

Parallax

by Laird Barron

EXCERPTED FROM NEWS 6 COVERAGE OF JACK CARSON BRIEFING (by Ron Jones—6/6/99):

JC: ... and thank you to all the people involved in the search. The Olympia Police Department, the fire department, the Washington Highway Patrol, all the volunteers. The media. You've worked tirelessly to bring Miranda back to us safe and sound. Thank you.

RJ: Is there anything you would care to add, Mr. Carson?

JC: Yes. Miranda, honey. I love you. Please come home.

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I see Miranda in the endless chain of faces.

After six years they are all starting to resemble her. Which is kind of funny since I often forget what she looks like until I spot her on a bus; in line at the bank; at a sidewalk café, scanning the *Daily O*, a Rottweiler at her feet, and wham. My heart knocks, my hands shake as if I quit the sauce only yesterday.

Six years, already?

Six years and I still can't touch Crown Royal, can't stomach the diesel taint. Six years and I hate the sound of ice slurring in a glass: makes me flinch and resurrects an image of icebergs in miniature on slate. I'm done with ice cubes, iceboxes, all of it. Sometimes I don't brave the kitchen for weeks.

Six years as of Saturday. Saturday Marchland pays a visit. He barges into the house, drunk and alone. They kicked him off the force, I don't recall when. The brute has time to kill. Crosses my mind it's *me* he's come to kill after the pussyfooting around. That thought is a catalyst. It starts the cookie crumbling.

What's he waiting for, for Christ's sake? That's easy. He's been waiting for the coroner's report to confirm his suspicions about the body they found near Yelm six

months ago. It's not that the deadly dull pathologists have a flair for the dramatic as much as there's a logjam at the forensics lab. Government cutbacks are a real bitch.

Six months, six years, six bullets in a .38 revolver. Marchland wants to be certain; of course he does. They confiscated his gun along with the badge, but that's not a problem; he got another piece at the pawn shop. He showed me once.

I ask how his partner Fisher is doing. Nothing doing.

Marchland lumbers to my liquor cabinet, grabs a dusty bottle of the best. He says to me, "Happy anniversary, Jack." Then he knocks back his whiskey and slops another. He trembles as he swallows, shudders like it's poison going down the hatch. His tics pronounce themselves most eloquently. His left eye is an agate. The right eye, the good eye, flickers like a shutter.

He's a wild boar, a crocodile, a basilisk. He smacks his lips as if he wishes it were my blood in his mouth.

Six years and Marchland won't quit. Good for him. I'm numb to his animal pathos. I've turned a stone ear to his dumb anguish. I'm tuned to the music of the stars, radio-free Tau Ceti. No interest in act I of *Hamlet*. Let's jump to long knives and goodnight speeches. Let's bring the curtain down already.

I turn away and stare through the window at the field where the Scotch broom creeps yellow as hell toward my doorstep. Six years and it has advanced from the hinterlands to the picket fence in the backyard. Six more years and it will have chewed this house to the foundation, braided my bones in its hair.

I think nothing changes because thunderheads roll like wheels. I think of wheels in wheels, the threshing scythes in the hubs of clattering chariots, and I think hasn't this gone on long enough?

But Marchland doesn't shoot me. He drains the tumbler, watches me watching the yellow field. When he leaves, he closes the door softly.

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EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE DOCUMENTARY*. INTERVIEW OF JUDITH PEIRCE (by William Tucker—3/19/02):

WT: What did you call your artist community—Penny Royal?

JP: That's right.

WT: Kind of a traveling show.

JP: More of an artist support group that toured Europe. A networking project. We put on exhibitions.

WT: Who was involved?

JP: Oh, me and Jack. Freddy Snopes, Larry Torrence. Joe Adams—he went into computers, does fractal art. Miranda, of course. There were others; the group was pretty huge at times, but we were the core, the nucleus.

WT: There have been a lot of rumors about Penny Royal. Is it true that members of Penny Royal indulged in heavy drug use, attended orgies, and held Satanic rituals?

JP: Satanic rituals?

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Judy is ready to rumble.

It's the same argument—the only argument—we ever have.

There are variations on the theme, but this is how it usually goes with Judy when she's drunk enough or stoned enough to grab the bull by the horns. Tonight she's both.

"Why do you stay, Jack? Why, in God's name, do you stay in this house?" And believe me, she's shrill when she's in the mood. She's got the cast-iron lungs of a professional activist, a cactus for a liver.

We've been friends since Cambridge. Since the magical, apocalyptic fairy tale days of starving in exotic cities, sustained by youth, cheap grass and cheaper wine, the kindness of strangers. Suffering was beautiful then, as is any addiction at the threshold of the honeymoon bungalow. Judy was the den mother of our brood, a select confab of like-minded *artistes*. She was savagely glamorous in her impoverishment, fearless as a martyr. Attrition ground up and blew away our comrades, turned them into bankers and graphic designers, housewives with fruiting ovaries and dutiful husbands hanged by their own neckties. I would've gone down too, except she kept me treading water until Miranda and the Muses and Lady Luck carried me home.

Judy's suffering doesn't seem so hip anymore. That youthful euphoria has evaporated. Her lean, bronze face sags with the effects of too much too fast, changes as if a lamp had briefly illuminated the planes and creases. Sad, she looks horribly sad. Looks like she's been guzzling kerosene.

Thank God Judy is an old school lesbian, else I'd be stuck on the notion she did away with Miranda to get with me. I almost ask her if she loved Miranda with the love that dare not speak its name. Almost, except that's the easy way out. And it's another question I probably don't want answered.

"I like my house. I'm attached to it," I say.

"Yeah, but isn't it creepy?"

"Creepy. No." It is, indeed. Am I going to admit that?

She wags her head. "Hell yeah, it's creepy. Only a psycho or a robot could sleep in this place knowing what you know. You act like a robot sometimes. Serious."

"Gee, thanks."

It's a really expensive house, a huge house with lots of artifacts cluttering the vaulted rooms, although none of the artifacts are mine. Correction, I kept one personal reminder of life with Miranda—a great ceramic bust of Achilles that I once hollowed in the throes of demonic possession or whatever it is the ancients took as the author of genius. This bust gapes from the window of my study. The old Greek's fractured skull is a palace for the silverfish, a repository of dust and dreams.

The remainder of my stuff has been reduced to splinters, ashes, pulverized. It took me three weeks to accomplish the feat. The big items went fast. The small items were tedious. I organized piles in the driveway, sat cross-legged as a swami, sorting them with maniacal devotion. I'd collected so many more things than seemed possible! The project was worth the effort, though. My wife's treasures deserve ample negative space.

I've converted my office into a gallery of Miranda's wax sculptures—the drowned woman; the cancer victim on the gurney we swiped from Saint Pete's; the seagull mobile; the Native American-style death mask in the window; a basket of petrified apples and pears oozing beneath a glaze of paraffin, a fruit-fly graveyard in the embalming oils. These remnants of her portfolio, these fragments I have gathered to my breast, are a paean to her gothic sensibilities.

Everything is heavy or awkward or fragile. The notion of touching any of it makes me nauseous. I framed the article in *Smithsonian*, the one with the picture of her at the fabled museum accepting a pile of grant cash and a handshake from some fossil

in a suit. I don't look at it much because it makes me nauseous too.

Then there's the Norman Rockwell yard, and the Norman Rockwell field, and those trees could've been painted by him as well. Everything turns green and red this time of year. It's a postcard outside my window.

I say, "Where am I supposed to go? Even psycho robots gotta sleep."

"You're loaded; you could go anywhere. Buy an island, become dictator of a banana republic, whatever, man. The only decent thing to do is burn it to the ground, blow it to hell and gone. Donate it, turn it into a fawkin' museum and sell tickets, whatever. Your call, Jack."

I sip my off-brand cola and force a smile. "I'm not loaded—you are."

"Ha, ha."

"But see, I can't leave."

"Why can't you?"

"What if she comes back?"

"Here we go. Here we fawkin' go. I need some more booze. Fast."

"What if she does?"

"Jack."

"What if the old girl strolls through the door one day with an explanation for everything?"

"Jack—"

"Hi, baby, sorry I'm late, I was abducted by the Greys, or 'Holy shit, you wouldn't believe the line at Walmart—"

"Jack. Jack, for Chrissake ... She wouldn't shop at Walmart, and she isn't going to come back. You gotta sell this house and move on. Serious. You aren't well, buddy. Uh, uh."

"I can't do that."

"Jack—"

"Judy, no."

"Ja-ack." Her voice cracks to pieces at this point.

I just sip my coke and wait for the storm to break.

"Yes, you can. Jack, man. Why can't you?"

I won't tell Judy the reason, the honest-to-Betsy reason. I won't tell her I wake up every other night with an iron band around my chest, bad dreams rattling in my attic. I wake up like a beast in the woods that's scented something it can't quite identify. I wake up with this premonition, as if any second now I'm going to receive the ultimate clue, that I'm finally going to find out what happened to my wife. Like the end of the cliffhanger serial is one commercial break away.

Instead, I tell Judy to have another snort and wipe her nose, because she's bawling into her gin and tonic. We don't discuss the fact the cops might be watching me again, that the phone is probably tapped and God knows what's coming next.

I change the subject to sports, the weather.

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EXCERPTED FROM THE *ALAMOGORDO DAILY TELEGRAPH* (6/9/87):

HONEYMOON COUPLE FOUND SAFE—Jack and Miranda Carson, presumed missing since their rental car was reported abandoned on Highway 70 near the White Sands National Monument on June 6, were found Tuesday at the Diamond Inn Resort. The resort is located 150 miles west of White Sands.

Mr. Carson, an acclaimed modern artist from Olympia, Washington, expressed surprise at being the subject of a missing persons report. "We're not missing, we're on our honeymoon!" Mr. Carson said. It was his opinion that the vehicle had been stolen and he had neglected to note its absence.

Further confusion arose from the fact that the Carsons signed the Diamond Inn register on June 8, prompting the Otero County Sheriff's Office to question the couple's whereabouts during the preceding thirty-six to forty-two hours. Mr. Carson, known for his flamboyant promotional style, denied any involvement in a publicity hoax, saying, "Publicity? Why would I want publicity on my honeymoon? We've been in our room or at the bar since we got here."

Patty Angstrom, spokesperson for the Sheriff's Office, declined comment pending further investigation.

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Sunday is a coma. Sunday's dreamscape is a long, pale sweep of desert.

My dreams are cinematic and exaggerated as spaghetti westerns. A lopsided V of Search & Rescue choppers crawls along the horizon. Mountains are jagged teeth of a cannibal cowboy. The wind hums the hum of bees in bleached skull hives, a discordant harmonica tune.

A plastic hand claws from the earth, the hand of a manikin severed at the wrist. It's feminine, and the ring on its finger is the ring I gave Miranda, the one from the flea market in New Mexico, not far from some proving grounds we read about in a tacky brochure. The ring matches the one she gave me.

Mesas and dunes blur, ruinous Luna gapes as the sun founders in her wake.

Home again. Miranda on the living room sofa. She's wearing my ancient rugby sweater; her brown hair's a glorious mess. She's daubing her nails and humming that old Sinatra song we first danced to in the Cloud Room. The light collects on her shoulder. I kiss her and walk through the door to the kitchen, try not to stumble. I drag my black double like a wrecking ball.

I'm fixing drinks, hair of the dog that bit us. I'm chopping at an ice block, trying not to botch the job, because my belly is queasy and the gong in my skull makes it tricky to concentrate.

The ice pick falls from my hand, rocks in a semicircle on the counter. The ice becomes a white-gold lake. The numbers on the microwave flicker forward two minutes. White light pours into my eyes. My head erupts.

No OFF button. I know this is only a movie, but I'm buckled to the theatre seat. Once it starts, it won't stop: the hits keep on coming. The memory of the event is like a splash of indelible ink, a bloodstain.

Cicadas chirr in the flowerbox. An unseasonably crisp breeze pushes the tall grass. Sparks gather in black-hearted clouds. The stink of fire. Then silence. Miranda isn't humming, isn't making any sound. The only noise is the soft gasp of air forced through a vent near my feet. And something else, something vast and running on a frequency that scrambles the neurons in my brain. My personal supernova.

Then it's night. Gauzy, crystal-studded, immense.

I'm behind the wheel of a speeding luxury car—leather interior, power everything. Miranda's riding shotgun, sipping Bacardi and trailing her arm out the window, laughing. Gods, what a sweet sound; it sends an electric spike through me, curls my toes. We're on the road to Vegas. Ricardo Montalban's disembodied voice congratulates my excellent taste in driving machines and women. The car isn't moving, it's at full stop. There's a big exit hole in the windshield. Vacuum moans as it sucks away the atmosphere, pulls my smile into a stroke victim's grimace.

The harmonica keens and Miranda's missing again.

I float up from the abyss, regard her side of the bed. Her pillow is drenched crimson by radio-clock light. You'd think I'd wake screaming, except that's fiction. Shaking, sweating, blinded by rocketing blood pressure, yes. But no screaming.

Why should I? It's utter phantasmagoria anyway. I've never been in a car crash, never owned a car that plush, never had such a desire. A road trip to Vegas? New Mexico was desert enough for me.

We got married in a historic trading post. Or in a cathedral by a priest named Dominic. Doves floating, Miranda's white train dragging in the good clean Catholic dust.

Which was it?

There was that ordained minister and his wife who stayed in the room across the way at the resort. We played golf once, backgammon, something. He'd offered to marry us in the chapel or the Cloud Room, hadn't he? Damn—I don't remember at the moment, and the moment is slipping away.

I stumble into the bathroom.

Water circles in the toilet. The stars march circles in a wedge of pebbled glass. They never seem quite right anymore. They hang differently from when Miranda and I used to lay on a blanket and do the romantic thing where you count them. They don't seem very romantic now.

I peer into the gloom of the yard, through the tall trees and taller shadows. A truck that resembles Marchland's flatbed Ford is parked at the end of the driveway. Like the Flying Dutchman, it materializes in that spot when I least expect. It's been there on and off for months, for ages. The dome light silhouettes Marchland's torso, his massive head.

Perhaps I should offer him a nightcap or a cup of tea. There's lots of Miranda's herbal tea left over in the pantry. Never been much of a tea man, myself.

I drop the blinds, return to bed.

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On Monday I'm among my people.

Judy has the studio unlocked and the lights burning when I arrive with Kern. Judy warns me that someone has left twenty or so hang-ups on the machine over the weekend. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wants to do an interview. A friendly retrospective. There have been no anonymous death threats for going on a year: that's a record. Miranda's mom died of cancer a while back. Her dad got himself killed on a ski slope in Italy and maybe that explains the drought. Why the hell does a retiree need to take up skiing anyway? My largesse is the culprit—after I got famous we sent scads of cash to Miranda's parents. Getting rich late in life would do in just about anyone.

If Judy is the long-suffering Kato to my Green Hornet, Kern is my evil apprentice who longs to usurp my title as art world wunderkind. He's a brilliant conniver, bound for glory. They love each other a few degrees shy of homicide.

Kern met me at the China Clipper for breakfast and we talked about the Seattle exhibition upcoming next month. Kern did the talking. Can't say I heard much of it—hope I bobbed my head in the right places.

The exhibition is of tremendous importance to Kern—it's his chance to hobnob with future patrons. We've got well-heeled boys and girls from New York, San Francisco, and Chicago on the guest list.

I drift. The bulky pieces are done and packed up for shipment. My mind is free to spiral into its pit.

Kern doesn't fathom my indifference to the minutiae. Once, I was the king of flash. I paid for rock bands and fireworks, bought ad space in the *New York Times*, made a spectacle of myself on network television, choked smug journalists with my bare hands, whatever it took to spread the word. He can't grasp this fundamental shift. He's also my disciple and his disapproval remains oblique. Plus, I've loaned him three hundred dollars and my old Datsun. Kern's got a big mouth and a canary ass. This proved to be an unfortunate combination when he swaggered into the local watering hole one fateful Western Swing Night. The local bullyboys totaled Kern's Volkswagen and went to work on him. An overhand blow from an aluminum bat spoiled his designer-model looks just a tad, and he's been humble pie since.

I won't lift a finger today.

Judy handles the bills and the maintenance people, coordinates with the lawyers and the galleries, keeps my head screwed on straight. She's a champ. Kern sweats the details in the forges.

I gnaw my nails, stare at the poster board with the billion memos, the press clippings curled as dried leaves. My eye is dragged to a photo of me and Miranda holding hands beneath the ceramic colossus of Achilles I erected in Pioneer Square. I've just won the bet between us about who'd hit the jackpot first, but we're smiling. Miranda didn't have it in her to be bitter. That statue bought me a ticket to ride, as the boys from Liverpool said. We appear insignificant in its shadow.

Coffee rings and ink drippings mar the draft book near my left hand: fishhook doodles, random letters that have nearly eaten through the paper, the number 6, and the words ORDO TEMPLI ORIENTIS; PARALLAX; MIRANDA. No designs, however. I haven't managed a real design since *Achilles*, and if not for stamping my name on Kern's drawings I'd be staring down the barrel of artistic obscurity.

Kern and Judy don't want me to wither on the vine. I'm the franchise, the label on the jar that seals the deal. If I go down, Judy may as well start hunting for secretarial positions and Kern will be shaking his ass for dollars at the Long Horn Lounge.

Inertia takes me in its jaws, pads outside this cement igloo, strands me in the middle of the parking lot. Truthfully, I am waiting for Marchland to come and maintain his customary vigil, the police-drama surveillance he obviously took to heart back in the academy. I do this every morning, although today is the first time in a great while that I have admitted as much to myself.

I gaze down the hill across the bridge at Olympia, its crescent of waterfront warehouses and high-tension wires giving way at the center to clumps of brownstones and hoary maples. Yeah, there's a few trees over there, they haven't hacked down the last of them yet.

I want to smoke, but I gave up smoking when I kicked the hooch. Since Miranda's disappearance, the simple expedient has been to deny myself all semblance of pleasure—as if dogged asceticism will pull the picture into focus, will pay off the vengeful fortune-teller.

The neon marquee of the Samovar Inn fizzles to gray.

The last time I had sex was in that very hotel: room six. That was something on the order of a year ago. The woman wasn't my wife, obviously, and I'd wondered beforehand, as I folded my clothes and drank tap water because my mouth was too dry, if this made me an adulterer. I wasn't driven by physical need. Biological imperatives had been submerged long before the Samovar rendezvous. Polar caps cover that territory. I obeyed the impulse to plummet from a high place, the impulse that quickens when we gaze over the edge of a cliff. I'd wanted to prove at least one

of the theories about my character. I wanted to send this train off the tracks, just to watch the wreck.

The girl I met at the hotel was named Gina, or Jenna, something with a hard *g*. Her hair was brown, just like Miranda's; she was an art student too, knew the book on me front and back. I can't remember much about her, except she wore sandals and purple eyeliner. She is a ghost among the throng of ghosts I seem to be collecting.

I wonder how Gina, or whoever she is, is doing. Has anybody seen her since then? This is how I indulge my latent masochism—entertaining macabre lines of thought, speculating about blackouts, schizophrenia, mysterious gaps in time. I'm into self-mutilation in a big way.

Judy is of that opinion.

Judy says so during our weekly conclaves at the Millstone when we sneak away and leave Kern to his machinations. Judy says it without opening her mouth—it's in her expression as she casually lines up the eight ball, the way she studies her toothpick after steak and red wine, or when she's chambering another round in her trusty Winchester rifle at the club.

Thing is, Judy's loyal. She doesn't care about finding the truth. She's the main reason I stopped seeing my psychiatrist and flushed the happy pills down the drain. Hell, I'd pretty much flushed everything else down there.

Too bad none of it is enough.

Marchland cruises by in his battered truck. He's wearing a ten-gallon hat, tinted glasses. He parks down the block where he can watch the studio from three directions, same as always.

Today is different. Today is the straw upon a mighty heap of straws. Today the straw has found a vein and the bad blood is rushing out.

I wave at him and begin walking across the lot, end up in my car before I formulate the intent to go anywhere. When I roll out and cruise north on Legion, my thoughts are flies buzzing in a bottle.

After the third traffic light, I know.

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EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE*

DOCUMENTARY. INTERVIEW WITH HOMICIDE DETECTIVE MARTIN FISHER (by William Tucker—4/4/02):

WT: During the timeframe of Mr. Carson's visit to Italy in 1983-84, how many women were reported missing?

MF: Approximately four. That's our best information.

WT: You contacted Interpol regarding Mr. Carson's activities in Europe ...

MF: Uh, yes. In the process of investigating Miranda Carson's disappearance. Well, and the FBI kept a file on some of the members of Penny Royal. Uh, a couple of them had ties to ELF—

WT: Environmental Life Force. The so-called eco-terrorists. Saboteurs, not murderers ...

MF: Yes, but it clarifies a pattern of behavior. These folks didn't necessarily mature with age. A couple were very sympathetic to ELF, and the Bureau shared information with us. There was also evidence that some of the members of Penny Royal dabbled in the occult. Mr. Carson corresponded with a former intimate of the late Aleister Crowley—one Mason Barnes. Mr. Barnes was an investment banker from Oakland and a chapter leader of the Ordo Templi Orientis. He owned several properties in the United States and Europe, and the Carsons were among those who availed themselves of Mr. Barnes's amenities on numerous occasions.

WT: Isn't it a fact that Mason Barnes and associates were instrumental in promoting Jack Carson's early work?

MF: Yes—that's correct. They financed him, arranged for an exclusive show in a major gallery. Launched him. Barnes went to prison in 1993 on multiple counts of extortion, kidnapping, sexual assault, and drug distribution. Whether Jack Carson was fully aware of Mr. Barnes's cult activity is unknown. Of course we looked at this in connection with the vanished women—and a possible motive for kidnapping or murder of Miranda Carson. And, obviously, we pursued the Italian leads. But this didn't go anywhere.

WT: Why not?

MF: One of the missing women, a secretary at a utilities office in Palermo, was subsequently found to be living in Venezuela. Local authorities did not consider foul play a plausible concern regarding the other women. Interpol treated it as a closed case.

WT: The local investigators declined to reopen the case.

MF: They declined. There simply wasn't enough to go on.

WT: Were the other three women ever located?

MF: No, they were not.

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Whenever I think about That Day, the images spill forth like negatives on a reel, like my guts coiling around my throat. The first thing I always remember is the migraine.

I hadn't been hit with a migraine since my college years. Those were humdingers, though—real knuckle-whiteners. The kind that bring tears to your eyes, bring up your lunch. The kind that can put you on your knees whimpering for God, mom, or whoever will listen. I'd almost forgotten.

This one wasn't like those. This was worse, and it came with special effects.

There I was, chopping ice in the kitchen. The migraine slammed me behind my left eye. I thought I'd been stabbed. Vertigo staggered me, and I dropped the ice pick and clutched my head. White light flooded through the multiplying windows. White light hit me in a wave and then receded and shrank, left me blinking at fractured afterimages. The kitchen door divided into a paper chain of kitchen doors and wrapped the bizarrely off-kilter room. Objects elongated and deformed and swapped places. This was a world made of warm taffy or the stuff inside a lava lamp. The worst of it was watching the Scotch broom in the field cycle from yellow to white to black and back. The Scotch broom undulated as if the field was a sea trough during a hurricane.

The sky shuddered and went white like an eye rolling up and back.

And then, everything was fine. Somebody released my skull from the vise. The scenery wobbled into place. I sagged against the counter, grateful the merry-go-round had let me off in one piece, that the vessels in my brain hadn't decided to rupture then and there. Just a migraine; not an aneurysm, not a stroke.

The merry-go-round hadn't stopped, though.

It took me a few moments to catch on, but I did soon enough. Silence spread like a riptide. Doom doesn't require fanfare when all it has to do is cup your balls and slowly squeeze. I got the message.

—Honey? Exactly like the movies. And, as in the movies, I tried again, poised at the lip of a chasm that widened with each synaptic detonation.

I searched everywhere. I tore the house to pieces.

The air was warm with her breath. Her perfume collided with particles of dust. She gazed from half a dozen photographs. We'd gone to the Capitol Theatre the night before, to catch the premiere of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and Miranda's stockings were draped across a chair in the bathroom. Her purse, her credit cards, her jewelry, her clothes, present and accounted for—everything whole and untouched.

Every door was safely shut.

On the sofa by the window, I found a creased copy of *Ladies' Home Journal*. On the coffee table by the sofa, I found an open bottle of cherry nail polish and a brush. Three red droplets etched a crescent upon the coffee table glass. The fumes were strong.

It got dark. I never found her.

The cops came, took my picture, took my story. Took me apart.

Detective Marchland wrote in a ledger. He had thick, mason's fingers with dirt under the nails. He exuded a medieval tang, as if his rumpled suit should've been a leather apron soaked in hog blood.

Detective Fisher smiled hatefully as he picked up knickknacks, caressed the spines of our many books. A lanky man in a cheap suit, he was positively dapper next to his partner.

—Love your house, Mr. Carson. Throw parties here, do you?

My mind was in slowdown. My gray matter had been nearly suffocated in the first hours of panic.

—Parties?

—We hear you have some real shindigs, Detective Marchland said. He kept scribbling and I realized that neither of them was exactly looking me in the eye.

—Lotta drugs at these parties, Mr. Carson? I bet there are.

—You can tell us, Detective Fisher said, weighing a musty copy of the *Decameron* in his palm.

—She just ... vanished, you say? Poof, like that? Left everything she owns. Maybe

somebody took her, you think?

—Know who might want to take your wife, Mr. Carson? Anybody asking for money, that sort of thing? You see, sir, people don't just disappear. Usually there's a reason. Sometimes they have help.

I understood where this was headed, could see them placing the dynamite, the blasting caps.

Parties? Oh my, yes. After *Achilles* we'd gone wild. Three-day parties, two hundred-car parties. Big bands, boom boxes, dj's, drug dealers, and hip-hop gangstas. Rock stars, track stars, porn stars. Limousine loads of them. We'd run the gamut; we'd done it up right. Most of it a bright, blobby fuse that I'd relegated to the trunk of ancient history.

The cops kicked that trunk over and rummaged through the dirty linen with unrestrained glee. No patrons of the arts here. It didn't do them any good. They never found her either. However, they did find some bloody rags stuffed inside a coffee can in Miranda's studio. She'd cut her hand on a piece of scrap metal. Nothing sinister, boys.

Cue the trial of the new century.

During the trial of the new century I learned that Marchland slept with my future wife pretty much their entire senior year in high school. They'd even considered getting hitched. Talk about a surprise to the prosecution. We won't talk about what gastrointestinal effects the revelation had on me. For a micromoment I leaped to the inspiration it was him who'd done the deed. He'd snuck into the house past the alarm, the locks, and two snoozing Rottweilers, chloroformed my beloved, kidnapped her under my nose. No go. The day Miranda disappeared, my rival, the ex-cop, was making the rounds with his partner.

Even so, Marchland's omission of this prior relationship sank the prosecution. The trial quickly raveled into a small-town soap opera.

Thank goodness for that—it's what eventually saved me from a prolonged stay at the crossbar hotel. It was the LAPD–O.J. Simpson fiasco all over again. Of course, that doesn't shock; that part's common knowledge. All of the dirt is in the public domain. Anybody who got CNN could keep score. There's a DVD documentary at Blockbuster, and I hear the grad student who filmed it is the toast of Tinseltown. He spliced bits of courtroom testimony with my prior appearances on the *Tonight Show* and *Oprah*. The kid even got his mitts on security-camera footage from my midnight demolition of *Achilles* with a sledgehammer, the madcap foot pursuit and arrest. Yes indeed, that screaming face squashed against the cruiser's window is mine.

Those prison-interview tapes are priceless. Good grief, I am positively scary in an orange jumpsuit. See me fidget, cast furtive glances at the cameraman with my slippery, Cro-Magnon eyes. And those questions. I love how they fire the questions.

—Are you guilty, Mr. Carson?

What they mean is, just admit it.

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EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE DOCUMENTARY*. INTERVIEW WITH FORMER HOMICIDE DETECTIVE KURT MARCHLAND (by William Tucker—4/12/02):

WT: Bundy. Ridgway. Yates.

KM: (nods).

WT: Serial killers who stalked the Pacific Northwest.

KM: Yes.

WT: Washington State is a magnet for these guys, isn't it?

KM: Frankly, Bill, it ... well, that's a myth. There's no link between geography and serial killers. Makes good copy, though.

WT: Bianchi, Russel, Dodd ...

KM: Right. That's right.

WT: And of course, the ones we don't know about.

KM: (chuckles).

WT: Jack Carson?

KM: Jack Carson ... I think so. Yes.

WT: But no proof. No body.

KM: The circumstantial evidence, the other incidents in the past. There's a history

there. I mean, we found a lot of blood in that workshop.

WT: Would you characterize him as the one who got away?

KM: (long pause) I like to think ... his day is coming.

WT: Some people have compared you with Mark Fuhrman.

KM: Yes.

WT: You've been criticized for ... quote, "torpedoing" the Carson case.

KM: Yes.

WT: Is that fair?

KM: I made a mistake. My career was destroyed. The guy murdered his wife and walked. I paid for that mistake. I was ruined.

WT: A powerful indictment. He was found not-guilty, however.

KM: The jury was forced to disregard my testimony. It cast doubt on everything the prosecution had built.

WT: Because of a technicality. So, it was unfair.

KM: Ask Miranda Carson. Ask her about what's fair.

.....

I drive deep into the country, past the dairy and the sod fields, past a busload of migrant laborers pulling weeds along the outer track, keep going until I cross an iron bridge with green moss eating alive the girders, and turn onto a rutted lane. Brush scrapes the door panels and squeaks against the windows. The claustrophobic lane opens into a valley of evergreens, none more than eight feet tall, the whole interlaced by dirt paths in the manner of a fishing net. I park on the ridge, get out and stretch my legs, inhale the musk of shorn fir boughs.

Miranda adored Schneider's Christmas Tree Farm. We brought the dogs here on many a lazy summer evening, let them careen after rabbits through the serried ranks of baby Douglas Firs. I'd sit on the hood of our car, puffing a cigarette while the blue sky burnt to black. Miranda, she'd chase the dogs, snap pictures of birds with her disposable camera. Sometimes she'd find the carcass of a blue jay or a robin and

wrap it in a kerchief, pack the smelly bundle home for one of her sculptures. Once, she created a wax mobile of decayed seagulls, showed it at a local art festival to the horror and consternation of our less cosmopolitan associates. Nobody ever expected a sweet, wholesome girl to possess such an edge.

When Marchland arrives he shuts off his engine and sits there until I begin to wonder if he will actually climb out and confront whatever it is I have in mind.

The sun hangs directly overhead.

"Don't be afraid," I say. I'm slumped against the bumper of my car. I'm thinking of nothing. I'm on autopilot. My mouth works and discharges a prerecorded message. "I figured this would be a good place. Surprised no one ever thought to look." I bare my teeth to really sell it. "Except somebody did finally look. That body they found—it was in a shallow grave about a mile from here. Rotted away to bone fragments and sinews. They know it's a woman, at least."

Marchland's face is hidden by the brim of his hat.

I plow on, jabbing the bee's nest. "What happened, Kurt? After high school, I mean. You weren't bright enough for the big leagues, were you, my friend?"

Marchland doesn't say anything. Doesn't have to.

"So, she bops off to college and meets me. Horror of horrors. I had drugs, talent, oodles of charisma. Means and opportunity. You were basically screwed. Life is unfair, eh? Course, this time we had us a twist ending—a little bittersweet vindication for the blue-collar slob, isn't that right?" Sure it is. My stalker is no man of mystery; I have become intimate with the squalid details of his wasted life—his lost love, stolen love, if one prefers; the procession of failed marriages; the ruined career, you name it.

Tit for tat.

I used to think Marchland's rage was fueled by simple jealousy, by frustration and sorrow of this melancholy end to an adolescent romance. Now, I get the feeling things are way more complicated.

He carefully adjusts the wing mirror with a hand shaped for the handle of an axe. His knuckles are disfigured; they've been broken in saloon brawls, backroom interrogations. Still, he says nothing. Stewing.

I'm nodding, mesmerized by my own invention. I'm catching my stride. I stand between the vehicles, my legs bowed like a gunfighter bracing to slap leather. "Yeah, you were right. You, your partner, the media ghouls. I'm fucking guilty. Haven't you always known that? Problem is, you're a coward." Is it true? Even I don't know

anymore what it is I have or haven't done. The crush of popular opinion has asserted its peculiar laws upon me.

Marchland caresses the mirror, runs his thumb back and forth as if he's testing the edge of a knife, as if he's searching for a pulse.

I curse him then. I scream at him with such fierceness my throat constricts and my eyeballs quiver. Profanities, accusations, a stream of vitriolic gibberish that doesn't sound a bit like me. Hoarse and shaken, I deliver the coup de grace, "She never mentioned you. Ever." I show him a zero with thumb and forefinger. I wait and wait and nothing happens except the trees stir and dust settles. Then I get into my car and drive away. Marchland doesn't give chase, doesn't do anything except sit dead in the road. His truck dwindles and is lost when I round the bend.

I'm jacked to the gills on nature's fight or flight chemicals. I can't see straight; the scenery jitters. Phantom trees, pale disc of sun, the gravel road a molted snakeskin beneath these tires. None of it solid, none of it substantial, two-dimensional flatness to every angle, every blurred outline washed in polychromatic glare.

Cramps lock my fingers on the wheel; my tongue is too fat. I might as well have stared down the drainpipe of a gun, the way my body throbs in the aftermath. I don't know what to do with myself; I hadn't planned this far ahead.

What did I expect, anyway? That if only I pushed enough buttons Marchland would explode like Krakatoa, put a bullet in my brain? Or maybe that wasn't the point of this exercise. Maybe I wanted to sting him like I was stung when they dropped the bomb on me during the trial. Maybe revenge is all this was and the rest could be filed under minor details.

I swing onto the blacktop, get almost to the moss-encrusted bridge when the grille of Marchland's Ford rushes in, fills my rearview mirror.

Clank.

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Many moons before the DA decided The People had a case, I hired this private eye to look into things. Naturally, public opinion was I only did it to clear my name. To that I say, well, hell, at least I wasn't cooling my heels on a golf course.

Money was easy; I hired the best I could find. Lance Pride, owner operator of the Pride Agency. I could have gone bigger, could have gone to one of those corporate outfits with international connections, two hundred agents on the ground kicking

trash cans, crunching data. The fact I went small and local wasn't lost on my detractors. To them, the vocal majority, it simply demonstrated a token effort, a face-saving maneuver. Demonstrated that I knew the whole search was a farce.

They were right, if for the wrong reasons. A buddy of mine named Marvin Cortez, a strong-arm guy who memorized Plato and Machiavelli, once hypothesized the universe is comprised of nothing more, nothing less than information, that the Kabbalists are on the money with their tetragrams and all that other esoteric magic square shit—the meaning of everything is in a lost equation. Miranda wasn't missing; she'd been subtracted, swallowed whole by some quantum boa constrictor.

I went to Pride because Pride was a bloodhound and because Pride was a checkered-past fellow and he promised to help me put holes in the sonofabitch who kidnapped Miranda—if there *was* a sonofabitch. He couldn't dismiss the possibility she'd decided to take a powder. People bailed on their lives by the thousands, every year. My chums the homicide dicks could attest that tons of missing persons weren't missing; they were on the lam from abusive spouses, debts, their humdrum routines.

Miranda wouldn't have bailed. Abandoned her mom and dad and beloved older brother who was a dentist with three kids that called her auntie and begged to visit our lovely country home every time we saw them. She wouldn't have left me hung out to dry, facing a murder rap. Miranda wouldn't do that, no way.

Then what of those photos from an airport in South America, about eight months after her disappearance? The picture of a woman in a flower-print dress going through customs. Hard to tell with the fugitive-from-Hollywood glasses and the hat and all, but that woman sure looked a lot like Miranda. Surely did indeed. Too bad the mystery woman melted into the great, old continent before anybody could ask her some questions.

It went like that for years. Periodically there'd be a Miranda sighting—a tourist in Delhi, a face in a train window, a grainy still from some camera in some Midwest department store, a blurry image in a crowd of a back-page newspaper story. Tips—ah, all those anonymous tips. I kept a file cabinet just for the letters and e-mails. Pride received hundreds of phone calls, and I guess the police did too. I had to guess because they didn't talk to me.

Most of it was garbage, easy to see it was garbage. Even in my state of mind I saw through it. Occasionally though, once in a blue moon, as they say, Pride handed me a picture and my pulse would stutter—because it was her staring back at me. The name would be wrong, the hair different, the face older, but unmistakably hers. Twice, Pride bought tickets and flew with me to the places these photos had been taken.

First we visited a town in the Rust Belt, had a chat with a woman who called herself Macy and worked in a five and dime. Macy drawled, seemed functionally illiterate

and was completely charming, guileless as a kitten.

Second time it was a suburban housewife in Oregon who drove a mammoth SUV and had four kids. This one was married to the local high school softball coach. Not so charming, not so guileless, and not the woman I married—metaphorically or otherwise.

Neither of the women knew me, although when they put two and two together, that I was that *other* infamous uxoricidal brute loose for lack of evidence, their eyes turned into saucers. If either was Miranda gone underground, she should've won an Academy Award.

They weren't actresses. They were a couple of people with a fluke resemblance to my wife and that was that. Everybody has a twin out there in the world, a doppelganger. The beat went on.

After a while, a long while, even Pride threw in the towel, left me to chase the next Fata Morgana on my own. He begged off on our business lunches, became too busy to return my calls, eventually stopped cashing my checks. By the end I think he was wondering about me, wondering if I had somehow fooled him. Bundy fooled Anne Rule, he surely did. There was a precedent. I think Pride worried the rest of the world knew something he didn't.

That made two of us.

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EXCERPTED FROM THE JOURNAL OF INMATE XX-201957. LOCATION, WASHINGTON STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY (7/13/2013):

You never would've caught me.

i was bored. So i stopped. Stopped taking precautions, stopped covering my tracks. Don't think you're clever.

You should've seen your faces.

If they mean to stick me with the needle in the morning, guess i can come clean and tell the truth. Sing for my last supper.

Who tells the truth and nothing but the truth, so help them GOD? People who think GOD's watching the show, that He's got His Hand on the switch, that's who. The truth is fine, a ripping yarn is better. Assholes who wrote the Holy Book knew

that everybody is looking for a good read.

Bugs, mongrel puppies, teenage prostitutes. GOD don't seem to give a goddamn about none of them. Folks say you were a COP how could you? i say there is no such thing.

Folks ask me how many, how many, really? Did you take that one, and it's the famous one they mean. My smile may seem sly, but it's not sly it's patronizing. Only a fool hears a line like 'bugs, mongrel puppies, and teenage prostitutes' and assumes one thing naturally leads to another.

MIRANDA wasn't a whore, now was she? She's disqualified. i was in the office with a dozen witnesses the day she went the way of joseph force crater. Do your homework. Do your damn math.

Besides, i picked up the hobby later in life. Didn't even start until i left the department, my third divorce. Sour days, baby. i needed something to keep my hands busy.

carson's the one to ask. i always said so and i still do. That sneaky sonofabitch. Takes one to know one. Those college girls in france and italy, the ones who vanished while he was doing his backpack tour of europe. Coincidence? You all love coincidences, don't you? That girl who washed out of evergreen and then dropped off the planet, i hear he banged her. Quite the grieving widower, ain't he? Know what i think? i think he was a no-talent trust fund hippie who married better than he deserved. i think he sold his soul to rock n' roll and one day the Devil called in the marker.

Face it, boys—when it comes to women that bastard is the bermuda triangle.

.....

Wheels turn. Stop.

Heads turn.

Miranda has just entered the Cloud Room to the muted strains of "That Old Black Magic" and she's decked out in her elegant but provocative red dress, the strapless number that smashes my rational side to jelly. She takes my hand and we start to dance by the light of the full moon, a glitter ball.

The glitter ball, a globe of pale fire, flickers, strobes, incandescens.

Judy blinks into existence and says, "Why were you out there, Jack?"

No Cloud Room. I'm in a bed and the walls are close. Muted green walls. Coffin walls.

Of course, what I hear first is, "Why'd you kill her, Jack?" I'm thinking "*Et tu, Brute?*" before the truth registers in the low, awful chord of a bag-pipe dirge.

The room darkens, a noose constricts around us, and Judy's sad, florid face wavers in the candle flicker, recedes down a long, flexible tunnel—a ventilation tube. Her lips move and I think she needs to speak up because she sounds like the ocean in a seashell.

Oh, right. The tree. I hit the tree, or the tree hit me. I drove off the shoulder and rammed a monster oak near a pasture. Cows chewing, vacuously watching me bleed, the car burn.

Judy wavers, disintegrates.

A man in white enters the frame, says a few words, mostly unintelligible, and shines a light in my eyes. I do catch the word *coma* and something about cerebral hemorrhaging. Guy must be a doctor. About the second I figure this out, he's warped off into the fuzzy nimbus at the edge of my vision.

"How ya doin', Michelangelo?" This from the doctor's replacement, a haggard man with a bleach-blond mustache. This isn't a state trooper, or an Olympia traffic cop, no sir. It's my long lost pal Detective Fisher hoping for a deathbed confession. Homicide dicks need hope too—it's no secret they're just janitors with gold badges.

The detective looks awful in the sunlight leaking through the window slot. He's aged these past six years. Not quite so poorly as Marchland, but poorly enough I'd almost pity him if I didn't despise California beach boys with such profound intensity. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts the sorry jerk keeps a surfboard stashed in the closet, Sex Waxed and ready to go.

We don't get do-overs on those Halcyon Days; Fisher won't be hanging ten anytime soon, won't be doing the lambada with Annette Funicello. He's been hitting the bottle and the bottle has been counterpunching. He reaches down to smooth my blanket and a wedding band catches the light. His touch is gentle, as if I'm a sick child.

When Fisher speaks I'm distracted by the shimmer of his ring, his cellophane flesh, the teletype scrawl moving across his brow, the hollows of his cheeks. He was fresh when he'd been attached to the first Green River Killer task force, eons ago. The task force that never actually caught anyone. A John Wayne wannabe made the collar, swilled up the glory and wrote a bestseller during the fifteen-minute joyride. Ran for Congress; the works. Some cops always get their man. Some never do.

"Sod farmer pulled you out. Saved your ass. What's left of it."

I can't talk, not with the respirator and the tubes, but I'm beginning to see the shape of things through the lifting fog. I recall a stranger in a plaid coat, his hands passing before my eyes, falling upon my shoulders. Trees and greasy clouds switch places. The burning car, the placid cows. And the stranger's wizened face swinging over mine in low orbit. Takes me a moment to decipher what he says. He mouths, *Killer*. Then his face becomes insubstantial; its atoms fracture to the four corners. The press and thump of machinery, the glint of Fisher's ring fill the margins.

Fisher is still here, digging in. "They say you're done. I can hardly buy that until I see it. Guys like you don't stop ticking until the warden turns on the gas, do they, Jack?"

Obviously Detective Fisher hasn't abandoned his pet theory. He'd been superb as a witness for the state, desperate not to let another maniac slip through his clutches. Not so down in the heel back then, either; charming as a snake-oil salesman, Fisher dressed the part of an Ivy Leaguer even if the farthest east he'd ever been was LA. Few things are more compelling than a handsome cop in a crisp suit pointing a steady finger at a prisoner wearing shackles.

Ah, if they could see him now.

Fisher says, "Even if you do squeak through, I don't guess you're gonna be walkin' around much. Not gonna be climbin' around any scaffolds, either. You can get yourself one of those deluxe rigs with the hydraulics and all that. Oxygen tanks strapped to the back. A hefty male nurse to change your diapers. Maybe do some whittlin' in your chair." He seems well-pleased at my evident paraplegia, and I don't blame him. If the best revenge is living well, second best has to be watching your enemy shrivel like a worm on the end of a hook.

"Damned tragedy, you getting in a car crash after losing your wife and all. I bet you were crying your eyes out to Hank Williams or somethin'—didn't see the curve until it was too late. Damned tragedy." He shakes his head. "Oh, I noticed a dent in your bumper. Was that paint from another car? Guess you backed into somebody and didn't report the accident. No worries. Olympia PD has better things to do than hassle you on a misdemeanor hit-and-run beef. I put in a good word for you."

The doctor appears from stage left. He taps Fisher on the shoulder and harangues him in Esperanto or Cantonese. Fisher laughs the good-natured laugh of a career cynic, raises his palms to ward invisible blows. He pauses at the curtain, says, "Hey, we got the results on that Jane Doe. She's not a Jane Doe anymore. You busy sonofagun—we found a few of her friends. Made yourself a whore graveyard."

I'm getting sick to my stomach. I see the choppers, the hounds, burly men in

windbreakers muttering into handsets. Not a desert in Nevada or New Mexico, but a green Pacific Northwest divide lumped with unmarked graves.

The burning car, the placid cows. Marchland observing his handiwork from the road. He tugs the brim of his hat to shade his Devil's face, although for a tick his face could've been anyone's, even mine.

A full tank of gas could've taken Marchland halfway to the moon. Or to a lonesome stretch of the I-5 Corridor where girls of all ages hawk their services along the archipelago of strip malls and truck stops, motels and casinos. A savage border where a grimy three-foot high concrete buttress holds back the woods and the night.

I can't even twitch my fingers. Getting sleepy.

Fisher keeps talking; he's got a mouthful of static. My eyes close. I'm thinking of cats in boxes, radioactive elements, and one simple question. As long as the cat stays boxed the answer is maybe.

Violins and horns scratch my cerebrum, catch fire.

I'm dancing with Miranda under the glitter ball. The band has Old Blue Eyes down cold. If I don't look at the detective, the song will go on and on, perhaps forever. If I don't hear Fisher's words, Miranda and I can keep on dancing until the champagne runs dry and the ball dims to a cinder.

The glitter ball pulses. It's the white exit of a black entrance, mouth of an event horizon, the hole at the heart of everything. In moments it has filled all space, has compressed all time to a point.

The possibilities are infinite.

.....

This must be a seizure.

There is no warning. The pressure in the room changes.

The wallop of pain strikes her temple like a mallet, causes her to cease humming, to discard the nail brush, scattering droplets of cherry enamel, to curl in the center of the room, trembling. She has never heard of a seizure causing pain. There shouldn't be pain. She can't coordinate her thoughts to assail this incongruity and it circles down the drain.

The world falls silent. Dull light curdles against the window, foams in her hair, reveals her delicate skull inside translucent flesh, traces the kaleidoscope of veins and nerves. She struggles to her feet and gropes toward the kitchen like a drowning swimmer.

The great, physical silence throbs and builds. White light fuses her vision and then recedes like a wave. She sways before the kitchen door. But there are too many doors. They shift and flex. Light and dark flicker through them. The light and the dark are cold and vast and the room distends, balloonlike, beyond its natural circumference. The doors distend also. Vertigo begins to crush her spine. The room is an inescapable gravity well.

Then, it's finished. The pain withdraws its hooks and clamps and leaves her shaken but otherwise unmarked. She wipes her eyes and everything is restored to its proper place and perspective. Yet, yet, something has changed. The house is different now. An ant farm suddenly, terminally, decolonized.

She finds the kitchen empty.

A block of ice in bits, drips, drips. The ice pick is balanced on the counter edge, its point a morning flame. The microwave clock nictitates indecipherable fragments of numerals, of words, a dying signal.

She smells the musk of his aftershave, the warmth of his smoky exhalations yet hanging in a gulf of dust motes. It's as if he dropped through a sprung trap door.

She says, "Jack? Honey?"

Out there, the Scotch broom nods, nods.

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EXCERPTED FROM THE ACTION 9 COVERAGE OF MIRANDA CARSON BRIEFING (by Rod Jones—6/9/99):

MC: ... and in closing I just want to thank everyone involved with the search for Jack. There are so many people who have given their time ... I thank all of you for the cards and letters. It means so much to us.

And to whoever is holding my husband: please, let him come home. Take him to a hospital or a fire station. Please, from the bottom of my heart, I beg you to do the right thing. Please let Jack come home to his family. You have the power.

Jack, I love you. We won't stop looking.

The End

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