of rationality to him to make Kendra's stay until the bitter end as palatable as possible.

The television ranted on by gargoyles in pompadours, and remote newscasters from CNN television. The current raid of the tunneled labyrinths of the zombies were quite successful, thanks to the torpid veterans of an amalgam of wars brought together for one last Battle of the Bulge.

"I ain't taken any Thorazine! You hear me woman?" Ned I. Reilly said to his doting wife who had only pulled herself together for the sake of the family, and of course, Ned I. Reilly.

"But sweet cakes," she begged, "you remember what happened to my mother? . . . She reverted back to her psychotic episodes." "So! She can go on thinking she was Betty Boop from now till doomsday!" he said, harshly.

"You used to make fun of her for thinking that." He looked directly at her.

"She's your screwing mother, and you let her keep believing she was Betty Boop?" Anything one could expect with a schizoaffective mother.

"But we used to steer her away from Betty Boop and all that. She went from spinning around and dancing and fluttering her eyelashes in Parkville Hospital to being what she used to be." "I ain't taking no Thorazine. It screws you up. I ain't' crazy. If I was crazy I would tell you." The next thing he knew he had tied Mrs. Ned I. Reilly to the colonial dining room chair, and put blowtorch to her face. That blue hot thing literally melted her all up. Her face burned off while she was alive.

He should have taken his Thorazine. The kids were summarily cooked like London pan broil. How in the hell can you keep both a microwave with a toddler inside and the oldest in the conventional oven, without them screaming and putting up a fight? T'aint easy. Nuff said. He topped the indulgent FACES OF DEATH episode the Home Game version, with disemboweling himself. It took lots of nerve to bring the knife around just so. Took a lot of moxy.

The Saxon family on Robin Hood drive were doing what they were told. The government men had used the local elementary schools as way stations for picking up each family's reinforcements of literal pharmaceutical cache. After all, these places were where the suburban folks went on election day in the past. Now they were going there to retain shreds of logic.

Vestiges of morals.

Peggy Saxon was by far the easiest to succumb to fever madness.

She had that sensibility of the kind of nervousness one would get from drinking a pot of Waffle House coffee. At this point she was fighting the image of her getting naked and trying to ram her newborn son back where it came from. Not an exact fit. No dilation this leg of the trip. That's when John Saxon was going really goofy, like Ed Gein goofy, and he went across Florida Boulevard and was found digging into a fresh grave. Popping the top of the coffin like it was the door in MYSTERY DATE by Mattel, and munching on rather unfriendly human flesh. John went off the deep end after being a Vietnam war hero and joining the Kiwanas, and keynote speaker at Amway rallies from Texas to Georgia. Peggy locked herself in the laundry room and forced herself to have a nice slow tumbler full of liquid Drano.

Hit the spot, she thought, as the intensely violent pain came from her esophagus melted like onions turning clear in a buttered skillet.

## Chapter Fifty-One

The worst part of the epidemic was quite arriving in fashion. If the first part was cruel by just silently stalking and killing figuratively, then this murderously wrong scheme of pervading an entire city and East Baton Rouge Parish.

From Off Track Betting Parlors on the other side of the river, to the KKK Christian folks in lazy Livingston Parish, this way lay madness. Husbands reenacting hunting swallowing their tongues quite properly and with little complaint.

So what can a pose of gangly sheriff's deputies do? They didn't know how to retain 65 thousand maniacs. What was that Hershel Gordon Lewis film? 2000 Mad Maniacs? Well, that was just a newsreel or cartoon in front of the main feature.

What a grim twist to the pandemic nightmare. Be the life of the covered dish Avon meeting in your neighborhood. Slit your wrists and you may be a contestant in our chicken-biting cavalcade. Throughout the dingy pit of city it was a demonical humorless as one could imagine in a Kafka art film, or a David Lynch preview. Folks now stomping the school grounds and parks, walking sideways, one foot dragging, so coy and frivolous. Where the sheriff's deputies and a whole bunch of good old boys reliving their war remembrances, by cutting down the zombies, now suddenly all were zombies.

The town was walking Kafkaesque tone poem.

Literally hundreds at a time, crowds in a madcap lynch mob were seen stalking in rover packs amongst the nestled manicured subdivisions.

Army soldiers were stoking themselves on so many big-boostered Thorazine and fistfuls of Navane and Prozac. They couldn't focus on these legions of stalking deadish comrades.

"Start shooting Mister!" Lieutenant Gil Straton said, to another soldier listing badly with tremors of white cold fear.

"I can't, I tell you!" A squadron of mindless vegetables who were the easiest and first to succumb to the invisible red death, were stalking the huge supermarket and stereo store next to the comic book shop and across Greenwell Springs Road from the Wal-Mart now virtually destroyed by hand.

They were not hesitating, brave through their dementia.

"God dammit shitfugg, I'll do it," Lieutenant Gil Straton said, and grabbed the rifle so hard that it knocked the poor soldier out cold. 'Whack!' against his head that rang through heard round the parking lot. He shot a few automatic bursts into a couple of coot-sters hell-bent on reliving the prohibition days. Down they went. Pop! went the gun, a neat little explosion that brought down Ma and Pa Kettle, of Broadmoor subdivision. Then he shot every zombie behind them, they had not a whit of gleaned logic to

run. They almost welcomed sure death as an escape from the sudden tormented disease that gripped all, at once, like a blanket of darkness. The streets were cavorting with snatches of sirens coming forth like Doppler effects. Ambulances, cars driven by DWI's (Drunk while Insane). It sounded like Beirut or any Wild West Western. They mostly were fighting each other, killing and wounding each other.

Just who was sane and who wasn't? It didn't matter. For one thing, there was no way to tell from the all-out street violence just who was the man. Besides, it would eventually sweep and get everyone.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

"Are you watching the news?" "Oh, the cable went back on?" Kendra asked.

Ricky popped another big booster Thorazine. The side effects were making him rock back and forth like a swinging unfortunate. All those toxic drugs being taken on by a sober, once-pristine bodice. Corpses.

"Live footage by outsiders braving the hellhole we are in, and I have seen more dramatic killings in the last ten minutes." Kendra had that look on her face of either worry or confusion.

Was she already going too? He wondered. She was the only one for me, he knew. If she goes hugger tea I have to think what I am supposed to do? I would gladly sacrifice my paltry existence for her. He was as he always was since he had met her, thought only of her and not of himself. She had given much redefined meaning to his otherwise meaningless existence. He should have been dead long ago, when the first wave hit and killed off a good 69% "I'm alright," she said, sitting down on the comforter. She still possessed on that lovely face a strained look that could not be mistaken.

They slept that night together, only after he told her that he had to witness her talking a fistful of shitty mind numbing Thorazine until she could only rattle herself to sleep. There, in that luxuriant ensconced villa bordering Hades on the North and Danteville on the south. Below the Manson\Nixon line of death, in what was once a plodding peaceful corner of the world, now were the leftovers from a fitful dreaming sleep chocked full of demons. Kendra was rolling on her side of the bed, fighting off the dreadful side effects.

Most of the people who ended up dying violently at this last stage of that grand play that this pandemic Torquemada had strutted forth, had not had enough sense to take their own given supply of Thorazine to ward off Mr. Nutzo. The mad monk of insanity, a real entity in itself. They just went along with that last liting dance of insanity that led them to die fighting and mad screams and blood flying.

If they were stupid enough to vote for a crooked racketeering governor four times-in-a-row, then they qualified for genuine ignorance for lack of wanting to swallow powerful Haloperidol and other cute names as such to at least give them some sanity; some dignity that had been stripped from them long ago.

The makeshift clan at the now-notorious alien-killing quilting bee was whooping it up. Little did they realize that they were sublimely usurping themselves to being something indefinable, monstrous. John Ed

was kicking back with some near-blinding clear brain bending mash. Chugging it with Mr. Benson, the Exxon boss that was in AA with him, once. With the Henderson twins, and Old Man Muskie, who had won more medals than T.E. Lawrence. But then Balmy Joey Nuttson had planted a shotgun spraying into Junior Slugger. It literally spread that fast. The sheriffs showed up and pistol-whipped the heavy set madman, who had just ten hours ago, fought against the Jell-O-lime green and valiantly split open the albino, redeyed mutations with a double-bladed ax. Joey's head went scattershot all over. Joey Nuttson just said in mid sentence, "I've got a hankering to get in the sack " and then he heaved the mall handled pick and pulled back and with a demented glazed psycho sheen of Ed Gein's bent view, had no quandary with whacking and splitting quite smoothly, the tough but easily cracked skull like it was a coconut being purposely thrown on rock by a Darwinian tool-using prized specimen. John Ed and the others stomped him subsequently into the terra.

On the radio came blaring fuzzy yelling, that indeed all hell had broken loose. It was biblical in proportion just as Kendra and Dr. Ravi had prophesized. Incoherent metallic screeches that just stymied the boys, all standing around, feeling carnal lust after stomping and stoning one of the boys.

"Let's make tracks," John Ed said, literally swallowing his Redman chewing 'backie. The sheriff's deputy who was wounded earlier was crying, 'this is too much'.

"Said something bout the whole town is gone apeshit!" John Ed hacked and the truck careened flinging sod on its double-axled stance. The jeeps, vans, big trucks, filled with men and weapons, men who were now touched as if it had made semblances of just little inklings of psychotic forget-me-nots inside their bouncing skulls.

"Stop that crying! Screwing mammy's boy!" "I'm sorry, Mr. John," the deputy simpered.

They drove into the wretched cityscape, seeing literally throngs of ill-modulated citizens of Baton Rouge, scouring the neighborhoods, making a legion of somehow makeshift camaraderie among the touched, or afflicted.

The disease was uncannily working too properly. The scientists at the labs had not figured on the hurriedness of the malaise of insidious maligned death fluttering like a blanket of vultures over a now doomed landmass.

"It appears the disease is in final stages now, General Berkley," said the national newscaster having just been dropped onto the wildness; the mayhem of the mad lundi carnival of lost souls. She looked around her in the middle of a midtown mall, directly in the parking lot filed with troops having flown into the metro airport, who were not succumbing to the terrible illness because they were outsiders. The mobs came in waves, and the men attempted to shoot with tranquilizer cartridges. The mobs came in waves, and the men attempted to shoot with tranquilizer cartridges, but then the boys ran out and the mobs kept coming. Live ammo was next.

The unassociated waves of unrehearsed madmen, little children incensed with fury, a dementia, their parents disassociated with all normal social significance, forgetting and blanking out reason and sanity. They were doing each other in, violently whacking each other with crude rudimentary tools like knives, butcher's cleavers, axes, shovels, rakes, whatever didn't require a knowledge of remembering how to use a rifle. That was a bit complicated for this low intelligent new form of mutated zombies. Literally turn coated in the blink of an eye by the dormant sickness.

The newscaster sobbed, as she witnessed mob killings, the army and crack troops sent by the government. The nation watched the entire spectacle on CNN and every possible channel, it was as easy as televised as the Vietnam War on evening news, or the Persian Gulf tapdances.

"Oh, my God," all of the outsiders said, and they couldn't take it anymore. The city was now crawling with newly embryonic zombies, a more gruesome facsimile of the evil village in Devil's swamp that had been successfully burned out with flamethrowers borrowed for some ex combat guys. And now they were using them on each other.

## Chapter Fifty-Three

Dr. Ravi turned to Dr. Thompson, and said , "Well, we did not know that the disease could mutate and evolve to such a quickened form of dementia, and resultant death." "I tried to tell them! Goddammit!" "Oh, my God," as they watched the incredible gulfs of rampant violence as the refineries blazed in the background like brilliant pyres to a Vulcan god of war — Mars. Exxon was ablaze far worse than it was a couple of weeks ago. Every single huge tank on the farm on Hwy 61 was ablaze. Kaiser aluminum was nothing but a seething cauldron, bauxite burning badly and causing a great inferno into literal HELL. Texaco down in Prairieville and Convent by the Sunshine Bridge was the only refinery that wasn't set afire or rattled by mutant zombies. The air was as bad as those infinite amounts of oil rigs set afire during the all of televised history. Insurmountable.

Deathly feared, hideous. A morass that literally was propelling this central part of the country into a war zone, blasting themselves back into the stone age Cro-Magnon style. A real horror show. The nuclear plant was reported in safe conditions. The folks who turned batshit of wailing about in insurmountable hideous racking pain. Slow death. The night went on, the crowds spilling into every street, every once able bodies citizen now a demented loathing ghoul. It was like a swath of voodoo imported from New Orleans had wafted through.

The national government was attempting to figure out how to shut down the whole thing. The next morning after what would be known as the great blackout day, of national mourning for the masses of folks listing about.

Unaware of their sanity, or lack of; mutilations, emasculations, dismemberment, all in the name of Black Death. At least the pandemic before throughout the Middle Ages were of folks spared dementia. That was the weird beautiful part. Never before had a toxin actually turned a few curves and curved into something so unusual in nature. Truly the most ravaging sort of disease. It had a bent for scrupulous as to turn these good Louisiana folks into madmen. Preying on their nervous systems, hunting down their brain.

That morning all over the flat fallow land, from manicured subdivisions in squalid Sherwood Forest, south Baton Rouge gentry, were moaning, wailing turn-coated zombies. Transfigured surely by the painfully ravaging diseases.

The lashing wailing gashed bouts like Edvard Munch's "The Scream" were evident. The creepy and sad sight of hearing mutilated zombies crying, wail, whimper, slowly dying some radioactive, tempered with a growing festering disease that was long ago supplanted within each of them like arsenic dipped. It was a

stygian horrid deathscape transformed now into myth.

One sentient intelligent, relatively good, churchgoing suburban, urban.

North Baton Rouge, white collar, blue collar, had still found enough energy to fight. To kill aimlessly, with no outward knowledge. It was the most horrid, sight ever witnessed by the rest of the world. The footage was poured into every living room of this senseless purgatory. Way station of death.

## Chapter Fifty-Four

Ricky and Kendra had both taken every single tranquilizer and shot of Thorazine, big bolstered tranquilizer liquid solutions, every anti-depressant.

Kendra looked at Ricky and asked him quietly, a madness welding in those blue dreamy eyes, gone sour, with pain, intense loathing terrible quakings, if he would put her out of her misery.

"Darling, I can't kill you!" She began hitting him. His love, his dream, his Leonardo concubine, his Byronic vision, his little Aryan wonder, his Rimbaud verses, Verlaine dreamy moondream; now beginning to start the descent into the hellishness of this particular Torquemada, Hades, or Pireaus.

Decadent decay, of a dying city, war ravaged, paved streets lined with corpses of army and mostly zombies without the consent, still many were suffering and quite alive, helpless than ever seen before.

Ricky got the prepared syringe, the death solution.

"Me first," he whimpered. The little pink fluid looked like it certainly could do its job. Everything was so sad about the whole matter. It was the end of time for them. That cloying decayed dying, the bitterness of a bad deal.

"No," she said, grinding her teeth together and pulling on her hair.

Ripping pieces out as she shook and bared fists, and gnarled and hissed. Just barely able to keep that one last flounced bit of scintillated sanity. Probably her deep love in this, the last of their lives. She hit him hard in the face. She was gone, but she said her very last set of syllables before being reduced. He laid the syringe on her left, bronzed, beautiful arm, pricking her vein. She said: "You know what you should do." They were both crying. It was almost beautiful. Through this enormous pain came a bit of earned comfort. He kissed her, sobbing badly.

Sorrow racked through him, and he pushed the fluid in. She lay back down, on the lovely comforter.

"Okay." "I love you." Ricky said. He looked into her painful wretched face, which was a sort of facsimile for a saint, an ennobled beautiful goddess of myth. He cried profusely, and as did she, violently shaking now. She was trying to hit herself in her gnashing and wailing. He stayed with her, him now not feeling too sensible, forgetting what he was supposed to do. She lay on the comforter sofa now, as the big

screen television poured out the now forgotten details of his life, of this wretched landscape once just a sportsman's paradise, but now limbo, of waiting, suffering people.

She was still, now. Gone forever. He looked down at her body, and kissed her on the lips, the final gesture. He lost it.

He got into the turbo Volvo and sped down the street, curving, swaying in outrageous maneuvers to avoid the literal mass of bodies of dying victims, who were suffering like no others had ever before.

The army people had skirted out. The government declared it had to quarantine the entire populace. Very real danger of weeping through the rest of the country. Harrison flew down the interstate at warp speed, a hundred miles an hour.

He was heading North on I-10, the I-110, past the Mississippi River bridge. Going past the Governors Mansion, he saw through his now maligned and confused state, the literal thousands, tens of thousands of bodies, of suffering wailing. The radio was screeching like stygian caves forlorn, of sights and sounds unholy!

"What did Shelley say in Queen Maub? Death and his brother Sleep," he yelled. The dreams of some long-gone Greek gods. Morpheus, the god of this land now, and Hypnos were both on this tail. He could barely keep his eyes open, as he flew to points above Exxon.

There were no army people left. They had long ago bugged out.

Every person who was ingrained with the horrid outcry of the disease was in for a long time of unending torture. But not if he could help it. He looked at the interstate curving into various appendages like some grand junction of traversing this hallowed land, fraught with suffering. He looked at the gray gunmetal sky—the smoking morass of refineries blazing like Olympian pyres all along the river, on both sides. Never had the smell of death been so clear and resonant. He kept driving, thinking about his family, who had all succumbed. There was a way to sail to a newer world. Kendra Hoerst and he had known love like Heathcliff and Cathy. Like Romeo and Juliet in some twisted pit of hell. But love survived almost, but not to conquer or oppose this manmade eternal question not answered or unanswered, but struck down. Erased, by man's godlike charm at creating his own hell, fashioned certainly on Earth. He turned into the Nuclear Bend Nuclear plant. Its alabaster seams on its concrete surface were quite seamless.

The integrated artistic beauty was capable of striking beauty against the huge clouds of the burning refinery pyres. He went inside, limping badly.

Hobbling, to set off what would only be instant relief for these death pyres.