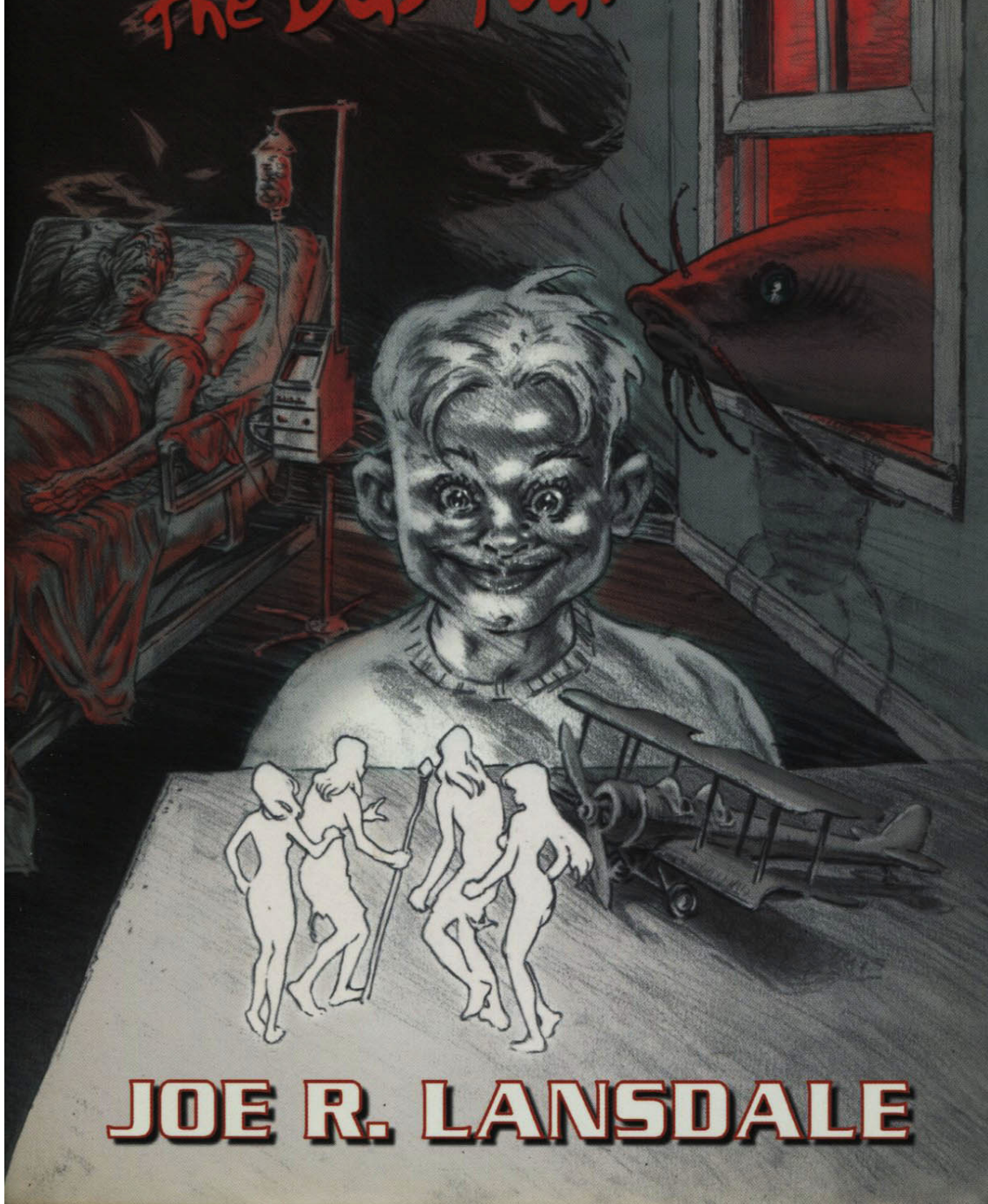
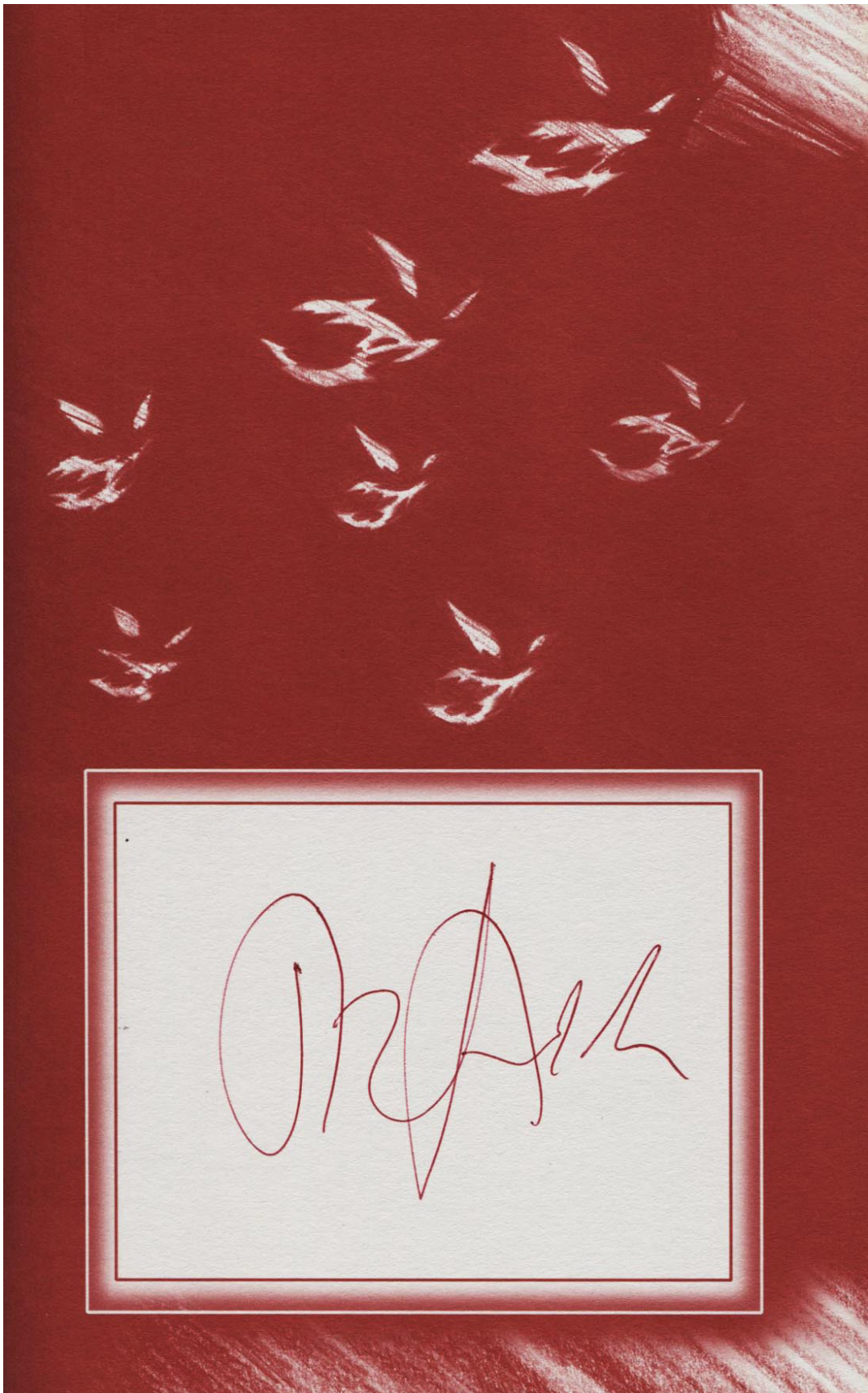


# The **DRIVE-IN**

*the bus tour*



**JOE R. LANSDALE**



*Scanned/OCR/Proof:*  
*Meatisgood*

*The Drive-In: The Bus Tour*  
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**For Keith**

God bless the children of this picture, this movie book. I'm going on into the Shade.

—Jack Kerouac (*Doctor Sax*)

God ain't nothing but the mind working overtime.

—Anonymous

## **FADE IN/PROLOGUE**

**I**n which the Great Jack, during a hypoglycemic high, ponders the universe beneath God's asshole while writing The Drive-In Bible and contemplating a journey by school bus.

# 1

They all lived in the great Orbit Drive-in beneath a hole in the sky that swirled with shadows and on occasion squeezed out sphincter style, dark sticky goo.

The goo reeked.

The goo stuck to your feet.

Some thought it edible, because once upon a time it had rained chocolate almonds and such, but this wasn't chocolate almonds. Not by a long shot. The eaters grabbed their bellies and screamed, and they were outta there.

For awhile their bodies lay stacked by the drive-in fence, ready to go. And go they would, but not far.

(More on that later.)

The stuff, the god turds, were finally shoveled with makeshift scoopers made of car hoods, deposited up against the drive-in fence to reinforce it. This worked well. Turned hard as cement. When you piled fresh stuff on the old stuff, it stuck. And so the wall grew.

But back to the hole in the sky.

Those who lived beneath this hole in the sky in the Orbit Drive-in called it God's Asshole. Or rather Jack did, and it caught on.

Jack was the man. Leader of all that was Drive-in, baby. Like everyone else, he hadn't aged a day in all the time he had been there. Least not physically. Emotionally, mentally, man, he was some kind of wreck. His mind needed a cane. His emotions needed a walker.

But he had become the man.

Jack, the Drive-in man.

The drive-in movies, for some inexplicable reason, played at night and all night. We're talking four big screens in four connecting lots which had become individual communities, christened cleverly: LOT ONE, LOT TWO, LOT THREE, and THE BIG LOT, which was larger than the rest (hence, the BIGness). It also had a larger screen. The four screens spread their flickering blue-white light along with images of blood and destruction. TOOL BOX MURDERS. CHAINSAW MASSACRE. NIGHT OF THE

LIVING DEAD. Others. Spread it across the screens like rancid butter on old slices of bread.

And on cool nights, which seemed evenly measured with those that were hot and dry, the residents of the Orbit stared in the direction of the screen, watched the shimmering images, quoted from the movies aloud as if praying in unison to Mecca, and did just a whole lot of fucking.

Along with all that movie watching, fucking had taken the place of good meals, intense conversation, and wondering what movie stars and rock stars were doing.

Yes sir, that fucking be helping something serious, brethren and sistern. It gave the drive-inners community as well as unwanted pregnancy and sometimes big red swellings. Fortunately, sexually transmitted diseases were not rampant, or the whole damn pack of them would have been full of it and sick of it and gone within a year. Whatever a year was in the drive-in and its surrounding jungle. Time was hard to measure. The sun seemed to rise and set on its own time scale. Sometimes the drive-in crowd sat in darkness, nothing to keep them going but the drive-in light, powered by who knows what from who knew where.

Not a happy series of communities, dear hearts. No, sir. There were strains at the seams. Always had been. True, they were no longer surrounded by a constant twenty-four hours of darkness and black goo that would eat you. That had long passed. And they had driven away from the drive-in only to find it at the end of the road again (bummer). They were in repeato situation, inside the drive-in fence, surrounded by daylight and night, sunlight and moonlight, and a big old jungle. Stuck in there, flimsily barricaded from the outside world. Trying to be safe. Wanting to be safe. Hoping to be safe.

But it wasn't safe. Dinosaurs and strange things roamed about and dotted the skies. Showed teeth. Showed claws. Sometimes they knocked down the fence and came in for a drive-in dinner. Jack and his people had learned to run the eaters off with spears of wood and car metal, fire-licked torches, rocks slung from slings made of shoe tongues and fan belts.

Even the water hole where they had to go for the wet stuff was a dangerous place. Critters waited there for them.

Finally great catapults made of jungle wood and twisted vines were fashioned and cocked and made ready behind and along the fence. Got loaded up with car transmissions and engines, old tires, batteries, anything worn out and real damn heavy.

Sometimes, when a person died (remember those eaters stacked by the fence, dear hearts?), they were catapulted into the jungle for the scavengers to take. It got so scavengers, smaller critters, lurked there all the time, in beg position, hoping for an offering. This dead-body launching was decided not to be a great idea. But burying was



no good. Outside the drive-in they got dug up anyway, and inside.. .Well, the smell of the dead wasn't a good idea. Critters could smell them even if the gravel and asphalt was scraped back and they were buried way under. Once, after Jack and others slaved to bury a body beneath the asphalt, a great pterodactyl, beating its wings faster than a teenage boy can beat his meat, swept into the drive-in and clawed the body from the ground. A brave woman, some friend or relative, tried to protect the corpse, but the winged beast took her and the body away, one in each claw. Dinner and dessert.

In an unknown year, the Great Jack died, and the drive-in tribes divvied up, and the ones who had known Jack the best, the Yippie-Ki-Pussy tribe, struck off on their own.

Jack had founded the Yippie-Ki-Pussy tribe himself, after an especially flavorful event that involved the poking of two women. Upon emerging from the old bus, in which he now lived, his privates wet with sex, he yelled, "Yippie-Ki-Pussy."

This seemed like a good and humorous idea, and thereafter, the tribe, looking for some identifying name, called themselves the Yippie-Ki-Pussy tribe after their leader, Jack.

Jack, now there was a good looker. A fine specimen of manhood made of bones and a hank of hair, dressed in rags, the flappy remains of shoes on his feet. He walked fast. He looked like a tired and perhaps alcoholic Bozo the Clown coming into the center ring to do some stumbling trick.

But still, he was arresting, ole Jack was.

Yes, I am.

Well, there goes the third person and here comes me, the first person narrator. I can't keep me out of it. I should. But, hell, this is all about me and all about them, and that means it's all about us, but mostly, since I'm telling it all, writing it down, it's about, you guessed it.

Me.

I wanted to mention that me part again.

But now and then, when you're raving in a near hypoglycemic semi-comatose state, you want to stand back and leave the me, the I, the yourownself out of the picture.

You can't do it.

You think you can, but you can't.

No matter what you think, or try to think, or try to do, it's always about, guess who?

You.

Or, to be more exact. Me.

Me. Me. Me.

But I said that already. Hypoglycemic or not. It's always about me.

I'm merely telling you what Republicans already know. To hell with everyone else as long as I got mine.

What I'd give for a steak.

From a cow, of course.

Besides, hell, I didn't die. Everything I've written down so far except the part about me dying is the truth, no shit, as if there's anyone here to argue with me (well, there's myself, but I'm not up to it today).

Oh, all right. There's another part that's a lie. But we'll hold off on that and come at it a short time later.

I guess, I should confess to you, Oh Journal, Keeper of the Goddamn truth, that maybe I wish I had died. I've thought about dying. You know. A do-it-yourself job, but, baby, it ain't in me.

I like living too much.

Even if you can't call this living, it's the excuse for living I'm living, and I don't know no other way to do than to keep on trucking.

Which brings up something.

Trucking.

Gonna be doin' me some.

Tomorrow (and I'll have to decide when tomorrow comes, 'cause, baby, in here, who really knows), but tomorrow there will be time to evaluate, lay some stock, and maybe some pipe if any female that isn't scary looking is willing, and with any volunteers I get, I'm jiving on out of here, bouncy-assin' in a big ole ride, headin' for —

- well, that part ought not to be discussed or considered or contemplated or too far planned.

Because, I'm not sure there's anywhere to go.

P.S.

I really didn't emerge from a bus after having banged two hot women with my snake flapping and my lips jackin' with, "Yippie-Ki-Pussy!"

But, I wish I had.

Actually, I complained of my back.

I avoid sex now.

Mostly.

I mean to anyway.

Sometimes you can make a woman pregnant and not know it. Not know if it was you, I mean. There are so many sharing in the festivities, you see. And then, if the women get pregnant, well, there are the babies.

And, of course, so many are eating their young, and though it has begun to have its appeal (so soft, so pink, so bakeable - though most go in for raw, as fire is difficult to create), we are trying to keep some semblance of civilization.

Or at least I am, goddamnit.

So, our declaration is simple.

No eating babies.

Raw, anyway.

Keep your top button buttoned.

And pee at the far end of the fence. Over where it already stinks.

## 2

That night (and it has been night for a long time, I am sure; well, pretty sure) it rained goo.

Black goo.

This was nothing different. It did this frequently. Most likely it was from the sewer dump deposited by whoever was in the heavens above.

Aliens it was believed. Up there behind the night, behind the clouds, ass-cracks perched for delivery.

Least that was my theory, backed up by certain events.

But I've written about those events already. Of the Popcorn King and the long road to nowhere, the dinosaurs, and Popalong Cassidy, of the beautiful Grace who took up with the goof-ball Steve (how could she even consider such after having such a manly stud-muffin as myself?), and of poor Crier, dickless (actually, he carried it in his pocket) and dead, toted off and eaten, his dismembered dick as well. Perhaps the critter that got him used the dried up dick to pick his teeth. On this world, in this world, wherever this world was, you thought about things like that because you had a lot of time to think.

I sit here and think about the children born here, many of them fathered by the Popcorn King. They look like the Popcorn King. Two bodies welded together, one on the other's shoulders to make a single unit. Unlike the King, they are covered in eyes that look like the eyes that were on the corn the King threw up. Each eye blinks at a different time.

They are sexless. Smooth as Barbie dolls without the attractive build. No ass cracks either. Here's the scoop. They don't shit. They eat, but they don't shit. Their pores ooze something that substitutes for that. They stink, by the way. But, I suppose you have guessed that. Whoever you is.

They used to be kind of sweet. As they've grown older, they've banded together. There are few left, actually. Most have gone off into the forest to survive on their own. When they reached, what I suppose could be called adulthood, they lost interest in us.

A side note. They can move small things with their minds.

Creepy, baby.

Speaking of children.

I had one. Grace, who went off with Steve, she was carrying my child. Or so she said. The baby was born dead. Good thing, really. Steve and Grace ate it. Being the father and all, they offered me the placenta.

I passed.

I regret that now and again when I'm hungry.

But you have to draw the line somewhere.

Bad things. Bad past. Bad memories.

And, there's always the new stuff to worry about.

I'd like to have less new stuff.

Jesus. I'd like to go home.

All this, it's one hell of a tale, my friends, a whale of tale, and a ho, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum, which I don't have. But, the writing. I got that. It helps me focus, except when it doesn't.

Course, my writing all this down is most likely a waste. Who will ever read any of it, anyway?

I'm sitting up watching Chainsaw like I might even like it. Sitting here in the driver's seat of the bus, my diary on the dash, me with a dying ink pen that has Get Your Car Lubed at Willies printed on it, writing to the light from the drive-in as flashed to me between plops of alien shit, or whatever it is. My left hand is in my pants and I'm cupping my balls like they're a sweaty, hairy teddy bear. They comfort me.

But, I really think I will catch the rhythm of this stuff, the plopping of the shit, I mean, and when I do (Listen to the Rhythm of the Falling Shit), I'll go to the back of the bus and lie down, and I'll really sleep, listening to the cadence of the falling crap, lulling me into slumber, pulling me happily down into the arms of Hypnos and Morpheus.

(I read that in a book once, those sleepy gods of Greece.)

Yeah, sleepy time, baby.

Really.

I hope.

I wonder about the bus I live in. I think about driving it down the single highway again, setting out once more, but what's the use?

I did that in another vehicle once.

It didn't work out.

I done said that. Shit. I'm so tired I don't know what I have said or haven't said, or even if I remember how to say it. I sometimes struggle with my letters. You know, like, which way does the B's bumps go? To the left or the right?

This place changes you. Doodles with your mind.

I'm going to go back and lie down now. Thinking about all this, my head is starting to hurt.

Please, Sleepy Time, come to me, oh sweet love. Open unto me and swallow me and hold me down in the deep dark and make me happy.

Or at least a little less miserable.

### 3

I awoke feeling like David Innes, a character from a novel I read by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I liked feeling like David Innes because he was strong and brave and true, all the things I wanted to be, and wasn't.

In the Burroughs book he lived at the center of the earth, and at the center of the earth there was eternal sunlight, the sun being a ball of lava or something, hanging at the top of their world, which was the center of the earth. So, this being the case, they never knew how much time passed since their sun did not move and there was no night.

Did they sleep eight hours?

Or eight years?

You never knew in Pellucidar.

(A side note which breaks my light and day and night and dark discussion, but shit, it's on my mind, so here it is:

Like here, in Pellucidar — way down there at the center of the world —you had to watch out for man-eating beasts. Consider this a reminder and another reason I can relate to good old David Innes.)

Back to how hard it is to know a true day from a false day, like in Pellucidar.

Something like that.

So, pick up with-it felt the same here on the Drive-In World, where there were changes in light, but no measure of time. This is something that has become more and more confusing, as if some device is playing out, a fuse needs to be replaced or something.

And this is kind of scary (and what isn't here?), there's a sputtering from time to time, and suddenly there's no light (the films stop instantly), and it's dark and it's a dark beyond dark, it's so goddamn dark. Then someone pours some light that would never have been thought light before into the darkness, and what was so black it was beyond black, just becomes black. Just good old night's black.

(Hot damn. Glad to see it. Hands are visible there in the dark, shadows coiling between the gaps in the fingers when you hold your hand before your face, where before, you couldn't see your hand before your face.)

What if (that age old question) the fuse does go and the light doesn't come back, and, well, here we are, nothing left but the sound of each other breathing, the touch of each other's hands, the sharing of lice, the sharing of fleas.

I think bad things would happen.

And, hey. What if the fuse kills the climate altogether and there's nothing but void?

V-O-I-D.

My take on that is it wouldn't be good.

But, as it stands now, you can start a fire and cook a meal, and the sun could rise and set and rise and set again before you finish your ration of dinosaur egg on some kind of gooey weed, or your fistful of grubs with a dirty root.

And next time you cook, the day or night seems to go on forever.

When it's night, there are the movies.

Films, as we intellectuals call them.

They show from the moment the darkness falls to the time it goes away. Throbbing light displaying horrible deeds, chainsaws and power tools. Once I found it entertaining. I see too much real life in it now, even if it has become as familiar as the flat brown mole on the top of my dick. Well, maybe that mole is on the left side of the old cable. But, you know what I mean, Mr. Journal. Old Bitch Diary. Whatever you are, made up of composition notebooks and pages here and there and backs of envelopes and such, written in pencil and ink and crayon and charcoal and mascara, all wrapped up tight and stuffed in a knapsack found in the back seat of a car, next to the remains of a dead body.

Skeleton actually. Small. Some idiot took a child to see an all night horror show. That skeleton wasn't entirely a skeleton. It was a body of rags, and the rags were flesh, the bulk of it having been ripped from the bones and eaten. The bones had been cracked open and the marrow sucked out, and, it was no longer a horror to see that, and I knew, just a slight push, a slight change of the emotional weather inside my head, and I too would be snatching flesh and cracking bones, chewing up meat, sucking up marrow like chocolate sauce through a straw.

But the movies. There's no way to turn them off. We've thought about tearing down the screen, but frankly, we find this a scary idea. If the screen is gone and there are no movies, then, at night, there is very little light, depending on if the moon comes up (when it comes up some nights, we can hear what sounds like a crank, like someone is jacking it up from the horizon on chains and pulleys), and if it should cease to come up, if the machinery, which I think must be getting old up there behind that curtain of sky, should



cease to work, then we will have no light at night, and in this place, no light, that's scary, baby.

I mean, what if the light never comes again? And here we sit. In darkness. The occasional fire, but mostly, darkness.

Not good.

And there are the sounds.

Wouldn't want to lose them.

I have become accustomed to the screams and yells and stupid dialogue from all the films.

They are like a mama's lullaby at night.

If they cease to play and cease to light and cease to sound, there is only emptiness. And ourselves. And all that we have done, nestled in the backs of our minds, moving around to the front. Most of those memories are bad. Being completely inside yourself without outside sounds and interference, that is very hard for the very weak, and that be us, baby. The very weak.

Did I mention the dark?

I did, didn't I?

It's on my mind. The darkness.

Now that I think about it, except for that part about not knowing how long I've slept, I don't feel that much like David Innes at all. I'm not only weak, I'm always scared shitless.

But let's talk about the bus.

If I can focus on the bus, get something to eat soon, maybe I'll be all right. As is, I'm rambling, I'm free associating, I'm all over the place, and if I'm not careful, I'll once again talk about the dark.

I need to pee. And shall, out by the drive-in fence, in that special spot where the aroma of a zillion pees rises up and overwhelms and bullies and makes one hasten the act. But, hey, it ain't nothing compared to a little farther down at what we call the Shittin' Section. Now there's some smelly business...

The bus.

The bus.

Focus, Jack.

The bus.

Will it run?

It starts. It runs. But will it run great distances?

Must pee.

## 4

I've peed. I've eaten. Had some boiled fruit. I had to go outside the drive-in, in the jungle, and pick it, and I was scared, doing it by moonlight, but I was more hungry than I was scared. I brought back a stick with the fruit. I wrapped the fruit in my ragged shirt and tied it to the stick and toted it back that way. Later I put the stick in the community fire and got it ablaze, came back to my bus, and using wood I had carried from the jungle and stored in the bus, I boiled water in a hubcap— the water taken from the community water — put the fruit in the hubcap and cooked it down and made a kind of goo, ate it with my fingers, which I burned. It gave me strength (fruit power, baby), and now I feel better.

Less hypoglycemic. More organized.

But my fingers hurt.

Now, here are my plans. I write this feeling better, less loopy. I can write now without feeling like the script itself will come off of the page and dance.

This is what I am going to do:

There is a trail that leads into the woods. An animal trail. It's fairly wide. It has to be to accommodate dinosaurs.

Once, while hunting down the trail, looking for something weak, looking for eggs or edible roots, me and Steve and a couple of the boys, as we call the "Popcorn Kids," came across, now get this —

— a school bus.

That's right.

Just off the trail, parked between two great trees, out there in the weeds. Vines had grown around the tires and twisted up under it and through cracks and under the hood.

The vines held it tight to the ground like they owned it.

There were other things around as well, all of them just as inexplicable. A large pontoon boat. A World War 2 plane, not to mention a Confederate flag on a flag pole, just stuck up in the dirt, and lying about, a bunch of beer cans, a pack of rubbers, and some cigarette butts.

Above, in the sky where a break in the trees let us see it, was a great funnel.

No shit.

The small end of it dipped down out of the sky, and the rest of it flared wide and gray and up into the heavens, and all we could figure was the bus and all the other stuff had come down that great funnel, came to rest here in the jungle.

I've thought on it a lot, but I've never come up with any explanation that satisfies, but then again, this world is full of unsatisfactory questions and few if any revelations.

But, anyway, we found this bus, and we came across the bus many times after that on our treks, and finally we managed the door open, and began using it for storage. It was a pretty good place to hide from critters chasing us, as well. A kind of half-way station. We got the front door to work and the back door to work, and one day, just for fun, I turned the key, which was in the engine, and —

— it started.

No shit.

Fired right up.

The gas gauge rocked forward. A near full tank.

Like everything here, it didn't make sense.

Where did it come from?

Had it come another time?

Who had been in it?

Kids on their way to school?

A band trip?

Football team on its way to or back from a game?

We didn't know.

Over the last few...days? weeks? months? years?, Steve and I, and a couple of others, have been working to free it of the vines. The tires are all flat, blown out and ripped up to be exact, and the bus looks to have run on the rims, driving like crazy, pursued by...who knows what?

That comet that sucked it in?

Giant aliens with tweezers, ready to grab hold of it and fling it down the funnel?

Who knows?

But there were a few tires on a few vehicles in the drive-in lot that fit, so we jacked it up and loaded it down with rubber, and with hand-made bellows and the remains of a bicycle pump, we inflated the tires.

One day, I drove it back to the drive-in, and they opened the great barrier we had made at the fore of the place, and I steered it inside. I closed it off, began living in it.

So when I determine tomorrow has come (keeping in mind I say this often), I am going to drive out of here in my sacred little home.

Not down the highway, but down the trail where the bus was discovered, just drive off into a new mystery.

And perhaps a short existence.

It has to beat this.

# **THE THIRD FEATURE BEGINS**

On the road again. I'm so happy to be on the road again.

—Willie Nelson

## **PART ONE: Truckin', Baby**

**I**n which Jack and friends venture out into the great world which turns wet, and they see strange beasts in the shadows, an odd ghost, and in the distance, shiny in the sunlight, the stairway to heaven. Maybe.

# 1

And so the sun came up and I called it tomorrow. I hitched up my mind and my resolve, and I said to myself, Self, I'm driving out of here.

Today, baby, is the day.

So I went to Grace and Steve, and I said, "I'm leaving."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Hunting. Forging?"

"Leaving," I said.

Grace, long and lean and beautiful, and quite naked, stood up and stretched (I could smell that they had been sexin' it up), and said, "You asking us to go?"

"I'm telling you I'm going, and you want to go you can. It's up to you. There's a couple others I'm gonna ask, and then I'm gonna go, without folks or with folks."

"We have been here a long time," Grace said. "I think. I really don't know. But it seems like we have. Shit, I say we go, Steve."

Steve nodded. "Beats nailing your dick to a two-by-four."

The day was as bright as a rich man's day, and I had all the world before me.

Such as it was.

Stuffed with dinosaurs and monsters and strangeness.

But, I didn't want to think about that.

The sun was bright. The trail was clear.

So, what we did was this: We found a few others who wanted to go. Most were afraid to go. Afraid if they got away from the drive-in with its relative protection, they would surely be on their own.

It *was* amazing. Once they had all been mostly young party-goers out for a weekend night at a four-screened drive-in, and now they called it home. And didn't want to leave. Did not want to go out into the world with a New Big Bad Wolf, but wanted to stay with the Wolf they knew.



I guess it was best to have only a few with us. Less to worry about. Fewer personalities to mess with.

Me, I wanted to go to my real home.

Didn't know how.

Didn't know if I could.

But I had to find out.

We managed to take a gas tank out of a car with tools found in the trunk of another car, and we put that tank in the bus, filled it with gas we siphoned from vehicles, and we corked the spare tank with a wooden plug, as the exterior screw on cap had been long lost, and we put it in the back of the bus for reserve. We put some fruit back there, as well. Steve and Grace had some meat that wasn't too rancid (dead critter found in the forest the day before, ants part of the treat), some water in gourd containers, a few odds and ends, and then we gave each other our best wishes, and were off.

Or we would have been, but Steve came up with an idea.

"If we're gonna be traveling about, and we don't even know where we're going, I think we ought to be prepared."

"We got fruit and a dead thing we can eat. If we don't wait a long time."

This was from a guy named, and I shit thee not, Homer.

He was one of our volunteers. He looked like what you thought a Homer ought to look like. Kind of tall and lean and goofy with hair the color of watered down shit that fled over his head in good patches, but showed through in spots and was as shiny there as a dog-licked dinner plate.

"Right you are, Homer," Steve said, "but that stuff will run out. We'll need new food."

"I knew that," Homer said. "You think I didn't know that?"

"I know you do, but what I'm talking is strapping them goddamn pontoons on either side of the bus, and if we need to float across a river, we can do it. I think, if we work on the back door window, we can fix it so we can take it out when we want. And we can make a rudder, stick it out the window there, and though we can't motor this baby across a river, maybe we could guide it some."

"It's a thought," I said.

"Hell, it's a good idea," Steve said.

We spent another day transferring the pontoons to the bus and making the rudder. We rigged the glass on the back door so we could take it in and out; rigged it so we could poke out the rudder and hook it on the window frame with some wire Steve found somewhere in the drive-in. Steve also rigged us up a tape player and we took tapes from all the cars we could find, except for Barry Manilow or similar shit, and then we were ready to go.

We put the box of tools inside, and just before we were to leave, a young woman came up the trail. She was short and pretty nice looking, or would have been, had her clothes not been made of an animal hide with a hole cut in it, draped over her head and cinched up with an old belt. It might have helped too if her hair had been clean and she wasn't so scratched up on the legs, and she hadn't had a look in her eye that made you think maybe she could see something just to the left of her nose no one else could see.

She was carrying a pack made of an animal skin. Wild dog. The head was still on the pack, and so was the tail, which she had turned into a kind of strap.

She said, "I want to go, too. I brought some dried meat and some dried fruit. I dried them good on the roof of my car. They're a little chewy, and the fruit has got some bugs in it, but they make it a little tastier."

"Protein is good," Grace said.

Grace, who today was wearing clothes (more of a bikini, really) made of animal hides, looked marvelous. Considering the rest of us all looked like scarecrows, I don't know how she did it. But she wore those skins great, like Raquel Welch in that movie *One Million Years B.C.* Her hair was as shiny as the chrome on a brand new motorcycle, and that came from the fact she wasn't afraid to go down to the river out back of the drive-in and bathe and wash her hair, and use some kind of weed that if rubbed together made a pretty good excuse for soap. Her hair was all combed out too, was real long, and when she moved, it moved, flowed around her and was the color of scorched honey.

Looking at her, dressed like that, I thought about the time me and her hooked up, and right then I was thinking on how I'd like to do the trailer hitch thing again, and damn if she didn't look at me and catch my eye, and give me a kind of grin, like, you know, you done had yours, and I pitied you, and it's probably the best pussy, if not the only pussy you ever had, so you best think back on it a lot, 'cause it's not a repeater, if you know what I mean.

I got all that out of that little smile.

I smiled back, kind of a thank you, ma'am. Ain't nothing else I'd rather have had, and in

fact, it is my favorite present to date, and in memory sense, it's a gift that keeps on giving. Then she turned away and the old bad world came back, and there was Reba, looking at me like a dog confused by language.

"What's your name?" I asked her, my mind still on Grace, fearing my thoughts would show on my forehead, or that she might notice my pecker had moved to the left of my worn pants, as if in search of prey.

"Reba."

There was also James and Cory. They were buddies. Good ole boys meets Heavy Metal types. Cory was bulky. James was wiry. Cory said he wished we had some Black Sabbath cassettes.

Steve said it was a shame we didn't. But he didn't mean it.

When we were ready, I, as tour guide, I suppose, said to everyone: "Well, climb on in, and let's shag ass on out of here."

## 2

The trail was as bumpy as a teenager's face, and there were places where there didn't seem to be any trail at all.

The woods, or jungle to be more accurate, grew thick on both sides and the vines wound in amongst the trees, and things moved out there. Sometimes we saw them, sometimes they watched us, and sometimes it was just shadows, falling between the trees, but fostered by nothing we could see.

There were lots of sounds. Cries and strangles, barks and growls, grunts and groans, and once, I thought I heard a fart.

I read a story once, a funny story, and I don't remember who wrote it or what it was, but it had a line in it that I remember. It went: Somewhere, a toad farted ominously.

Out here, bumping along the trail, that kind of thing didn't seem so funny anymore.

That fart from the bushes, larger than a toad, I might add, did seem ominous.

Hell, the wind, which had picked up our first day out (I call it a day because the sun went down and came up again), picked up even more, and it whistled through the jungle and shook the limbs and leaves and vines like dry peanut husks.

We drove and drove, and finally stopped so that we might take a bathroom break.

The seven of us hadn't spoken much, had just bumped along, trying to figure on what the hell we were doing, but now, we began to talk.

There was me and Grace and Steve and Homer and Reba and the two rednecks, James and Cory. James talked about beer a lot, about how he'd like to have some, and about how he had brewed some from fruit, but it had just tasted like nasty fruit, and what he'd give for a Budweiser, that sort of thing. Cory was quiet, didn't say much, except, "I got to go take a shit," and wandered off into the jungle to do just that.

Grace and Steve seemed to have handled this whole lost in another world thing better than anyone else.

I think that's because they had each other.

I don't know if they loved one another, but they had each other, and it seemed to be working. It kept some bloom on the rose, especially on Grace's rose, 'cause like I said, she

was the only one amongst us who looked fresh. Steve looked okay, though he had recently lost a tooth on the left side of his mouth, and if he grinned real big, you could see the gap.

"I get the creepy feeling," Steve said, as we sat around, cooking up some of the dead animal he and Grace had brought, listening to the ants pop in the fire that we had stoked with flint and steel and bits of tinder, "that somethin' is followin' us."

"Something always is," I said. "You can count on it. If it isn't following us, it's running ahead. There's things in the jungle. Both sides. I can feel eyes all over me."

"I don't mean like that," Steve said. "Something weird even for here."

"Considering The Popcorn King," Reba said, "I don't know how weird it could get. I ate some of his popcorn, and shit eyeballs, I did. I had a kid too. He was stolen from me and eaten. He was eaten raw. The savages. I guess it was for the best. I really didn't want a kid covered in eyeballs."

The maternal instinct is a lovely thing.

"Well," Homer said, "long as we're talking weird, how's about them dinosaurs and such?"

"And Popalong Cassidy," I said.

"I ain't saying this ain't the warehouse for weird," Steve said, "just saying I been having this feeling something is following us that I don't want to have catch up with us."

"That could still be most anything," I said.

"I was out with this fella that came to the drive-in with me," Cory said. "Out with him looking for food, and no shit, he bent over and a little dinosaur rammed a dick through his cloth pants and got him some ass, and while he was gettin' it, he bit my buddy's head off. Blood went everywhere, and if that wasn't bad enough, the dinosaur jerked, sprang around in happy circles, shooting his jisom all over the place. I got some in my hair. I figured I was next to get butt-fucked and et up, so I hooked ass to a tree and climbed it. And damn if that critter didn't scuttle up after me. He was small enough for that. So, I kept climbing, and finally I got to the damn near top of that tree, where it was thin and starting to bend, and I was thinking, well, it's either jump and get it over with, or get eaten while up in a goddamn tree, and maybe butt-fucked — though I couldn't see that critter doing that while balancing on a limb—and damned if that critter didn't miss his footing. Fell. Killed his ownself. When I got down he was lying in a puddle of blood and shit. I cut a big portion of meat out of him and took it home. I would have took my buddy home, but something had already dragged him off. Now, tell me that isn't weird."

"We've all seen shit like that, or sort of like that," Steve said. "Though, the butt-fucking

and head-eating simultaneously is high on the Holy Shit meter, but I mean something else. I've started having me some visions."

"None of them have come true, by the way," Grace said.

"Maybe they just haven't had time, dear," Steve said.

"Or maybe," Grace said, "you're full of shit."

"I suppose it's possible," Steve said. "I always have been pretty full of it. But, I tell you, I've got me a feeling, and it's not a feeling I like."

"Is it a feeling or a vision?" James said. "If you just feel it, it could be the flu."

"It's a feeling," Steve said, "but it isn't any kind of flu."

"It's probably this meat," Homer said, pulling a piece on a stick from the fire. "It's just two degrees short of having gone full South. The ants on it are fresher than the meat."

"You don't have to eat it," Steve said.

"Actually," Homer said, "I do. There ain't that much we got to eat, and this has to go first. Then it's the dried stuff."

"Maybe we'll come across a grocery store," Reba said. "Seems like this place has got everything else. School buses. Pontoon boats and an airplane."

We ate, and finally Cory came back from the woods.

He said, "Hope I didn't wipe on nothing that might give my ass a rash. I picked me some big leaves, and one of them started crawling off. I was glad I wasn't wiping with it when it started to crawl."

"We're all glad your ass is clean," Steve said, "now, much as I hate to mention it, we got food, but you don't touch the meat outright. I'll put it on a stick for you, and you cook your own."

"I could tear it off with my right hand," Cory said. "I wiped with my left."

"Use the stick," we all said.

### 3

When eating was done, and everyone else's bathroom needs were attended to, we all packed in the bus and set out, the Big Boys blasting on the tape deck. We hadn't gone far when it grew dark as an oil slick inside of a coal mine at midnight.

What I'm trying to tell you, dear hearts, is it was dark. Steve, who was driving, turned off the music, turned on the lights, and we eased on slowly. I saw several things—I know no other way to describe them other than to say they were **things**—rush out of the jungle and cross the road.

I didn't know how safe we really were, but it made me feel better to be in that big bus, and not out there on foot. Maybe, most likely, there were plenty of beasts who could peel us out of the bus like sardines from a can, but it gave me a greater feeling of security to be inside something big and metal that could move. To top things off, it began to rain.

It came down in little drops at first, seemed it would pass. But then the wind picked up, and so did the rain.

It was a strong wind and it rocked the bus. Soon water was flowing across the trail in dark rivers. The trail went down, dipped into the jungle, water rode up about halfway over the tires.

"I don't think it's such a good idea to go farther," Steve said, leaning forward over the steering wheel, trying to peer into the darkness, attempting to see what was before us in the light of the two pale head beams.

All that was visible was stygian water flowing through the jungle, washing hard against the bus.

"Turn it around," Homer said.

"I don't know," Steve said. "We done got kind of committed here. The trail's small for that, and it being so wet and all, we try, we might get stuck. "

"Then what's the alternative?" Grace asked. "If we keep going forward, we could get washed off the road."

"I guess I could try and back it out, but them tail lights ain't much in this rain and dark. Inflamed hemorrhoids would give more light.

"I'll go to the back window and look out, be your guide— "

"Hey, what about the pontoons?" Reba said.

"Damn," Steve said. "I forgot they were on the bus."

"And it was your idea," Grace said.

"I'm lucky these days," Steve said, "if I can remember to shit out of my asshole and piss out of my dick. Sometimes I get kind of confused on which hole is which."

"That doesn't happen much in the middle of the night when you're sortin' my holes out," Grace said.

"You can say that again, baby."

Steve jerked the bus in gear, and we sat. "Look here," he said, "the water picks us up, and we can't control things, it could wash us into the trees. I think backing is still the best thing."

"All right," I said. "We'll do it that way."

I went to the back of the bus and Steve put it in reverse, started gassing the vehicle into retreat mode. We had gone about a dozen feet, slipping a bit on the mud, when suddenly there was a sound like someone had stuck a water hose in my ear and turned it on. Out of the jungle came a dark rush of wet, and I do mean wet, baby. It hit the right side of the bus and knocked it into the trees on the other side, and kept washing against us. The bus hung up in the trees, limbs wrapped around it like arms.

The water spurted in through the closed windows, finding every weak spot imaginable. Pretty soon it was all over the bus.

I could feel water vibrating under us, lifting us, and pretty soon it toted us up and out of the tree where we had gotten hung up, and shoved us down the trail in a rush.

"This ain't good," Steve said.

The bus floated down the trail, banging against trees. I feared the pontoons would get knocked off. But just when I thought it was all over but the drowning, we were lifted up and we began to flow fast down hill.

All of us were now seated, hanging onto the seat in front of us, and through the windshield, in those weak head beams, we could see the dark flow of water. The bus dipped down, and it looked as if we would be lost, down there at the bottom of the rush, somewhere deep in the jungle, waiting for the water to subside so crawdads or some such could eat on us. Then, suddenly, we rode up on a wave and were floating evenly on top of



the gushing darkness, sailing down the corridor between the trees at about the rate of a goddamn speeding bullet.

"I think I saw a big bird in the water," said Cory.

"No," Steve said, "that there is a big stick. A goddamn log, if you want to get technical. I figure it'll hang up under the bus, and maybe fuck something up under there."

"Quit thinking negative waves," Grace said. "We're in a flash flood, and I don't know about you, but it's my first, and I'm trying to enjoy it."

"Yeah," Cory said, "and it's wet outside and dark and we might drown. And the fun just keeps on coming."

# 4

We were carried along in the dark like that for a good piece. It went on so long, I finally drifted off, first leaning forward on the seat in front of me, and finally lying down in the seat.

You wouldn't think with something like that going on, you could sleep, but the truth was, you could. Or at least I could, and I was doing me a good piece of that when I was yelled awake by Grace.

"Water's rushing harder," she said.

"What?"

She repeated herself and I sat up.

"Do what now?"

"We got to put out the rudder, we need some guidance, we're gonna smash up. We're trying to turn sideways."

I hurried to the back, slipped out the rigged window and got the rudder. I had James take hold of it with me, and we stuck it out.

When it hit the water, it was like hitting cement. The rudder rode up, and the end we were holding hit James under the chin. He was knocked unconscious, and crumpled to the floor.

I screamed for help. Cory, Reba, and Homer all leaped forward, grabbed at the rudder. We tussled with it, and it fought us. But we held on and went along like that for a bit, then the water got reinforcements. Probably some high place got overrun and gave up its water, 'cause it come down through the jungle in a blast of dark bully wetness, and that rudder, it snapped like a toothpick.

When it did, we were all knocked loose and thrown to the floor or into bus seats.

I think I yelled something about Mama, and the next think I knew the bus dipped down, and we plunged into the rushing wet; it pounded over the windshield and there was water on either side of us, up to the side windows. Some of it (too goddamn much of it) spurted inside. Then, as if some kind of a miracle took hold, the bus was pushed upward by an undercurrent. It shot up into the night like a goddamn porpoise, came down on its pontoons and was shoved along down the trail, which now, to complicate matters, had begun to wind about like it had been laid out by a cross-eyed drunk with inefficient tools.

But things started turning for the good. The water slowed and we were flowing along comfortably now, dead center of the trail, winding around those dark jungle curves like we were driving.

And Steve was pretending to drive. He had long cut the motor and lights, but he held to the wheel, which, due to the force of the water on the tires, he couldn't turn anyway. I reckon it made him feel as if he were in control, clutching like that, leaning forward like he could drive on this watery highway, when, actually, all he could do was do what any two-year-old in a car seat with a plastic steering wheel and a horn could do.

Pretend.

And honk the horn.

Actually, with the engine turned off, he couldn't do that, but he managed to make some very convincing honky noises.

Several times.

And then an amazing thing happened. The trees on either side of us grew short. In time they disappeared. Were covered by water. The rain was gone, and there were no clouds, just this great, strange moon above us, and this other moon—the reflection of the one in the sky lying on the water like a big old silver serving platter, minus meat, minus taters, just lying there, waiting for Mom to pile it up.

Before us, or at least as far as our eyes could see in the moonlight, was water.

Water... water... water.

Sail on, sail on, sail on.

# 5

One of the tapes we had was a classical one. Steve started up the engine, and we played that, listened to Moonlight Sonata and such, and finally I fell asleep.

As a defense against reality I have learned to snooze under pretty dire circumstances. Had to learn how. Or, considering the events of my life, I would have never slept. I have learned to sleep very deep. Down there in the bowl, with dreams, of course, but not so many as before. Least not that I remember, unless it is a good one (usually a lie or something good long past). The bad dreams I try to forget. That doesn't always work.

So it was that I awoke, there in the darkness, fearing it would be one of those times when the night went on forever, or when maybe my dream-shit filter was on the goof, and might in fact be clinging to the nasty remnants of an unforgiving dream, or a truth tied up in a dream, a bad memory wrapped in the sack of a nightmare. But no.

Nothing clung to me.

It was quiet in the bus. The music had long been turned off, and so had the engine, and Steve was asleep against the steering wheel. Grace had stretched out on a seat, and everyone else was asleep as well. The bus bobbed up and down on the water, but the pontoons held and I could hear and feel the water wash up against the side of the bus.

The moonlight had turned very bright, and it glistened on the water and made it shiny as a poor man's suit. There in the moon-light/I got a good look at Reba's face. I couldn't see the dirt so much in that light, and she looked pretty good.

Of course, it might have been like they say, they all look better at closing time, or in my case, near-dying time. But she did look good to me, and I watched her sleep for a long time and I had some fantasies, all of them nasty, and I liked how her chest rose up and down, and the way she lay there, her legs drawn up, her hands tucked between her thighs, smiling. Maybe she too was thinking of something good, though most likely it wasn't me.

Perhaps she had just finished practicing the maiden and widows dance of fingers, and it had thrown her free of bad associations, knocked her out of the dark and into soft light where she could sleep and savor some good emotions and feel all right.

I hoped so. We all deserved to feel all right.

When I looked up and out at the water, it was still calm out there, and daylight was starting to seep into things, covering up the pearly edge of the sky, turning it rosy, and though it was still a bit chilly, I felt that the air had warmed.

Not too far out on the waxy-looking surface of the water with its little waves, I saw a dark

fin break the surface. It was huge. It cruised for a bit, then dove out of sight and there were wide ripples for a long time before the water went smooth again, and when it went smooth it was completely smooth, like a fresh-buffed floor.

No ripples. No waves. Just the morning sun on water, making it pink and proud as the nipple of a fine girl's tittie.

# 6

The day did not come off hot, but it came off warm, and we worked the windows down so we could catch a breeze.

We still couldn't see land, not even a dark line of trees. Just all that water. And I thought: we could float here until all our food played out. Just float here until we were all dead in our floating bus coffin.

I have never liked great expanses of deep water, and at that moment in time, I liked them even less, and this particular section of water I hated even more.

We ate some of the meat and some of the fruit. The raw meat that Steve and Grace had brought on board we had cooked up completely at last stop, and now we ate that and some of the fruit. We decided we should eat all the meat, because it was going to turn bad soon, and we best have our bellies full of it, lest we get hungry and decide to eat it when we shouldn't.

Though, I figured if we were starving, it didn't really matter much. It might be better to die of a belly full of rank meat than have your belly chew on itself until you were dead.

Course, neither were appealing alternatives.

Some water splashed up at the bottom edge of the door and came inside, but the pontoons held us up pretty good, so it was no biggie. I figured if this body of water, this great lake, this sea, this whatever it was, every grew stormy, we would be up shit ocean without a paddle. Enough water could wash in to sink us like a stone.

I wondered what all was down there, in the deeps. Other dead folks from the drive-in.

That great fish and all his companions, down there in the deep dark wetness.

It gave me the goddamn willies just thinking about it.

Steve managed to slip his body out of one of the windows, and by rocking the bus only a little, he climbed on top and looked around.

He lay over the edge of the bus and yelled back through a window.

"Nothing but water."

"Well, I didn't think a few feet up was gonna cause him to see land," Homer said.

"No," Cory said, "but it would have been nice."

We had a stick with us, and we tied a pan on that and stuck it in the water, and pulled some of it in. I tasted it. It wasn't salty.

"Well, I don't know how clean it is," I said. "I mean, it don't taste bad, and it isn't salty. We can drink."

"Parasites could be all in it," Reba said.

"We could boil it," Grace said.

"We got to make a fire," Reba said.

"We could build a small one right there on the floor. Maybe tear out some seat cushions and burn them. Open the windows and they'll work like a chimney."

"When we're all out of seat cushions?" Reba asked.

"Then we drink it straight," Grace said.

"Hell, I think I'd take my chances drinking it straight right off," James said, "rather than build a fire in the bus. Besides, them seats are pretty comfortable. Comfort might be a thing. We could drink the water out there when we run out, shit out the window — after we drink. Maybe get some kind of rig to catch some fish. Back home, in the Sabine, I used to catch little fish with a line and a hook and a sinker and a colored piece of cloth. You got to be good, and you got to know how to pull that hook just right when they grab the cloth, but it could be done."

"We could be like that Flying Dutchman," Reba said. "I read about him in school. We could eat and sleep and drink and shit and just be here on this bus until we died of some kind of disease or old age."

"Damn," James said. "That's a creepy thing to think about. Think I'd rather slip off in that water and drown than sail on forever, or until I just naturally died."

"A natural death don't seem likely," Reba said.

We heard Steve calling.

"Look," he was saying. "Look over there."

When he made clear where over there was, we looked.

It was an amazing sight.

# 7

Way in the distance was a great ladder, or rather a bridge. I mean it was huge, like the goddamn Golden Gate Bridge. It was silver and at its bottom there was a cloud of mist, so you couldn't see to what it was attached, but it rose up high and shiny and chromey, rose up and went up into the sky and into the thick white clouds that surrounded it at the top like shaving cream.

You couldn't tell where it began or where it ended, but it was wide, and though similar to the Golden Gate, instead of stretching across something, it was rising from somewhere at a slant, going up, disappearing into some place unseen.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," Homer said.

"I wonder how far away it is?" Cory asked.

"Hard to say," I said. "Out here, on this big piece of water, it could be close, or it could be way far away. You can't really judge how big this water is, so that bridge...ladder, it could be close and small, or far away and huge."

"I can tell you one thing," Grace said. "It ain't real close. It's big. I get the impression that it's goddamn big."

"How can you tell?" Reba said.

"Well, I guess I can't. But I'll bet you. If I had something to bet."

"You got something to bet all right," Homer said.

"So do you. You bet against me, I'll kick your goddamn nuts off," Grace said.

"Let me think on it," Homer said, "and I'll get back to you."

"But what is it?" James asked. "Where does it lead?"

"Heaven," Homer said. "That bridge leads to heaven. It has to, 'cause everything down here has got to be hell. And look how shiny and pretty it is. God would want a shiny bridge."

"There isn't any god," Grace said. "It's just us and whatever is behind all this."

"Well, that's god-like enough," Cory said. "'Cause something is sure strange, and I don't think it's government work. Not all this."



"Aliens," I said. "I know that's what it is."

"Well, whatever it is," Homer said, "there it is, shiny as a metal tooth."

"We seem to be drifting in that direction," Grace said. "Very slowly. Current stays with us, we'll know soon enough how close or how far away it is."

"It's some kind of place we can want to be," Reba said. "I don't know it will be good if we get there, but I like a goal, some kind of place to go. I haven't had a goal since I tried to get Phil Senate to fuck me, and he turned out to be queer. That wasn't a goal I made, getting a mercy fuck from a queer, so I had to let it go. So I'm going to make a pretty modest goal now. I hope we wash up at the bottom of the bridge, and that we get to climb it, and it leads somewhere where someone would want to be. There's got to be some place here that's some place someone would want to be. There's just got to be."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

Grace was right. We weren't even close to the bridge.

We drifted for a long time. Nights and days, half nights and half days and fragment days went by, and though we flowed with a current that carried us in the direction of the bridge, it was a slow current, and I noted little if any progress.

No land appeared either. There was just that great shimmering water all about.

But one evening, the day fell and the moon came up, cool on the horizon, like a blonde-headed giant poking its head out of the water. And shortly after its rise came a mist.

There was something odd about it, and as it came to rest behind the bus, and float there, we saw (for everyone had moved to the back of the bus) that it was not a mist at all.

It was a specter.

It took us a bit of time to really see what we were seeing, as it was so large. It was a ghostly outline of the drive-in lots, and we could see gray versions of the screens, the shapes of cars, and there were spectral folks moving about. I recognized them as the drive-in people. They were going from car to car, and the specters looked happy.

Slowly but surely I realized why.

The mist was a specter of the drive-in all right, but it was as the drive-in had been before the comet, the great red comet that came burning out of the sky, hung over the drive-in, and smiled.

Showed teeth, baby, that's what I'm trying to tell you.

And this was as the drive-in was, just before the comet swerved away, changed the drive-in and all of us inside forever. This was the drive-in when it was a fun place, a gathering place, a ritual shrine to the youthful. There were women in bikinis and there were folks in monster suits, barbecue grills cooking away. Everyone looked so happy in the misty drive-in world, you could almost hear them laugh.

We all watched carefully, not a one of us speaking. Just stood there and looked out the back bus window, glared into our past.

I saw the lot where my friends and I had parked, and there we were, poking one another, laughing.

Oh, Jesus. All my friends.

Gone now.

Just me left.

"Ain't that some shit," Homer said. "It's a haunting."

# 8

I don't now how long we stood at the back of the bus, watching, but I know it was a long time. I felt sad. Tears kept running out of my eyes, and when I looked around, I wasn't the only one. Only Grace still had it together, centered inside somehow, and maybe, just maybe (because it had occurred to me more than once) she was in her element now. Strong and needed, lusted after and feared. A kind of shiny queen bee in a hive of colorless drones.

But I didn't think on that long. I turned away from Grace and kept on looking at that ghostly drive-in.

In that spectral world we all looked so happy, and healthy. And though we had not aged in any classical way, here in the present drive-in world, we had, to put it mildly, gone to seed. It was obvious looking at our ghostly shapes. Even in their transparent grayness, they looked so much better than we looked now.

Again...Except for Grace. Still strong and clean of limb, with hair like a shampoo commercial.

So there we were, looking grimly back into our past. And as we watched, a gray version of the great red comet appeared at the top of the misty ghost of the drive-in, smiled, and things went bad.

I realized I could stand there forever, watch our past lives unfold.

I said, "You know what, gang. I don't think this is healthy. The past is the past."

"Besides," Steve said. "This story seems to have gotten to the bad part. We've seen all the good we're going to see."

"I can see myself," Reba said, pointing.

"We all can," James said.

And this was true. The spectral shape twisted and misted and reformed, and showed different parts of the drive-in, like cuts in a movie. Faces. Close ups. Medium shots. Long distance shots. Dissolves. Fade ins. Fade outs.

"Something is fucking with us," I said. "Something has always been fucking with us."

We all made a deal to stop looking at the misty drive-in.

As much as we could stop looking, that is.

We still looked. Just not as much. I just looked now and then when I didn't have anything else to occupy my mind.

Which, of course, was all the time.

It was a little easier to stop looking when the misty events moved forward in time and showed me the horrible things that had gone on, back when the food first ran out and there was nowhere to go and everyone was so hungry. I knew the Popcorn King and his horrid activities, the blood corn events, were coming up, and that helped me not look. I didn't want to see that. I had lived that, and I hadn't liked it much.

So, I quit looking.

As often.

As the night passed and we dozed and the sun came up and the light that was our day wore on and became really hot, the mist evaporated, and we had a break. There was just the ocean now, and it was flat and smooth, as boring as watching your mama peel potatoes.

We ate and climbed on the roof and swam around the bus, hung to the pontoons, did this and that. Made up games, sang songs.

It was like a real bus trip.

You know, like when you're a kid and you go to camp, and you got songs to sing and things to talk about. Only thing missing is we didn't know where we were going or when we would arrive.

Actually, a lot of things were missing, but for that short time, we found some happiness and we concentrated on it.

When we wore out on the songs, Steve started up the engine from time to time and we listened to tapes. What we had to talk about would always turn grim. Tales of the drive-in. So doing things like songs and swimming was better.

The swimming was really pretty nifty, because all of us stripped naked to do it. Grace was dynamite. I loved that triangle between her legs, how it looked when she climbed out of the water, stretched out on the pontoon, knowing full well we were all looking, perched atop the bus, hanging over the sides, drooling. She shook out her long golden hair and arched her back, showed us what lay inside the taco, all pink and inviting. A smorgasbord of goddess.

And let me tell you, Reba looked good too. Tiny, ribs showing from lack of food, well

built and more modest. She stripped, and stood on the pontoon too, but she wasn't trying to give us an aerial view of the canyon, so to speak.

She just did what she had to do, shook out her shorter, darker hair, pulled back on her clothes, climbed on top of the bus, lay in the sun and dried herself and the damp clothes she wore.

Steve lay with us, hanging over the roof looking down at Grace, and he said, "Grace is such a tease."

Homer said, "You know, I wouldn't ask this in the real world, and you may hit me, but you got to understand, what I'm seeing there, and not having had any in a while, 'cept this fella's butt hole, (pointing toward Cory, who raised his hand in admission), but it wasn't the same, you know, so can you tell me, for entertainment's sake. Is she good?"

Steve pursed his lips, made a kind of smacking sound, looked at Homer, smiled, said, "Now, let me ask you this, Homer, my man. Looking down on that young woman, all ripe and spread out and brown, and being all uninhibited like, and you having had, at best of recent, some shitty ass off Cory, what the fuck do you think?"

"Oh, yeah," Homer said. "That's what I wanted to hear. That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

"Male chauvinists," Reba said.

We had sort of forgot she was there.

"Well," James said, "this here is a new world, and it's got new rules, and, shit, we don't mean nothing by it. Besides, how much of a chauvinist is Homer. He fucked Cory in the butt."

"I don't like him though," Cory said. "It was just one of those things. Me and him, we wouldn't even hang anymore if he hadn't gotten on this bus."

"Maybe you ain't chauvinist," Reba said, "but I wanted to mention, I've seen you all swimming, and each and every one of you have what can only be described in euphemistic terms as having real small dicks."

"Hey, now," James said, "that ain't right."

"It certainly isn't all that euphemistic," I said. "You don't mean me," Steve said. "You couldn't mean me. They used to call me Horse in P.E."

"I think they were just calling you by your first name," Reba said.

"What's that mean?" Steve said.

"You know," she said, "Horse Ass."

# 9

Night came and we all climbed back inside the bus, and the misty world of the drive-in floated up out of the ocean, first in a cotton-candy twirl, then the twirl spread and figures began to form, coiling and uncoiling, eventually taking shape.

The drive-in ghost floated behind us for a time, then it moved forward, melted right through the walls of the bus and was part of us, our own ghostly wraiths moving past us and through us and around us; all of the events of the drive-in unfolding silently and overlapping and passing one through the other.

For a while we watched in awe, but in time, some of us anyway (I was one) had had enough. I coiled up on one of the seats and covered my face with my arms and tried to sleep; my trained ability to do so kicked in, and I drifted off. I dreamed I was on a great rocking horse, and it was bucking, baby. I mean up and down, even side to side, and finally my head banged against something, and I found myself lying on the floor of the bus, and the bus was churning about. I climbed onto a seat and looked out the window.

Great sprays of water and splashes of white foam were striking the windows, and the bus was washing precariously to one side, then the other. Out there in the frothy splash of foam, I thought I saw large dark creatures move. Then the water slashed the bus, and anything I might've seen was gone.

The others were up and watching as well. There was nothing else to do. A bit of water came through the cracks in the windows, washed under the bus door and foamed in the driver's section like soap suds.

But still we floated.

Someone vomited. I didn't even look, but I could smell it. All I could think was, when this stops, that will have to be cleaned up. I visualized us at the bottom of this.. .ocean? monster lake? whatever it was. Just settling down to the bottom, the pressure of the water squeezing the bus, shattering the glass, the water rushing in. And then I thought, what if it's not as deep as it seems, and we go down? We could hit the bottom and there wouldn't be the pressure to crush us, the quick rush of water to drown us. It would be a slow seep. Just setting there on the bottom with water leaking in through the windows, slowly filling the bus.

I knew if this body of water were that shallow, I would just open a window and let it all rush in.

It seemed to me you should be able to open a sliding window. Underwater pressure wouldn't keep that from being done, would it?

And if it did, maybe I could break it.

There were ways.

All this went through my mind as the bus washed about.

One good thing, though, the misty past adventures of the drive-in were nowhere to be seen.

As I sat there in my seat, Reba slid in beside me. She took my hand. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No."

"I thought, we went down, you know, we could go down together. Someone with someone."

"Someone with someone," I said.

"We don't have to like one another," she said.

"I know.. .We don't have to dislike one another either."

"That's true," she said, and squeezed my hand hard. "I thought I wanted to die a few times, but I've lived so long now, been through so much, I don't want to die anymore. I just want to find my place. Isn't that a strange thing to think? That I just want to find my place."

"No. Not at all. I know exactly what you mean."

The storm tossed on, and once the bus lay almost on its side, but the pontoon rig Steve had made held. The water waved us back and the bus settled, and turned, and soon the rush of the storm was no longer pushing the side of the bus, but the back of it, and that little twist of fate may have been what saved us. We washed forward, the storm propelling us like a motor.

Why the bus didn't spin and take it on the side again, I can't say. It was as if the storm were the hand of great child, and we were its toy, and the child was motoring us forward, on down a wet highway to who knew where.



# 10

The storm subsided.

We didn't sink.

The day came up quick and hot and there was no mist and no ghostly drive-in.

Reba and I laid down in the seat together. It was a narrow seat, so she had to lie on top of me. She rubbed against me. She put her mouth close to my ear.

"I didn't think I could get juiced again," she said. "I thought that sort of thing had all dried out. But I'm wet as outside the bus. And hot, and I hurt, you know, in a good way. Down there."

"I feel like I have a crowbar in my pants," I said.

Not exactly romantic, I admit, but, we were not living in romantic times.

She pulled up the rag of a dress she wore and rolled to the side and undid my near worn out pants, and out I came, popping up like a jack-in-the-box.

"We shouldn't," she said, holding my dick in her hand.

"No?" I said.

"I don't want to get pregnant."

"I'll pull."

"What if you don't?"

"I will."

"Famous last words."

"Really. I will."

She slid over me and spread her legs, and in I went, and she said, "You lie still."

"Everyone knows what we're doing."

"Maybe not," she said, "and even if they do, let's try and keep it private as we can. Let's have this between us...Oh, God, that feels good."

And so we went at it. She made a little noise even though I was silent like she asked, and very quickly she opened her mouth and showed her fine white teeth, then made a squeak like a mouse that had just gone to Cheese Heaven, leaned over and touched her forehead to mine. After a moment, she sat up and went at me again, and when I was close, not so close that I knew it would happen, but close enough I knew it wasn't far off, I pulled and shot on her pubic hair. She made with a little purring sound, spat on her fingers, rubbed the sperm into her dark triangle of hair and over her lower belly.

She licked her fingers.

She looked down at me and smiled.

She said, "I needed that."

"It didn't hurt my feelings any either," I said.

She climbed off of me, patted my balls, said, "See you later," as if she were about to drive off to work.

She pulled her ragged dress down and moved to the back of the bus.

I pulled my pants up and lay there both satisfied and confused, felt just a little cheap and used and maybe not all that well respected, and wondered if everyone had been watching.

## PART TWO

In which the great bridge is nearer, a catfish appears, and the gang takes up new quarters.

# 1

The days went by slow, and we got good at fishing. Using a piece of cloth cut off one of our rags for bait, dipped in blood from an open wound Cory got from snagging his elbow on the side of the bus while out swimming. We attached that strip of cloth to a long length of twine (it had come with a kite found in the trunk of a car). Actually, we had a roll of it, the twine, and we cut several strips and made a strong cord by braiding them. We made a hook carved out of a bone from the meat Steve and Grace had provided, a sinker made out of a bolt we worked out of one of the seats with a screw driver. With our rig we sat on top of the bus, taking turns, catching fish.

The fish we caught were mostly small, but now and again we'd catch something a little bigger. We found that a way to prepare our catch for food was to gut them and cut them in strips and lay them on top of the bus for a day and a night, then turn them over and do it to the other side. We tied them up there with string, running cord from one window, across the top of the bus to the other window, tying the cords off on seats inside.

The sun didn't exactly cook them, but it dried them some, and that was good enough.

Trust me, when you're really hungry, you get a whole lot less persnickety.

Slowly, we started making not only a home of that bus, but a pint-sized community.

The only thing that was really terrible, was when we wanted to go to the bathroom, we had to climb out a window — which made the bus lean heavy to one side —and work our way to the roof and hang the old moon over the side.

This however, in the number two department, didn't work so well, as there were dark streaks on the windows, as our loads didn't go smooth into the water.

Finally, it was determined, the best thing to do was to climb down on the hood of the bus, near the front, and let it fly. This way, you didn't quite hit the water, stains on the front weren't so noticeable, and the way the bus nodded itself forward into the waves, as it was wont to do, it washed off the old dookie, became a perpetual self-cleaning machine.

Compared to how things had been, it seemed downright hygienic.

When I could, I got out my little possessions, which were all in a backpack I'd found in one of the cars —you wouldn't believe the stuff we found in cars —and inside I had paper and composition writing books I'd taken from different places, and in those I tried to keep a running diary of everything that had happened. I also had a Louis L'Amour book, HELLFIRE TRAIL, that I read from time to time, even if it was missing a few pages, and I had a copy of an old ACE DOUBLE science fiction book. It had a cover on back and front and half of the book was a novel called MASTERS THE LAMP, and the other

half—you had to turn it over and open it from the other side—were short stories under the title A HARVEST OF HOODWINKS. The writer was some guy named Robert Lory, and it was pretty good, though a little less interesting when you had read it about twenty times. I liked the story "Rolling Robert" best, and I could tell it pretty good, and I did that for Reba quite a few times, and though she had read it from the book its ownself, she liked me telling it best, because I added what she liked to refer to as embellishments. I put fucking in it. She liked that. And if you've read "Rolling Robert," dear nonexistent reader, you know what a goddamn accomplishment that is, putting in the fucking, I mean.

So our biggest battle was not food, or drinking water, though we did call a moratorium on pulling up water in our buckets any time close to when one of our esteemed crew did their number one or two.

So, all things considered, life was tolerable. But there was all that water. Water. Water. Every goddamn where you looked.

Water.

And more water. Did I mention the water? Alas, our greatest opponent was — Boredom. Boredom set in with a vengeance. We made up games. Eye spy was out. That was easy.

Uh, I spy...Water.

Me and Reba, we spent more time together. I shared my two books with her. We talked about this, we talked about that, did some serious drilling and heaving anytime it was night, and sometimes when it was day, and it got so, after a while, the other guys, the ones not getting any, started to eye Reba in a way that made me nervous. I didn't like the way they were looking at me either. Of course, they looked at Grace that way too. But Grace, they'd have had to have come on to her fast and in mass, 'cause she was one bad ass. All that Karate, or Taekwondo, whatever it was. And Steve, he was her man, and he was a pretty tough nut too. So, it was me and Reba they eyeballed.

In time, Cory took to fucking James in the ass now and then. Then they'd reverse it. I don't think it was a big homo thing, though I was hoping for that, so they could get their mind off what I was getting, and off who was giving it to me. But, you know, they were guys, and they had discovered there were holes they could use; did it out there right in front of everybody, just tapping the cork in the upturned jug. Course, out there and in front of everybody was pretty much how everything was, you know, being on the bus and all, but, man, they weren't even trying to pretend they were hiding it.

One of them would lift his pale, shit-holed whiteness to the other, say, "Okay, it's your turn, and don't look at me, 'cause that beard you got is throwing me off," and then James would say to Cory, "Like fucking you in the ass and looking at that cut up head you shave with your pocket knife is any kind of goddamn turn on," and Cory, he says, "Close your goddamn eyes, and just imagine it's your mother."

Then there'd be a fight, fists flying this way and that, then they'd make up, pat each other on the shoulder, say something nice, and it was Ass Fuck City all over again. And later on, just to show there wasn't any hard feelings, they'd hold each other's nuts while the other stroked off.

It was kind of sweet, really.

But the sweetness only went so far, and they kept eyeing Reba. And Homer. He eyed her too, 'cause he wasn't even getting his ass-end worked. They all eyed her so much she didn't go back there with them, not even to get her food rations. I had to bring her food out, and I'll tell you, I was not feeling too good going back there myself. I think they wanted to beat me up and eat me and keep Reba.

And maybe they liked me for what they wanted to like each other for. I had good long hair and I kept shaved with my pocket knife, so there was just the now and again shaving rash to remind them of my masculine features.

And, hell, I'm gonna say it. I've always kind of prided myself on the shape of my ass, so I'm sure it was a factor, that good ass of mine in rags, which, though not a fashion statement, did show, in spots, the meat.

Nervous times, dear hearts. Nervous times.

## 2

One time when it got dark and I was nervous from the way James and Cory was acting, and Steve and Grace had moved to the front, trying to stay out of it all, and Homer, he was practically oblivious, just stretched out on a seat, not knowing that at any moment he could be lunch or ass-poked.

I started telling stories from the Lory collection aloud. You know, like I was just telling Reba, but really loud, and pretty soon, they were listening. Cory and James, and then Homer, who sat up and listened with his mouth hung open. Up front, even Steve and Grace quit groping each other, as that was available to them on a regular basis, and took to listening. Reba sat by me, worked her arm around mine, leaned against my shoulder and listened to me tell the stories from the book.

I think I told three of the tales, and I told long versions, adding in stuff not in the stories, but stuff I thought ought to have been there, though I went light on the sex stuff, no use heating up the natives, and those stories, way I told them, it held them.

I felt the way I figured cave dwellers must have felt. Felt like the grand Pooba of the cave, the storyteller, sitting there by the fire (minus the fire, of course) talking into the night and everyone listening carefully, and gradually scooting closer, more engrossed in the stories by the moment. And that was a good feeling. Having a kind of control.

Even if it was with a story. Because for a long time now I And I thought in the back of my mind, as I was telling these tales, here we are in a tale ourselves, an incredible adventure we didn't want to be living, but we wanted to hear stories anyway, tales about others in strife and joy, but not our own strife and joy.

It was kind of weird, really.

But it worked.

And when I finished that night, everyone seemed calmer. Happier. Not so much aware of the ghostly drive-in that pursued us and floated around us and tried to become one with us.

I felt I had taken some of the pressure off the teapot. And Reba, she was sweeter that night, and slower, and I felt respected, and when I came, I opened my eyes and saw over Reba's shoulder the ghostly shades from the drive-in drift by. An old acquaintance, Crier, was looking my direction—not really seeing, just standing there ghost-like, looking at the spot where I lay on my back, Reba astride — and I felt a strange fondness for him. But in that moment of pleasure, I was quite fond of everyone and everything. And when daylight came, it was a little better in there.

No one was singing tunes from *The Sound of Music* or giving me the high five, but it was better. Calmer.

Nights came, I told more of the short stories. And as the nights passed, I told the Lory novel. Then the Louis L'Amour novel. Then I began to make up things. I felt like Scheherazade from the Arabian nights, and like her, I feared if I ever slowed down or bored them, I was dead meat.

Then, when I felt I was maybe out of tales or losing my energy to tell them, was hoping my ass could take a lot of loving and not be too unhappy with it, and, in fact good at it, so I would have something to barter besides being turned into jerked meat, a strange thing happened.

And considering our lives have been a list of strange things, this was a very strange thing indeed.



### 3

The day had turned off hot and the water was still, and it hardly seemed we were flowing with the current at all. We were mostly becalmed. There was, of course, nothing but water to see, and the great bridge, clouded at bottom and top, but visible. It seemed no closer then it had seemed many days before.

I climbed on top of the bus for a bit, took in the sun with my shirt off, lying face down. But there was too much of old Sol, and I didn't have any way to protect my skin from the rays, and the idea of some terrific sunburn without so much as a bottle of calamine lotion didn't appeal to me, so I decided to climb inside and take in some shade.

As I turned over to go back in the bus, I saw Grace climb out, stark naked and brown as a walnut. She didn't fear the sun and spent much time in it. And though the sun's rays might be rough on her in the near future, right then she looked like a brown jungle savage, a regular Sheena. I watched her dive from the hood of the bus and swim about for awhile, then I climbed back through the window with my shirt.

It was a good thing too, and it was a good thing that Grace became bored and came back inside, because Cory pointed out an open window, yelled out, "Look there."

We looked out the window where he was pointing.

The great fin again.

"That is one big fucking fish," Cory said.

"There's enough meat there to dry and feed us till this big old water hole goes dry," Homer said.

"Well, I don't know about that," Steve said, slipping an arm around Grace's nude body, "but there's a lot of meat there."

"I'm gonna get my line and such," Cory said, "get up there, see if I can catch it."

"You're gonna need more than a few twists of twine and a bone hook to hold that one," I said.

"You can catch a big fish on small line if you know what you're doing," Cory said, snatching up his fishing gear. "And I got some fish guts for bait. They've been hitting good on that one."

He climbed out the window with his gear, boosted up by James.

We could hear him on top of the bus, and we saw his line flash out in the direction of the fin.

The fin surfaced and the water rippled. Then everything was still again.

James said, "Shit, he's done gone to the bottom."

About that time we saw the string go taut and Cory yelled, "Goddamn. String cut my hand."

James stuck his head out the window. "Hold him, Cory."

"Get up here and help, James."

James climbed out the window, worked his way to the roof of the bus. He clumped around up there for a while, then we heard them both cussing.

"Maybe they need more help," Homer said.

"Damn," Steve said, letting go of Grace, grabbing a seat back for balance. "That little cord and that fish are causing the whole damn bus to rock."

"They need to forget that fish," Grace said. "The thing could swamp us."

About that time the twine snapped. James and Cory cussed and began to jump up and down on the roof.

"Stop that, you idiots," Grace said.

I felt a tug at my sleeve.

I turned. It was Reba. She had her mouth wide open. She was clutching my sleeve with one hand and pointing at the water with the other.

The fish had surfaced.

And, to put it simply and honestly, it was a big motherfucker.

"It's a catfish," Homer said. "It's like a blue cat, only a whole hell of a lot bigger."

"It's big as a Great White," Grace said.

"It's coming right for the bus," Homer said, as if this might not be obvious to the rest of us.

The great head split, and the mouth was wide, maybe six feet, no teeth, but there were whiskery growths sticking out from its broad face, and its eyes were black and bottomless.

It dove, showing only its fin, which split the water like a razor slicing paper.

Then the fish hit the side of the pontoon.

The bus shook and I heard Cory and James cuss again. I was knocked back into the seat behind me. I scrambled to my feet, made it across the bus, to the window, called out, "Get back inside. Now."

But the catfish hit again, and I heard a splash on the opposite side of the bus.

I turned for a look just as Reba said, "It's Cory. In the water."

And it was.

He yelled out for help a couple of times, and I was about to work myself through the window to go for him, when Grace said, "Oh, my God."

I turned.

The catfish that had rammed the bus rose up out of the water. Its tail flashed and it seemed to heave like it was being pumped with bellows. It sat there on the surface, looking at us, giving us the evil eye.

But he wasn't nothing.

He wasn't nothing at all.

Not anymore.

There was something new.

Something that made our concern about the ramming catfish seem like a silly notion.

In fact, the idea of leaping into the water and wrestling with it seemed less scary than what was about to happen.

# 4

The water, as far as the eye could see, foamed. Then it lifted in a sheet of sun-shimmering silver, and beneath the splashes and lapping of the water was a darkness. At first it was a line, like a black storm on the horizon, stretching way wide.

The line widened, became a maw, and the maw became a great black cave. Slowly, the cave condensed, and there was just the fine line again. Then the line dropped below the water, and there was a dark hump rising, making a brief waterfall to either side. This was followed by a faraway flick of a finny tail. I don't know how far away that tail was, as it was impossible to tell distances, but if I were a betting man, I'd say, and no shit on this, it was a half a mile away, and even that far away it was considerably bigger in appearance than any fish tail I had ever seen, no matter how close to my eye and how large the fish.

The body rose up higher in the water and there was a massive head, about the size of six city blocks, and there was a glimpse of one eye the size of a spotlight, and a whisker, big as bridge cable. The whisker flexed.

I looked and saw, down a distance and to my left, the other eye (way down there it was, dear hearts) and another whisker, (also way down there) and it was then that our finny friend opened its mouth and showed us the cave again.

In that moment, of course, I knew what it was. A catfish. And not the sort you'd catch and toss in the back of your truck to be weighed at Wal-Mart for a fishing contest.

This watery denizen would have made Moby Dick look like a fucking anemic minnow on a runway model diet.

The mouth stayed open and the fish dropped slightly in the water. A whisker whipped the wind like a black snake whip, and the other catfish, the one we had thought was big, turned and swam slowly toward the greater one, a willing sacrifice.

It swam right into that cavernous mouth, splashed on in and out of sight. The maw continued to widen and expand and the water rolled and foamed as the monster swam toward us.

We just sat there, our thumbs up our asses.

Wasn't any place we could go.

Nothing we could do.

No one said a word. Not even a Holy Shit, look at that size of that motherfucker.

Nothing.

We didn't even notice that Cory had worked his way back up on a pontoon and had climbed dripping wet through a window. Well, that's not entirely true. I had noticed, but it hadn't registered deeply. How could it. Not with that Leviathan out there.

Water ran into the fish's mouth like being poured into a funnel, and way to the left, and way to the right, I saw a shiny spurt of spray, and knew water was rushing through the great fish's gills, shooting out against the clear blue sky like geysers.

The bus began to move. Rapidly. Flowing behind the formerly large, now less impressive catfish, into the darkness of the maw that must have swallowed Old Jonah. Finally, someone spoke.

It was Grace. She said. "This sucks."

Steve said, "I just want to say goodbye to my dick. It's been good to me."

The water moved fast and went into the fish and we went with it; there was a rush into the great mouth as the bus straightened itself, fled down the throat of the beast, and behind us the light faded.

I turned to look.

The dark line was lowering and the bright blue of the outside was going away as if a blind were being slowly pulled closed. Water lapped in, and with it came a total blackness like the end of all things.

There was a thud and a jerk as the water the behemoth gulped slammed up against the back of our craft. The bus began to flee along at breakneck speed, like a roller coaster ride, on down, dropping our stomachs out. Water spurted in through the bus's cracks, and someone, James I think, yelled, "We're gonna drown like rats," and from the back window came a confirmation, a blast of black wetness (should have closed that fucking window up), and away we went, water gushing to our knees, causing us to climb into the seats, only to instantly feel the water rise up to touch us.

Away we went, faster and faster, propelled into the pitch dark moist nowhere toward the nucleus of the Lord of the Fishes.

# 5

One thing you don't expect inside a fish is light.

Soon there would be other things unexpected. But, for the moment, let's just consider the light.

Lights actually.

A row of them.

But let's not jump too far ahead.

Let's roll back and talk back and go up the throat of the fish, and let me tell you how we came down.

We came down in a stink, baby. The water nearly filled the bus. We bumped our heads on the ceiling and the water smelled bad and there were things in the water, and the bus went fast, and then it slowed. There was a feeling like being a mole in a water hose. And somehow I knew we were in some piece of gut, making our way to the center, where, I figured, stomach acid, or whatever fish use to digest (is it rocks? no, I believe that's chickens that get pebbles in their craw), would be our final destination.

Seven for the soup.

Dinner served.

A little later that day it would be out the ole sphincter, blown through the asshole into the deeps, an acid-pocked bus full of skeletons.

If that much was left.

Just so much fish shit.

But, I was saying about the lights, and now we come to them again. So, we're jetting along through the guts and into the stomach, hanging onto the seats, drenched in water, not quite drowned, but in a position that we in the business of being swallowed by fish like to call, seriously wet, and then —

- SQUIRT -

— right out into —

The light.

A muddled light, I might mention, as if shown through thick wax paper, but it was light. The bus came down with a smack, right side up (thank goodness), and the water in the bus sloshed back and forth across us, and the light shining through the windows, piercing the water that was now almost to the ceiling, burned our eyes.

Water fled from the bus the same way it had come in. Only took a matter of minutes before it was to the point where we could stand in the seats and have the water about our waists. At that point it slowed its drain. The windows, though lit up with light, also were splattered with all manner of dark business I would rather not consider, and so was the floor of our bus. There were even small fish flapping about, and I found leeches clinging to my body like day commuters grasping the handholds on a subway car.

All our food supplies were ruined, soaked up with that water, and possibly the water and fuel was fucked too, depending on how well the corks held in the containers. But, at that moment in time, that didn't seem like a big concern.

Steve dove under the water and worked the bus door, and it came open. The water rushed out, and so did Steve, Grace, Cory and Jim. Homer, Reba and I clung to seats and waited for it to wash away.

Then we too slipped and slid along the sopped floor of the bus and out into the lights.

They hung from long cables at the summit of the fish, which was pretty far up there, dear hearts. And the fish itself was like a great aircraft hangar in size, but its sides heaved, and the meat and bones moved with the pressure of its breathing. In the sides of the fish were great pockets cut into the meat, and in the holes of this meat, high up, we could see people. On both sides of the fish, extending back for a goodly distance, as far as we could see before the rows of lights played out and there was only darkness.

Occasionally, as I observed, I'd see a spark emit from the fish's insides, pop out like a firefly, crackle like cellophane. There were a few metallic ladders on wheels and runners, like in a great library. The ladders were narrow, but they went high up. Down into the dark spot at the tail of the fish, where the lights played out, my eyes adjusted enough I could see there was a pile of cars, both old and new, and one small airplane. All of this was mounded up together in what could almost be called a wad. The paint was off the cars for the most part, and there were holes in the metal, like termites the size of motorcycles had been at work.

Our bus was resting on a grid, long and flat with drainage holes all through it. The grid began at the pulsating gut gap that had launched us here, and a sewage aroma came from that gap as it irised open and closed. We wobbled slightly, not having gained our sea legs, as the great fish propelled itself through the depths. Beneath the grid, I could see a boiling green mess that gave off a fart odor that blended with the special smell that puffed out of the sphincter. The catfish that had swum before us lay flapping on the grillwork, its

mouth opening and closing as it gasped for water.

People in the meat caves started down the ladders. There were a lot of them. Some wore rags, but most were raw and wet looking, covered in fish blood, their hair matted, Many were covered in puckered scars.

As they came down to see us, Steve said, "You know, I caught many a catfish in my lifetime - well, not that many, I suck as a fisherman-but, I never found no folks inside of one. Or any lighting equipment."

"How about old cars or airplanes?" Homer asked.

"Nope," Steve said. "None of those either."

Grace said, "I just hope the natives are friendly."



# 6

How y'all doin'," a big naked man said. He was holding his limp dick in one hand like it was a symbol of authority, and there was enough there to look authoritative. I was glad I was clothed, otherwise I would have been mucho big-assed embarrassed. A weener like that belonged in some kind of museum, or maybe peeking out from under a circus tent in the snake section.

As an added note, a leech hung off his left thigh in a decorative way.

"I don't know we ought to welcome you or not, seeing as how I figure you weren't just driving through. But, I reckon some kind of howdy is in order, so, Howdy, goddamnit."

He opened his mouth in a big grin at this comment, and showed us just how many teeth he was missing.

Men and women, and even one child, were amongst the crowd. I guess there must have been fifty or so. A number of them leaped on the large catfish that had washed in ahead of us, and with fists and bone clubs they were carrying, they beat it about the head until it stopped thrashing.

The naked man never even looked at this business. He just kept twiddling with his dick.

"That's some cannon you got there," Grace said to the naked man, "but I don't know I like it pointed at me. And, now that I mention it, it seems to be a larger cannon than a moment ago."

"I just try and display a little at a time," the naked man said. "I don't want to scare nobody.. .You look so good."

"Thank you," Grace said. "I try to take care of myself."

"And you look good too," the naked man said to Reba.

"You're hurting my feelings," Steve said. "I just had a hell of a bath, and no good words about me?"

The naked man grinned. "I'm down here much longer/ and you'll start looking pretty good too. My name is Bjoe. It's really Billy Joe, but everyone called me B. Joe, so I just shortened it to Bjoe, one word. I could tell you all kinds of fascinating things about me and my life, but I think you probably got other interests."

"That's the truth," Homer said. "Where the fuck are we?"

"Why, silly," said Bjoie, "you're inside a giant catfish."

"As Steve here said," I said jerking a thumb at Steve, "I've never seen a catfish like this. How come it's got all this rigging? The lights and such? The caves up there in the meat?"

"Sometimes," Bjoie said, "I think about it and my head hurts."

"I feel sick to my stomach," Homer said. He turned from us and vomited onto the grillwork. We all stood there watching it leak through the holes, down into the bubbling mess below.

"You got a mite of sea sickness," Bjoie said. "Had that myself at first. No telling how long I had it. We can't tell one day from another down here. Not even false days. I mean, they're ain't no real light, just them bulbs. And there ain't no night. Ain't nobody wants to turn off the light. There's some dark up in them caves we cut into the meat, and there's dark down there past them wrecked cars and such, but, hell, you don't want to go down there. There's things on the other side of them cars you wouldn't like to meet in a dark fish ass."

"Things?" Cory said.

"We don't know what they are, but they're fucked-up and goofy-doofy."

"Goofy-doofy?" Grace said.

"Yeah. They don't like the light though. You see, they was here before the lights."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I just reckon it. Well, I kind of know some things, but it's a long story."

"Got a feeling we ain't gonna be catching no train or nothing," Steve said, "so, we ought to hear it."

"You will," Bjoie said, dropping his flesh hammer so that it flopped against his thigh like a pale eel. "But first thing we got to do is eat. Got to eat when you can eat. We'll show you the ropes, since I figure you're gonna be permanent."

"Now there's a word," Grace said. "Permanent."

Reba said, "I never knew how permanent the word permanent sounded, until just now."

# 7

They pulled the skin off the catfish using sharp pieces of bone, their hands, and their bare teeth, bit into the skin near where the head had been —it got chopped off with bone tools — scuttled backwards, stripping the skin off in dark bands, revealing the clean white meat, still pulsing.

They cut into the meat or tore at it with their hands, and pretty soon they were through the meat and into the guts. Blood and fluids ran out of the fish and through the holes in the grating, hit the bubbling mass below and disappeared.

"I think that's stomach acid," Grace said, nodding down at the stuff below the grate.  
"Yeah," I said. "I think you're right."

"I think we better get in the chow line," Steve said, "that catfish, big as it is, is going fast."

We hustled back to the bus, where we had knives, and slipping and sliding over the goo on the floor, we found them.

My knife was in my backpack, which I had appropriated from a car where the kid who had owned it had been eaten by her parents, and along with the knife were some other items, most of them ruined. But my journal, which I kept in a plastic bag I had found long back, appeared to be in tip-top shape. That was good, but right then I would have traded it for a ham sandwich.

Back at the fish, we cut off slabs of meat and ate it raw. It was surprisingly good, but then again, most anything to eat had become a gourmet treat as far as I was concerned. I had known folks back at the drive-in to peck undigested berries and such out of piles of dinosaur shit, had sworn that it having passed through the stomach of a critter made it more delectable.

When we finished eating, we looked about to see all the others wiping their oily hands on their clothes or bodies or in their hair. I used my ragged pants to take care of my etiquette. Finished, the Fish People eyed us for a long while without speaking. Finally, Bjoie, having rescued his dick from lonely abandon, and having picked the leech off his thigh and eaten it, said, "Up there. That's where we ought to go. That biggest cave. That's where we have our community meetings."

"What kind of meeting we talking about?" Steve asked.

"I don't like heights," James said. "Fact is, I don't like being inside a goddamn fish either, but I can take that better than heights."

"You need not come," Bjoie said. "None of you need come. But that is where we can

drink. We have drink there."

"You mean like booze?" Cory asked.

Bjoe nodded.

"Where would you get that?" Homer asked.

"Made it."

"Oh," Cory said. "And may I ask out of what?"

"Spoiled things."

"Of course."

"This fish, our swimming home, he eats what I guess is algae. Some kind of weed anyway. You add water, let it set till it smells, which takes, I don't know.. .who knows down here.. .Too long, anyway. But when it smells worse than the inside of the fish here, then you know it's ready. You got to hold your nose on that first jolt, but after that, it's all right. Besides, it beats all the bourbon and beer we don't have."

"There's a point somewhere in all that," James said.

"Does the fish ever do any acrobatic type swimming?" Grace asked. "I mean, anything that might make all this goop beneath us slosh up through the grates?"

"It does," Bjoe said. "Now and again. Mostly, just a bit of side to side movement. Not bad. The Big Boy is quite steady, actually. Most of the time. I do advise not being in the area of your bus, however. Lots of water comes through his gullet there, washes through. Sometimes, enough of it comes through, the goop as you call it, swells over the grates, and then we all got to stay cave bound. You really should get your own cave. You got to cut it into the meat. But not too deep. You do that, you could injure the fish, or cut through the outer skin, then it would all be over. Which, sometimes we think might not be such a bad thing. A quick rush of water, and down we all go to the bottom, our lungs wet as Noah's flood."

"I guess we can come up," I said. "To talk."

"And have a drink of that rotten fish swizzel," Cory said.

"I'd like to try that," James said, "but once again, heights. Ain't for it."

"I might can bring you some back," Cory said.

"That would be great. Just like the rest of my life. Great, great, great."

# 8

With the exception of James, who decided to stay with the bus, we followed Bjoie and his band up one of the rolling ladders. I tried not to look up, as the fella in front of me didn't have on any pants, and a nastier asshole you could not imagine, and when he stepped high his grapes swung wrinkled and ugly on their vine.

Behind me came the others, Reba, Cory, Homer, Steve, and Grace last in line.

It was a precarious trip, as the rungs of the ladder were damp from wet feet, and I had to hold on tight. I cautioned the others to do the same.

When we reached the summit, we stepped off the ladder and into a very large cut in the meat; a pulsating cave that went some distance back. The walls were wet with thin stains of blood from the fish, and you could see veins throbbing in the wall of the cave. One rib bone had been exposed and was visible. I could see skin over the rib, and wondered just how thick that skin was, and how much it would take to pierce it, bringing in all that water; thought too about these folks, and what Bjoie had said, about how they sometimes thought about ending it.

I didn't like my life, but as I had come to realize, it was the one I had. I wanted to play out its string as long as I could, and I preferred to not have anyone cut it short for me just because they had had enough and wanted to go.

There were skulls in the caves, or rather the tops of skulls. They were split from the eyes up, and had been turned over to be used as utensils.

"How'd you come by your tableware?" I asked.

"Folks that died," Bjoie said. "We ate them. Waste not, want not. You have a problem with that?"

Actually, I didn't. I didn't like it, but in this world, you did what you could. It was okay by me. Cannibalism has its place.

If they had in fact died, and not been helped along.

I had a tense sensation that we might have just climbed a long ladder to unwillingly accept a dinner invitation.

"I know what you're thinking," Bjoie said. "And no. We're not going to murder you."

"I could have told you that," Grace said, looking ready to fight.

"We may not look like much," Bjoe said. "And I may play with my dick more than a rap musician, but we don't mean you any harm. Long as you abide by the rules and get along and such."

"That's good to hear," Steve said.

"What about that booze?" Cory said.

"We'll come to that," Bjoe said. "Please. Make yourself at home. Guys, play with your dicks if you want. We don't discourage it. Ladies, you can plunk your pudding if you like. We don't consider it vulgar here."

And they sure didn't. Three of the women had revealed themselves and were slapping their meat in a savage manner, grunting like pigs to trough.

"Maybe later," Grace said.

"Suit yourself," Bjoe said.

We sat down cross legged, and I could feel the great fish's flesh vibrating beneath me, taught as a harp string. The meat against my ass was warm, and I could imagine going to sleep quite comfortably in this cave.

The women who had chosen to explore their valleys were still at work, and even though only one of them was moderately attractive, I couldn't help but watch. There was nothing really sexual about it for me. It was just interesting to see. Sort of like midget wrestling.

Bjoe went over to a row of skulls against the fleshy wall and picked one up. He brought it over, set it down in front of us, squatted to join us.

"So," Cory said. "You just get some weed the fish ate, let it rot and such, and it's ready to go."

"We spit in it too."

"Whoa, now," Cory said. "I didn't need to know that."

"Saliva blends with it, makes it ripe."

"I bet," Steve said.

"You really should try some," Bjoe said. "It'll set you free."

Cory leaned over and sniffed it. "It smells like a dead animal," he said.

"Indeed," Bjoie said.

"You just hold your nose?" Cory said.

"First sip, yeah. After that, probably won't need to."

"Oh, shit," Cory said. "I'm a fool."

He took hold of his nose with one hand, lifted the skull to his lips, and sipped.

Carefully, he put the skull back down, removed his hand from his nose.

"That. Without a doubt. Is the foulest motherfucking thing I have ever put in my mouth. And I got to tell you, I once ate a turd because it had some kind of nuts in it. I think it was shat out by a bear or something. But that right there. That is some nasty shit. But...It kind of grows on you."

"What happened to your head," Bjoie asked Cory. "Knife fight?"

"I shaved it. But not too well. I'll have another jolt of that fish brew, if you don't mind."

"Help yourself. There are plenty of bowls of it. Would any of you like to try it?"

"I'll pass," Grace said. "I haven't even had a bear turd yet, so I'll hold out."

Everyone else passed.

Cory grabbed two more skulls, drained them down. Then he burped, fell over backwards, unconscious.

Homer leaned over and looked at him.

I said, "He isn't dead is he?"

"No, but his breath is really something," Homer said. "And strong. It could hold up a tea set."

"Would you like to hear how we came here?" Bjoie said. "And maybe I can clear up some things for you. About the fish, I mean. I know some of it, or rather I've noodled out a lot. Rest of it is guesswork. And some, shit, I don't got a clue. Maybe you can fill in some holes."

"Tell us," I said.



## **PART THREE**

An which BJoe, while playing with his tallywhacker, recites a tale of woe, boating, fish intestines, expert lighting, the Scuts and such. And, in the meantime, Cory stays drunk.

# 1

I won't begin where it began, because we all began there. The night of the drive-in and the big red comet with the hot white smile.

"Forget that.

"I'll begin where it began for us. The all of us here except you newcomers. There have been a few other newcomers, folks eaten by the fish, but they were all dead when they came through. And, frankly, we ate them.

"When the comet came back, like so many others, perhaps all who were in the theater, we started down the long road. We were among the first to leave. At the end of the road we found what you found. The goddamn drive-in again. We were on a loop, and we arrived at where we had left.

"Folks were coming into the drive-in to stay, but a caravan of us decided to strike out down a wide trail, bump our way along and see if it went anywhere else.

"We went for a long time. Some of the cars conked out. People died. People got eaten. There were a few murders, rapes, and acts of depravity along the way, not to mention creature attacks, and that accounted for some loss. You know the drill. Been there done that, I'm sure.

"Finally we came to a wide break in the woods and found ourselves on the edges of great sea. Or so we think. Maybe it is a lake so great it seemed like a sea. But we found ourselves there, and there was no alternative but to stop.

"Critters were thick along that lake, and we decided to make tools from bone, plus use what tools we had. It's amazing how much in the way of odds and ends can be found in the trunks and back seats of cars. Even car parts could be made into tools.

"So, what we did, is we circled the cars, vans and trucks in double circle, to make a kind of wall — remember, there were a bunch of us, so it was a big circle—and inside that circle we began to build.

"During the day we cut timber and dragged it with pickup trucks. One of the cars served as a door to the circle, and the driver would pull it back and we would bring the logs in. Here we cut them and shaped them and coated them with clay to keep out insects as best we could, then we built them up into what can only be called one large goddamn home. Around the home we built palisades, tall, cut with sharp points on their ends. Beyond those, we slanted logs in the ground with points sticking out like angled porcupine quills. It wasn't a bad job at all.

"In time, we used clay to cover the log walls. This not only kept out bugs, it better kept out the wind and insulated us from the cold and the heat, whenever it came. After a time, we built great chimneys on either end of the structure. Here community meals were cooked. Wild animals and roots and greens and such we found. Occasionally, one of our band would die and we would eat them, and let me tell you, if you haven't had the old long pig, it can't be beat. Now, I'm not suggesting anyone eat anyone here — unless they die—but, if you get the opportunity, don't be squeamish. And I'll tell you, it don't taste like chicken. Or pork for that matter. It is a unique and sweet taste unrivaled by any meat. Damn. My mouth is starting to water just thinking about it.

"But we built this great place and we called it home, and let me tell you, after all we had been through, it wasn't so bad.

"Fact was, it wasn't bad at all, and we should have stayed there, and we might have, but along came Noah.

"That wasn't his real name, but it's what we came to call him, at first derisively, and finally, respectfully, and then...Well, let me go back to the story.

"Noah, actual name Tim, said we should build a great boat.

"He wasn't preaching religion. He wasn't saying it was going to rain. He wasn't even saying life was too hard, because, actually, all things considered, it wasn't. He was saying we should build a great boat because he knew how, and it would give us something to do, and we could sail across the sea.

"Now, he did have one idea. He thought that on the other side of the sea we might find home.

"I don't know if this was a silly idea or not. I suppose it was, knowing full damn well there were no seas or great lakes like this in East Texas, but it was hard to know what to think, and finally, what I think made us all decide to build it was a simple factor.

"Boredom.

"I kid you not. There we were, plenty of food from the forests. Small animals, the nuts and berries, wild greens program, and we were catching small fish from the fresh water sea. We had plenty of water. Our fort was pretty safe, even from dinosaurs. It was clean and dry and warm, cool on hot days, and we were fornicating pretty much at will and babies were being born, and most of them were living, looked like they'd grow up and our community would swell.

"What I felt like was this. One time I saw a cow on the side of the road, behind a fence, but she had her head through the fence and was eating grass growing on the other side, near the highway. I remember thinking. Silly cow. She had a whole pasture full of fine

green grass, and there she was nibbling at some scrawny grass growing by the fence that had been dosed with the fumes from thousands of exhausts.

"How stupid. If she could break through the fence, pretty soon she'd be on the highway, and maybe get hit by a car.

"Looking back, we were that cow with our heads through the fence, but we didn't have grass to nibble. AH we had was Noah's idea.

"We called him Noah because he said he was a builder, and he had proved this by helping to design and construct our fort, which, by the way, we called Fort Drive-in.

"He said, we can build a boat, like Noah's ark, and we can sail out and see what there is to see. And maybe, he said, we can expand what we have here. Find better food, build greater forts, and form a kind of community of forts. Sail the waters. Establish trade between forts. I mean, he had the whole nine yards laid out and marked off and ready to cut.

"He drew up plans. First in the dirt, then on animal hides. He marked this, he marked that. He drew an overall picture of the boat.

It was to be huge. It looked like Noah's ark. We began to call him Noah.

"Now, I got to tell you, there is to me no dumber idea than to think that ever there was a man that built an ark that held all the animals of the world, and a family too, and that they sailed on the ocean for forty days and forty nights. Dumb. I don't care who you are or what you believe, that's just goddamn dumb.

"But, you know what? This Tim, this Noah, he was almost telling us the same thing.

Build this big-ass boat, stick in a few of the wild birds we had caught, a few of the wild animals (pig-like critters mostly), and all our nasty asses, and we would set sail on water so big we had no idea if there was an end to it anywhere. Just get on out there and sail around and see what happens.

"Let me tell you, in retrospect, I consider it one of the dumbest ideas since people came up with and believed the story of the original Noah, and the only thing dumber is pet rocks and an idea I had once about a portable pet called porta-kitty, legless and in a sack that hung on the wall and mewed when you turned on the lights. But I won't go into that.

"I'll just say, we built that boat.

"The boat was very big, because it was decided that everyone but a handful of us would go. Some would stay and hold down the fort, so to speak, while the rest of us went adventuring. The idea was to come home with plenty of exotic information, foods and

such, and since we weren't being assailed by wild Indians at the fort, it was thought all that was needed to hold it was a skeleton crew. I suppose they are there yet.

"The boat took a long time to build, and it was hard work. But I found it a wonderful thing to do. Boredom was on the run. Adventure was in the air, and I was banging regular tail, two women who didn't mind sharing me, and I didn't mind sharing them.

"We were clean and well fed and spent the nights, sometimes the days when we were too tired to work, talking about our quest.

" Yippie. Out there on the water. Sailing about. Adventuring. Yee-haw.

"Again, I never even liked the deep end of the pool back home, so what was up with me and the boat and Noah? It's hard to figure. Life certainly turns you some spins, that's for sure.

"So there came a day when the boat was finished to Noah's specs. We had driven wooden pegs into wooden ribs and swollen them up with water and poured tree sap into cracks. Noah said this was the thing, the sap, the resin, and that it would hold tighter than an eighteen-year-old virgin's doohickey on her wedding night.

"We used our trucks and cars to pull the great boat up on a ramp, and then we built another ramp below the front end of the boat, and we greased it with animal fat and dung, and with all of us pushing, we were able to make it slide out and down and into the water. There it was held by ropes made from vines and strips of bark. Big and broad and ready to go. "We cheered.

"I distinctly remember cheering.

"Yeehaw. I'm a dumb ass. I'm going to leave a nice home on the banks of a beautiful body of water, surrounded by great trees, plenty of food and a lazy lifestyle, to climb onto a boat and sail off to...Nowhere.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Anyway, we swarmed aboard. The boat was already packed with foods and stuffs, and there were, in fact, a dozen long lifeboats on that sucker. It stood high out of the water like it was proud of itself. We were ready and eager to set sail.

"The sails went up. Made from animal hides and vines, they were, but they were solid and they caught the wind and we set out. And the wind was good that day, strong and blowing harder than a whore at Mardi Gras.

"About one day out something that should have occurred to us before, suddenly became prominent. Noah may have known how to build a boat, and we knew how to hoist sails,

but frankly, none of us, Noah included, knew how to actually sail. "And the good wind went away.

"Another problem. The boat was so big, that the only way it moved was s-l-o-w-l-y. Out there far from land, we became becalmed.

"This was okay for a day or two, you know, benefit of the doubt and all that, but within a few days we were pissed. All of us.

"We went to Noah, and in polite words, told him to turn that motherfucker around and take us back to Fort Drive-in, and from now on he could live in the fucking boat.

"No, someone said, the boat would become a second fort, up a ways from the first, and those with children, they could live there, make it a giant nursery.

"But, the bottom line, thing that counted, was this. We wanted to take our asses back to Fort Drive-in.

"No," said Noah. This was just the sort of thing that ruined a good adventure. Sailors always grumbled. The becalming would pass, and with it would come a good wind, and we would sail on into adventure.

"Besides, he made a very good point.

"Without any wind, becalmed as we were, we weren't sailing anywhere. Home or otherwise.

"Did I tell you this Noah was a good speaker. He could talk the pork off a pig. He was that kind of guy, had that kind of voice. Held himself firm and high, had a beard. Reminded me of Charlton Heston in that Biblical movie, *The Ten Commandments*. So, to make it short as my hopes, I'll just say we were famboozled again and hung in there.

"He had even given us a little fire in our bellies, made us think it was a good idea.

"So, finally we did catch a wind, and it was a good one, and it carried us far, far out, and land was no longer a distant line of brown. It was lost to us. There was only the sea and the sky, and once again, guess what? No fucking wind.

"Died like a politician's promises.

"Let me tell you. I just thought that I was bored at Ft. Drive-in. That big boat soon seemed like a fucking canoe. I paced it daily, as did a lot of others. Noah, he stayed away in his cabin. Sight of him made us angry and he knew it.

"It was also obvious to us by this time that if we wanted to go home, we wouldn't know

how to do it. We had been turned and moved by that last good wind, and in fact, felt as if we were doing little more than spinning about like a top in pretty much the same place, so no matter which direction we decided to go, it would be a crap shoot.

"You know how it is here on this world, this place, this dimension, whatever it is. The sun might come up in one spot one day, in another the next. Same with the moon. And the stars. They move about like fireflies.

"These, of course, are things we should have thought of. But, like a lot of fools, we had put our fate into the hands of one person. Someone who KNEW THE ANSWERS. It wasn't until we were on the ocean, becalmed, going a little crazy, starting to go short on supplies, and catching no fish, that we determined Noah didn't know his dick from a grub worm.

"So, and I'm a little ashamed to tell you this part—but not real ashamed — there came a time when we had had enough and we pulled him from his cabin and cut off both his ears, his nose, his dick and balls, tied him to the rigging and hoisted him up.

"He lasted a long time, hanging up there, bleeding to death, screaming and cussing, wiggling with his hands tied behind his back, his feet tied together, as big white birds pecked out his eyes and took off chunks of his flesh. He was plagued by insects too. Big mothers, They tore at him as well. "It was horrible to see. "All that meat going to waste.

"So after a time, on a dark night, we brought him down and beat his head in and cooked him up and he was good. And might I add, we ate him by his own light, having used some of his fat— which was not much at that moment in time, him having lost weight up there on the ropes — to stick in bowls to light as lamps. So there's an irony, or at least if it isn't irony, it's a strangeness, to make a light of him to eat him by.

"When we were finished, we beat in his meatless jaw with clubs, knocked out his teeth, gathered them up, and in a kind of ceremony, tossed them into the dark waters, one by one. And for a long time, I kept a toothpick made of a snapped and fragmented bone from his skull, stuck it in what were then the remains of pants and/or now just so much fiber dust somewhere inside this fish. "But, shit, I lost the pants, I lost the toothpick."

## 2

Well, there we were. Out there on the vastness of the wetness, having eaten our captain, who was about as seaworthy as Captain Crunch, in a boat that looked like a giant Noah's ark with a rudimentary sail, and we weren't sailing so good.

"We cursed the drive-in world, and we cursed the lack of wind. We cursed Noah, and we cursed the ship. We even got around to cursing ourselves. I missed the college classroom, teaching, which is what I did for a living, gentlemen and two ladies. Liked teaching fine. Spreading knowledge. Meeting young women. Truth be told, I fucked a lot of my students. I know that isn't ethical, but, as you can see, I'm sort of dick oriented, and I, like my students, am young, in my twenties. I just couldn't help myself. Hear what I'm saying?"

"So, I liked to do what they did. Go to the drive-in being one of those things. I took one of my students as a date. She was fine. I mean fine. But when things got bad, shit, had to eat her. And, not the usual way that word is used. I mean, you know, I did that too. Before I got hungry. And then, I actually ate her. Cooked her. Had matches in the glove box and a lighter on my person.

"God, I miss my cigarettes.

"I miss her as well. She was pretty special. I think we might have gotten married when she graduated. One thing for sure, she was gonna make an A in my class, she did the work or not.

"Not that she couldn't do it. She could. She was smart. Hell, she even cooked up good. Sometimes I think I can still taste her. You haven't eaten until you've had human flesh.. .Did I mention that. A tittie, it fries up good.

"Oh, yes. The boat. We were on the boat. And I'm thinking, where the hell are we, really? I'm sure we've all thought that. I know I have. Where are we?"

"Another planet?"

"Another universe?"

"Up a duck's ass?"

"I sort of like that idea. Not the duck ass. The different universe idea. You know, all that stuff about multi-verses. Expanding out beyond our own universe, and the laws of physics not applying in the same way, or at all, and the laws of physics here being nothing more than bylaws. You hear what I'm saying? Bylaws. What applied where we were, our world, does not apply here. Someone has laid out a whole new lists of what does and what don't.



"But, I think on that, and I think, shit, to believe that, I got to make a real leap of faith, and finally it's just so much guesswork.

"Yet, here I am. Some goddamn place. The inside of a fish, that much I know. But, this world, can it be? Why yes, I tell myself. It can be. For here I am. So I be, and you be, we all be.

"But still I wonder and the wonder confuses my head.

"It also causes me to veer from my story. I'll throw out a mental lifeline and tug it back. I should know how to tell a tale better than this, a tale that ends up with me inside a fish's tail, which makes a hell of a tale indeed.

"So there we sat on our boat inside this branch of the multi-verse, or wherever the fuck we are, and finally, we got some wind.

"We had been becalmed for some time, and we had prayed for that wind, begged for that wind, longed for that wind. And when it came, we didn't want it.

"It started out calm and cool and fine enough, but in short time it was less calm and turned cold. The water frothed like meringue on a pie, and then it was not so much frothing as foaming, then not so much foaming as white with fury, like a mad dog frothing.

"At first, before it went psycho-wind on us, it filled the sail in a single puff, and we decided to turn the boat, for no good reason than the bulk of us voted to do that, thinking we had come from that direction, but not really knowing, you see, just guessing.

"But we decided to turn it, gentlemen and two ladies.

"And the boat began to move. The wind picked up and the boat moved faster, and then an interesting thing happened, and this was even before the wind turned savage.

"Parts of the boat began to fall off.

"The glue we had made to stick between the boards, after being damp for so long, was coming apart. Noah had designed the boat in such a way that not all of it was tightly pegged. Some of it, heaven forbid, was held together by no more than resin and hope. This sort of shit, my gathering of little dirties, is exactly why Noah should have been eaten.

"He had duped us.

"He didn't know glue from cow shit. And hadn't that motherfucker ever heard of a nail. A bunch of nails. Not just a peg or two, but real nails. Maybe we would have had to have

made them from wood, but they should have been made. Some kind of way. Hear what I'm saying?

"Glue is okay for paper hats and homemade valentines, but it's shit for holding together big ass boats after they get good and wet and end up in a storm.

"The waves and wind lashed us and slammed us, and washed into that weak-ass glue and made it thin, made it come undone even faster. We rode the waves, this way and that, and our sail got wadded up like a snotty Kleenex. Folks were going crazy, they were so scared. They were fighting and yelling, fucking, leaping over the side of the boat. It was like someone had touched us with a crazy wand.

"Finally, I took control. I didn't know I had it in me. I had to stab a couple folks, make them quit running around like assholes, make them shut up, but pretty soon, I'm yelling ideas, and then the ideas are orders, and folks are listening.

"Stabbing a motherfucker or two will bring another fella's mind around quick-like.

"I yell out about the lifeboats, say let's get those goddamn lifeboats filled.

"About the time we're trying to do that, the whole goddamn great boat, or ship, or whatever the fuck it was, came apart. Just collapsed like a Republican tax cut. Looks good on the outside, and works fine up front on the short run, but boy do you pay for it in the back end. And, my little dirties, we were paying for it.

"Thing was, the lifeboats had been filled. About a hundred and ten of us in those boats. There were a few folks left over. We had to give them our best wishes and a couple of knife wounds to keep them out of the lifeboats. When the big boat came all the way apart it left us floating, and those unfortunates who hadn't been fast enough to get their nasty asses in the boats, that hadn't been stabbed, well, they were just out there, hanging to lumber or going under, or getting finished off by boat paddles to the head. It sounds cruel, but it was better than just leaving them there. Especially the little ones. The three- and four-year-olds who were struggling so hard. You can't stand to see that, I will assure you, so we beat them down.

"The wind kept up, and we had to bail water out of the lifeboats, and there wasn't much room to bail, so we put some of the mothers and children over the side and wished them luck. We had to stop hitting them with the paddles, due to the fact we had shattered one and cracked another. That wouldn't do.

"I know that sounds cold, and I suppose it is. I got to come back to that, me saying how cold it was, but how necessary it was. You see, for the bulk of us to survive, we had to rid ourselves of the weak. And most of the mothers and children were weak. We hung onto the stronger women with the plumper babies (food should always be considered), and kept at it.

"The night came and that was bad, but at least the wind had stopped and the moon had come up. During the night, some of the folks in the boat disappeared. I don't know what happened. I think someone must have cut their throats and drank the blood and put them over the side. It had to have been seen by just about everyone, (not me, though) but no one was complaining. Not when the bailing buckets had warm blood in them to drink.

"When the sun came up, we checked our boat, took a head count and determined how our survivors were doing. There were some who had been injured when the big boat came apart, you see, and now, in the daylight, we could see they weren't doing so good, so we put them over the side.

"Except for one. We cut him up and ate him.

"I might also mention, that the ones we put over the side that' morning we didn't let drift and we didn't bust them with boat paddles. We drowned them, pulled their bodies close to the side of the boat and tied them off with rope. They were our larder. We had come to that, and thank God we were wise enough to do just that. I only regretted that we had thrown so much fine meat over the side the night before. I remembered one of those women quite well, seeing her ass in the wet moonlight, bobbing up and down like a round-ended barrel. She would have provided us with rump roast for days. She had been a volunteer. Someone who just couldn't take it anymore. She bobbed about for a while, that ass up in the air, and then she dove in and went down with hardly a splash, and didn't come up. My guess is she swam down till her breath played out and the water filled her.

"The other boats floated nearby, and they too had gone through a thinning. I suppose with our experiences in the drive-in, this kind of ruthlessness was to be expected. Sentimentality had long passed us by, and though for a time, there in Fort Drive-in, I thought we might be gaining our humanity, I learned quick-like we had not, and thank goodness for that, or I, and the bulk of us, would not be here today.

"Considering we're all inside a giant fish, that might not be such a good thing in the long run, but I suppose the best any of us can hope for these days is extension of life, and not quality. In the past I often thought, quality, not quantity, is what's important. Until I was faced with the big sign off. The idea was unappealing to me. I didn't have the courage of the fat-assed woman who went over the side and swam deep down.

"I am still ready to grab at whatever bit of life I can get, no matter how sour it might taste, how foul it might look. I still wish for better food and cleaner pussy and having my ass outside of this fish and back at my house in East Texas.

"Hell, I'd settle for being back at Fort Drive-in. It was a pretty good deal. You could bathe regular, fix meals that didn't stink so bad you had to hold your nose, or worse, just get used to.

"But, I was telling you about the boats.

"Drifty, drifty, drifty, that's me.

"We went a couple of nights and some days, and then one night, in the moonlight, all of the boats floating close together, the dark water rose up high and broadened. We thought it was a freak wave. But it was not.

"The darkness froze for a moment, then opened up into greater darkness, and the boats, even though we paddled hard to not let it happen, flowed into the big ole darkness of the black hump, and down we went.

"You know what's next. You experienced it. We shot out of a gut or throat, or whatever, and landed here on the grid, splashing water behind us, shattering our boats and spilling us willy-nilly, this way and that, breaking some of us up. As a side note, I should add that those poor unfortunates got eaten. That was their unintentional contribution, but, I think, if their ghosts could be here to discuss it, they would tell you they were proud to share, considering they weren't going to recover from their wounds.

"The lights that hang above us, went way back. Not to the tail. But way back. They are starting to play out now, but then, they were bright and far. Not like now, where there are almost less than half the lights there used to be.

"And, so here we were, where you are now. In the fish's belly, lit up and stinky, all of us lost causes."

That was the first part of Bjoie's story. And we're going to pause there.

When he finished telling us all that, Cory rose up, asked for more grog, fainted dead away again.

I thought, this guy, this Bjoie fella, decided he wanted to eat one of us, or all of us, because he always seemed to find some justification for long pig preparation, that ladder was going to be hard to navigate with us running all over each other's asses.

And, Cory, shit, way it looked to me, he was first on the menu. I wasn't going to try and drag his big unconscious ass down that ladder. He was on his own. Pickled and ready to serve.

I said, "So the lights were here?"

Bjoie nodded.

I scooted back closer to the ladder, tugged on Reba's sleeve a little. She looked at me and slid back too.

I looked at Grace and Steve. I could tell from the way they looked at me, they too were hip. Thinking: this guy could go snacky-whacky at any moment.

"Wow," Grace said. "The lights were here, right?"

"Yes," Bjoie said. "Yes, they were. Brighter than they are now, and they went way down the fish, and for awhile...But I said that."

"Okay," Steve said. "Tell it all. Tell some of it over if you have to."

Bjoie nodded.

"We lived back down there as well, at the back, away from the big rushes of water, not up here on the scaffolding and in the caves. But that was before the Scuts."

"The Scuts?" Grace asked.

Bjoie nodded. "Yep. The Scuts."

### 3

Oh, yeah. The lights were here. And that was a mystery to me, at first. Then I began to put some things together, draw what we like to call in mathematics some goddamn fucking conclusions.

"I'll begin with the robots.

"Don't look so goofy. Really. Robots. Fuckers made of metal with lumps for heads and a single light for an eye. Tentacles instead of hands. All cabled up and ready to go. Guess there were six cables, flapping this way and that. Reckon there were twenty or thirty of them metal, multi-tentacled doohickeys. Don't know for a fact, didn't count them, but it was in that range.

"Maintenance.

"Bless their little electric hearts.

"Place was a hell of a lot neater then."

"So," I said. "What you're saying is, the grill was in place, all this was in place before you came."

"Do I look like a fucking electrician? A carpenter? A metalworker? And where would I get the tools? Yeah. It was all here."

"And you think you know why?" Grace asked.

"I do, you good looking thing. And, hey, I'm really talking to all of you. You all look good to me. But, shit, you lady, you're, I don't even know where to begin."

"Begin with why all this stuff was here," Grace said.

"All right, doll. You see, I think the robots were finishing up this baby. Making this fish.. Don't look that way. Let me explain, let me go into what we in the mathematics business like to call one big ole fucking goddamn shit-eating hypothesis.

"This world is hand and machine made, gents and two ladies. I shit thee not and fuck with you not at all. That's what I believe. You see, this fish, it was water workable, and the robots, they were here to finish up its insides. Do maintenance while it was operating, and at the same time being built. Maybe whoever was building this fish, having it made, forgot all about it and set it adrift before the robots were all done. They had a built-in wear out time. Like those dissolving stitches you get in your head. They stay in so long, then they dissolve. That's what happened with the robots. They were supposed to do

maintenance for so long, then the fish was supposed to go obsolete, like a Ford, you know.

"Why, I don't know. Maybe there's no real reason. Maybe it's just that these work-on-stuff robots can only last so long before they go nutty-bolty. That being the case, they—whoever they is — decided they'd build them with this go-to-butter clause in their wiring. Finish up a certain span of work, then goo-out.

"Ain't that a possible?"

"Sure it is. Don't think on it long. Sure it is.

"So they got the grid to not get eat up by the stomach acid they made. And they have lights above, 'cause they're doing work inside a way-down-in-the-dark structure, so therefore gentleman and two ladies, you got to have some old-fashioned illumination, lest you think you're sharpening your pencil and it's someone's dick.

"They didn't even take note of us when we came, those robots. Not so much as a howdy-do, or, oh-shit, you done found out the fish is electric and we ain't the Partridge Family. They were programmed, hot-wired and motivated, chip-headed and blueprint driven."

"But, the fish has flesh," Reba said.

"Oh, yeah. It's got flesh and it's got veins that pulse with blood. But, I'll tell you another thing this big old finny motherfucker has got, and that's wires, sweet baby cakes.

"I know you must have noted now and again that the dinosaurs seemed to crackle and pop, spark and sputter. Yet, they died or got killed, we ate them and didn't find wires in our teeth, so, it was like what can only be called one big fucking mystery.

"My belief, and you can just quote the living dog shit out of me on this, is that the wires were too small. No shit. Too small even in dinosaurs. To understand the wires, how this alien-built world works (I know, I said aliens, and I'll stand by that remark), is you got to understand the wires are minuscule, as in small little bastards. You can't see them with the undressed eyeball, and, before you go where I know you're gonna go, let me run ahead of you.

"You're gonna say: Yeah, but Bjoie, we done ate the meat off these critters, and we didn't eat the wires, and what I'm going to tell you, now grab hold of your balls —I already got mine, and those of you who are balless may clutch anything at will-I'm gonna tell you flat out, you did eat them too, my little hungry folks.

"They're edible. They dissolve. I mean, shit, they can make women's panties you can eat right off the snatch and have them taste like fruits and such, so you think some way-advanced alien motherfuckers can't make some edible iddy-bitty goddamn wires?"

"They can.

"And inside this fish, in which you could stuff several dinosaurs and our worn out asses, except you baby blonde, goddamn you are fine and movie-star-like and not even partially worn out — "

"Tell it," Grace said. "Just go on and tell it."

"Yeah. Okay. Look at the wall of the cave. See the flesh of the fish pulsing. See those cables of veins. Well, when we cut this dude apart, just dug chunks out of it on the inside, touched bones in some cases (the scaffolding is what I call the skeleton), I found wrapped around them, running through the meat, veins, I could see were wires. Red and blue, green and white. You can cut through them and not get shocked. Remember what I said about physics here being bylaws. Things are different. Bring that little thought back to the fore.

"And now I'm gonna go all Serbian guy Nikola Tesla on you, and we're gonna talk alternating current power transmission, rotating magnetic field principle, and polyphase alternating-current system and induction motor all over the goddamn place, and let me quote B.A. Behrend, 'Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; God said, let Tesla be, and all was light.'

"That's from my schooling, gents and two ladies. In math and physics and such, I was just schooled all over the goddamn place, although I regret to say I'm all theory and no action, or not much action anyway. I once fell off a chair screwing in a light bulb. That's my electrical work career right there, in the proverbial motherfucking nutshell.

"Now, you're looking at me funny, like I've gone North and am waving at you from afar, shouting out stuff the wind is carrying away. Let me put this where you can fucking understand it. Get your mind jaws around this, gentlemen and two ladies.

"This electricity comes up from the ground, the water, out of the atmosphere, drawn in by...Well, shit, I don't know. Do I look like a fucking Einstein? I just quote people, I don't really understand them. Except to say, There ain't no plug-ins, Jack, there's just the electricity, and it's on its own, pulsing through the wires, the veins, the edible cables. And the fish, it lives off the electricity, just like we humans live off electricity At birth, BAM, there's a spark, jumper cable time my little dirties. Our batteries are charged. We got that crackly stuff running through our veins. Call it Chi if you will, and if you want to go Japanese, call it Ki, and, if like me, you want to stay on the planet Earth (though we ain't, I don't think), call it elec-goddamn-tricity.

"Call it string cheese for all I care.

"You see, the robots, they were finishing up this little fucker, and whoever owned it, set it asail and a-dive before it was done, and the robots, they were trapped here, and they just



kept working while we were here. Not bothering us at all. But restoring lights and fixing stuff, shining the grid.

"So, like I said —and we've come back to it gentleman and two ladies. Finally, those robot gentleman just wore down and dissolved. Went to silver-metal goo, they did, and that goo just went right through the grid and into the goop, and sayonara robot fellas. No shit, pilgrims. That's how it went down.

"Their work was done, their time was done.

"But I done told you all that. I tell you now, we got a new phase me and my pals are latching into.

"We used the robots' ladders to climb up here, and there was no place to really rest, so we ventured to cut into the walls of the fish, just so deep, so we could make caves.

"And caves we made, and that's when I found in the walls the veins, so big 'cause the fish is so big. All just one big train and fish set this motherfucking world is. Here we are, adrift out there in the hooty-hooty with nothing but our own goddamn selves, and maybe now and again a peek at what this real world offers — aliens seen in dreams —yeah, I see your face, you got them dreams —and wires seen in fish meat caves.

"I might also add, that the meat we cut out to make the caves, oh, my goodness, it was sweet as pussy fresh with the pubescent bloom, salted down with excitement sweat and the juices that cause it to make smacking sounds in the deeps of the nights.

"But that was one of the few good things, that meat. 'Cause, down here, it wasn't grand. The water the fish gulped was drinkable, if not exactly Evian, and the food the fish swallowed kept us with bellies full. And we, of course, could borrow from the fish itself from time to time. And we had the light, and because we did, well, we couldn't sleep good at night.

"So, early on, we lived at the farther end of the fish, not down in the dark part of the tail, but farther than here. This was before the caves, I should say. You see, there were the cars and such down there, stuff the fish had scooped up somehow. We would go down there and sleep in the wrecked cars to get away from the light. But the lights started to die out down there, and that's when we began to appreciate them. Unlike stars that wink out, their light did not travel long and far while dead or dying. Just being lights, they winked the fuck out and left that part of the fish as dark as the inside of a wolf's ass.

"This darkness, it produced another problem. "I mean, it was there before. Way down in the tail where there were never lights and it stayed dark. Way down there bad things moved, my little dirties. We didn't know what they were, though some folk went that way to explore, (and let me point out I was happily not among them) and they didn't come back. We couldn't yell them up, and the parties that went to search, carrying fire from car

metal sparked against dried seaweed and such, didn't come back either.

"We could see their little lights, all Prometheus and such, and then, gentleman and two ladies, they were gone. "Here a moment. Gone the next. "No one else went down there. We yelled a lot, whistled some, but no folks come up.

"Let me add this, though. Just before one of those weak ass torches went out, I thought I saw something shaped like...well, something shapeless, you know. Like shadows that got no shape, like that. Figured I saw it under hot lights it would have shape all right, but not a pretty one.

"Then what light there was got stolen and there wasn't even a flutter of shadow, just this snatching sound like a bull whip cracking and wrapping itself around something there in the pitch-ass-darkness, and that was enough to tell me, don't worry about staying away from the light like those 'I'm going to God sonsabitches.' No sir. Go the other way. The way you've known since you were small. Since cavemen first lit torches and poked them in caves. Stay the fuck away from the dark. Dark bad. Dark final. Stay away from the dark. In the dark, it's dark, gentlemen and two ladies. Dark. Just plain ole dark.

" Anyway, I think it—whatever the fuck it was — nabbed the torch guy. Hell, I know it did. 'Cause there was a grunt, then the light went out. We scampered quick as frightened mice back toward the hottest and brightest part of the light, all us sonsabitches who had been watching at the edge of light and shadow. And when we arrived beneath the bestest lights and their warmy, not quite toasty yellow, we was goddamn proud to be there.

"Now, that wasn't bad enough, there being something down there in the dark, and it not being good, another concernful-type thing happened.

"The goddamn lights back there started going out a bit more regular.

"That was bound to have made the things, the shadow guys, the Scuts, happy. Unless they are fifty feet tall, they can't reach the lights. Like here, there must be ladders back there. And that may be why it's all dark to the rear of our fishy boat, them beasties, the Scuts, having climbed up there and done those lights in. But their sliding ladders, they don't come this far. Their ladder rails play out about where all them cars are piled, so they can't just keep taking them out, not unless they're willing to come into the bright lights for any time at all. Find their way to the ladders."

"What are they?" Reba asked.

"Not sure. But I think they are built-in disease. You know, the robots were maintenance, and these guys, these shadow motherfuckers, they are dis-maintenance. Just like us, gentlemen and two ladies. We are built in such a way that cells repair, and all manner of such shit, but, we are also built to age and go obsolete-o, baby.

"These Scuts. They are the Big Boy's Obsolete-o team.

"Someday, they win.

"And the fish, he's all done in.

"And so are we. And now we're here. And we just might give them a fight."

"Why did the lights last as long as they did?" I said. "I mean, why didn't they put them out early on? And if they put out the ones they put out, why didn't they venture into the light to get rid of these?"

"I can't answer that. I don't know. Maybe they were happy back there in the dark, eating fish shit, and then one day they find out we're here, get a taste of long pig from our little torch carrying adventurers. And being so delicious—and it is delicious—they decided shit wasn't quite the delicacy they once thought.

"And it's different coming up on a light from the dark, reaching out quick like and banging it. But to get these, they got to come seriously into the light for some time before they can even get to a ladder. That gap between us and them is enough to hold them, I think. Unless all the lights go out. You know. Just play out without help. It could happen. I've seen a couple die, no Scuts needed."

"Is there anything in those cars that's useable?" Grace said, always the utilitarian.

"In those cars, in one of them, I found a lady. A beautiful lady. She washed in one day while I'm up here watching the water flush, and her car washed in with it. Washed along the grid and flowed to the back and banged up against them other cars. I went down to investigate, 'cause I could see someone was behind the wheel.

"She was all drowned, her blonde hair pushed tight against her head, her lips purple. But God, did she look good.

"And the water, well, it had tenderized her.

"So, of course, we ate her.

"Rest of the cars yielded skeletons, tires and greasy jacks. Nothing special. I figure they were folks drove off from the drive-in, tried auxiliary trails, same as us, but it hadn't worked out. Flash floods may have got them. Or they could have died in their cars, and in time, rain would slippy-slip-slip them down muddy paths twixt great trees and hungry critters toward the great body of water under which we are now, doing the Nautilus shuffle, only to be swallowed by our larger than average and then some fish.

Who, by the way, we affectionately call Big Boy or Ed. Let me tell you something about Ed. Sometimes the plumbing backs up, and what can only be described as about a whales-

ass-load of fish shit, flows back this way on a real serious schedule. You can smell it before you see it. It usually gets to just this side of all them cars and such. It ain' t pretty, and whatever it is that lives down in there must be tougher than a Christian lie, because when it washes back, now and again, you still see those creepy-shadow-shapes moving amongst the cars, all shit-shined, I guess.

"Nasty as we are here, back there, man, we got to be talking nastier than you want to be times ten. Know what I'm saying? And when that fish fart smell comes sailing back this way, it's so solid, you had a club, you could beat it back.

"Oh, Lord. What kind of life is this? Here we are. Jonahs all, with electric lights and bad fish plumbing.

"I need drink. I need love. And figure what I'll get is a drink from yonder skull.

"Let me stop for a drink."

# 4

Okay. Enough of this guy's story. We'll get back to him. It's me diary. You know, Jack. Me. I'm talking here. Writing here...Whatever.

I've come to tell you this BJoe's story, but, seeing how my world, our world, is a weird movie, and I'm writing this down, and I'm sleepy, I think at this moment in time I'll pause BJoe's story and pick up on it when I feel less tired.

Also, this pen is playing out, and it's harder to get a dark inky impression...Shit, I'm starting to sound like that insane nut BJoe, wandering this way and that with thoughts and pen.

I think this world does it to you. Scrambles the brain waves, dear hearts. Sometimes I feel as if my mental impulses, like a ball, bounce off things, ricochet and are caught by a catcher not intended, so to speak. And that when he/she/it throws the ball back at me, it's not the same ball first thrown. Too tired. Too hypoglycemic.

God, what I'd give for a glass of iced tea, a fine fresh dinner salad with Ranch dressing and that little crumbled up bacon stuff, a medium rare rib-eye, and afterward, a big clean bed with crisp sheets and a nice soft pillow.

Going to stretch out on a bus seat, alone. Reba has already stretched out on another, and these seats are not roomy. It's one thing to be seriously doing the dirty deed, 'cause you want to do that, you'll do it on a goddamn toadstool. So the seats are not too small for that, but for sleep, it's nice to have a bit of room.

So, I'll lay me down to rest, and call for —

# **INTERMISSION**

And now, refreshed, somewhat, we return you to your movie—

# 5

After resting, as well as one rests here, I started my day. No matter if it is day or night, I call anytime I'm awake and functioning a day.

There is really little left of Bjo's story worth telling, so all I'm going to write down is this:

We woke Cory up and Grace slapped him a bit, and he was sober enough then to climb down the ladder, our friend Bjo lurking above us, calling down for us to go ahead and sleep up there with them, in their fishy cave.

My thoughts were: I do, I might not wake up. And the last defiant thing I might ever do is give Bjo or the others a spot of indigestion and then pass turdlike out of existence. On the other hand, I might be nothing more than a warm pleasant feeling in their tummies. Couldn't have that.

So we climbed down. Quick. And once in the bus we slept, made sure all the windows were closed and the door was good and locked, and we kept knives by our sides. Bjo's story got me worried. I think there's good reason to worry. I'm awake. So I should worry. I also worry in my sleep, now that I think about it. At least most of the time.

Reba is worried too. She climbed on me this "morning," and we had sex so desperate and savage and unsatisfying, I wish I had just pulled my pud or maybe stuck a stick up my ass.

We spent the morning flushing out our bus by backing it even closer to the exit from which we entered the fish's belly. We stood outside and let the water that the fish swallowed flush through the back window and cleanse it.

It isn't exactly clean smelling, but it got rid of all the muck, washed it out the door. That done, we considered driving the bus closer to the piles of cars and the darkness, which lay thick, like something stacked.

James, who had wiled away his time in the bus while we were visiting with Bjo, said, "If what you told me about the dark things is true, wouldn't it be smarter not to go that close to those things? The Scuts?"

"Yes," I said, "it would be smarter. But, it's a kind of trade off. Bjo, he's not coming right out and nailing us. I figure they don't want to fight if they don't have to. But, you can see he's starting to think of us as lunch. He can't help himself."

"And maybe more than that," Grace said. "I think he had other plans for Reba and me."

Reba nodded. "Seemed that way. Especially you."

"Yeah," Grace said. "He wants to screw us, skin us, eat us, make pouches out of our tits."

"Yours would certainly be utilitarian," Steve said, and Grace slapped him in the back of the head.

"It was a compliment," Steve said. "Sort of."

"So, we can be near a spot that they don't like to go," I said, "or, rather we hope they would rather not go, or we can be right out there in the brightest part of the light, where they feel safe."

"I could tell he's got the willies about those shadow things," Grace said. "He tried to play it pretty deadpan, but he sure was massaging the old sausage when he got to the part about the things in the dark. The Scuts, for scuttle, I presume. I thought he was gonna toss the old mayonnaise from one end of the cave to the other, way he was getting down."

"Sure sorry I missed that little trip and conversation," James said.

"I don't think you really mean that," Reba said.

James grinned.

"Here's the way I see it," I said. "Last night, we just locked up. And I guess that was enough to save us. But in time, the more they think about it, us down here, them up there, their bellies gnawing, and this Bjoie with a love for human flesh, I think a day will come when they decide to try and take us."

"I agree," Grace said. "I get the feeling they aren't trying to add new members to their group. Not really. Just lunches. Here near the darkness, if we have to, we can retreat into the shadows and deal with those things as they come."

Cory had been silent, trying to get over his hangover, but now he spoke. "Big question I got, is how do we get out of here? It's cozy all right, but I'd rather not stay here."

"That one," Grace said, "we're still working one."

"And, if there's a solution," I said, "I suggest we find it. Not only because of Bjoie and his companions, or because of the Scuts, but because this morning I noted that some of the lights that had been just in front of the cars, they went out. My guess is, in time, all the lights will go out. And then we're going to have to deal directly with the Scuts. We won't last long inside of a fish where we can't see how to move about."



"Another thing," Reba said. "Have you noted that it's temperature controlled in here? A little warm, but there's something keeping a fairly balanced temperature. The lights go, maybe it goes. For that matter, maybe whatever powers the fish will play out."

"Can I say something?"

It was Homer. He went through spells so quiet, it was easy to forget he was there.

"Sure," I said.

"One way out might be we wait until the fish is close to the surface, and then we exit like turds and float up, taking something to hang onto with us. There's wood lying about, stuff the fish has swallowed. We might could do that."

"Good as far as it goes," Steve said. "But how would we know how deep down we are. We go out when we're way down deep, we'd drown before we made it to the surface."

Homer shook his head. "Catfish like to get along the bottom, that's no lie. But don't you feel it?"

"Feel it?" Grace said.

"Pressure in your ears?"

Now that he mentioned it, I had to admit I did. It came and went. The others agreed that they too felt it.

"When the pressure goes away," Homer says, "I think Ed's at the surface, or close to it. That would be the time to go. I mean, there was a door, that would be when to go out of it."

Everyone was silent for a moment.

"It's a thought," Steve said.

"It isn't much," Grace said, "but it's more than anyone else has offered. Homer, you just might be a genius."

"You think?" Homer said.

"No," Grace said. "Not really. But even a blind pig finds an acorn now and then. And I think you may have found an idea."

"Well," Homer said. "Wow. An idea. Me, of all people. Uh, what kind of idea did I have really?"

# 6

"It was a thought," Homer said. "But I didn't take into consideration that there isn't a door."

"There are two ways inside this fish," Grace said. "We got the mouth, and we got the asshole. We try to go through the mouth, well, water rushes through there all the time. We'll drown. Maybe, if we go to the rear we can find an exit. This thing may eat and shit, but it doesn't have real fish intestines. I think Bjoe is wrong about some things. I think this fish is, or was, a work in progress. The robots were supposed to finish it all up, give it fish insides, but, for some reason, they played out."

"Leaving the fish not quite complete," Steve said.

"Yep. I think that whatever built this world, the things in it, is losing its grip. Maybe mentally, maybe it, or they, or whatever, just got bored with the whole thing."

"So it's falling apart?" I said. "Our gods are going insane?"

"Yeah. Or it's not being finished. It's like a dream I used to have when I went to bed at night, elves would take up the rest of the world and fold it away. But they were quick, see, so if I got up to go pee, looked out the window, they were always there with a back-drop. And they built things instantly, before I could get to them. But sometimes, in my dream, I'd look out of the corner of my eye, and there would be nothing.

"I remember the dream well. Gave me this feeling that the world was all a lie, and that I made it up as I lived and breathed. And sometimes, my daydream broke down."

"So in the dream, you dreamed you were daydreaming?" Steve said.

"Yeah. And now I may be living in just the sort of world I dreamed about. But, a lot more unpleasant."

"My head's starting to hurt," Homer said.

"About escaping?" Steve said.

"Yeah," Grace said. "I was going to say, could be, in the back, there's a way out."

"Great," Cory said. "We go out the asshole riding on a turd. And drown."

"That's where Homer's idea comes in," Grace said.

"What idea was that?" James said. "I still don't think I understand all I understand about

that idea."

"It's about listening to the inside of our heads," Grace said, and she let that hang in the air like a fart.

"I get it," I said. "We work our way to the rear, hang around until we feel the change in our heads, in our ears. Then, it's the asshole escape. Homer's idea, but without a conventional door."

"That's right," Grace said. "But we have to prepare ahead of time. We have to be sure there's a way out back there. It may be there's real fish guts to the rear. We might need floating devices of some sort."

"Maybe the Scuts got life jackets," Steve said.

"Funny," Grace said, "but it's some kind of idea. Otherwise, we live our lives in the belly of a fish. Just hanging around until an overwhelming crowd of hungry folk descend on us ready for dinner."

"It's possible we could get along with them," James said. "We've seen and done some pretty strange stuff ourselves. I mean, shit, I can't believe I've been fucked in the butt. That's not something I'd do on a Saturday night back home. I even ate a dead baby once. Maybe twice. All right. Probably three times. And I saw two of them killed. So what makes me better than them?"

"You have to make yourself better," Grace said. "We all do. We've all missed a step. We've done what we had to do to survive. But, I know me and Steve and Jack, we've tried to keep it together. Tried hard. Now we can keep trying and the rest of you can try with us. If you want to stay here, that's your choice. All of you. Me, I'm looking for a way out of the exhaust pipe."

James nodded. "Guess so."

"Hell," Homer said. "I'm for it. It's my idea, and I didn't even know I had one."

"How about everyone else?" Grace asked.

"I'm in," I said.

"Me too," Steve said. "I go where you go, honey."

Cory raised a hand. "Count me in. But, maybe we could make some kind of deal with those guys up there. For some of that liquor. It tastes like boiled dog shit, but it makes you feel pretty good."

"That's one thing we don't need," Grace said. "Distractions."

"So what's the exact plan?" James asked.

"That's a bit of a problem," Grace said. "An exact plan hasn't exactly come to me yet."

"Then we all put our heads together," I said, "come up with a more detailed plan."

"It sounds iffy," Cory said.

"Actually," James said. "It sounds fishy."

He looked a bit disappointed when no one laughed.

"It does," I said. "But, I'm tired of being pushed around by this world. I want to push back. Lets rustle up something to eat, then put our heads together and figure how to do what we want to do."

# 7

We scrounged up some food. A few fish Ed had swallowed. We cut them open and ate them raw. I wondered if they too were lined with little wires, a combination of flesh and electricity.

After eating, first order of business was to see if the bus would start.

It wouldn't.

Steve and Homer opened the hood and checked around under there.

"I think it's just damp," Homer said. "We got to get something to dry the inside of the carburetor, and such. Some rags would do it."

"We're wearing them." I said.

"Everybody shuck," Grace said.

We took off our clothes and stood butt-naked while Homer and Steve took our rags or animal wrappings and used them to dry the inside of the engine.

Well, we weren't all butt-naked. I had shoes. And so did all the others. Grace's were made of dried animal hides, as were Reba's. I'm sure I looked ridiculous standing there wearing only shoes, and shoes where the soles would have flapped like tongues, had they not been tied up with twine and vines I had scrounged during our stay in the drive-in.

This drying business went on for awhile, and in time, our clothes, now greasy, were returned to us. I put my rags on, as did the others. Grace, however, decided her top was too greasy and threw it away.

It was enough to make me want to believe in a good god.

Almost.

After a bit, we all tuckered out, and I was feeling queasy on top of everything else. Sea sickness. I guess Ed from time to time swam faster and deeper, and perhaps slightly off-center.

We decided enough was enough, closed up the hood and tried it again. It fired up. We drove it up close to the pile of cars, decided to rest. I went right to sleep. As always, there were thoughts and worries and dreams. I dreamed about the ghost of the drive-in. Where was it? Did it only mist about on the sea above us?

I dreamed of aliens with devices that seemed to be cameras, and maybe special effects instruments. Were they filming us? If there were lights inside this fish, why not cameras? Were we some form of exploitation film? A documentary on strange life placed in odd circumstances; a kind of reality show for the quivering, tentacled green-faced masses that slithered above our sea and above our sky?

And then, in an instant, it came to me, like the flash of an old-fashioned camera, one of those kind that made the eyes go bright, then see white, then turn one temporarily blind. In that instant, I know for a fact that a truth was thrust upon me. Something inside me put it all together, worked it all out, took hold of it and held it and saw the insides of everything that was, and there was a revelation. I knew how the universe worked. To be more precise, I knew how my universe worked. I was astonished. I was elated.

And then I awoke, it was lost to me, fleeing fast from my memory like dark water down a drain. I felt as empty as a eunuch's nut sack. I lay there on the hard bus seat and tried to call it all back to me, but it was like calling a deaf hound dog. That buddy had done run off and was gone.

I pulled my arm from over my eyes and sat up in my seat, and was startled.

The bus was surrounded by the fish cave folks. There were even a couple on the hood, their faces pressed up against the glass, looking in.

One of those on the hood was Bjoe. He was on his knees with both hands on the glass, sort of cupped, and his forehead was pressed up against them, and he was looking in.

I must have let out a startled sound, because Reba, who was lying on the seat across from me, sat up, saw them, and let out a loud noise herself. Pretty soon we all stirred.

Grace, who was in a seat near the front, rose up and looked around. Her naked breasts took my mind off of the fish cave folk for a pleasant moment. She didn't look self-conscious at all. "What do you want?" she said loudly to the glass.

Bjoe put a hand to his ear.

Grace repeated herself.

Bjoe stuck the tip of a finger against the glass. It was pointing in her direction.

"Why?" Grace said.

Bjoe just smiled.

Grace shook her head.

More of the fish cave folk climbed onto the hood and pressed against the glass, thick as a grape cluster. All of us were out of our seats now.

Cory said, "Maybe they just want to talk?"

"They don't look as friendly as before," Steve said.

"They've had time to think about us," Cory said. "Probably been comparing long pig recipes."

"Ain't no different than the rest of us," James said. "I've eaten dead bodies. I've cannibalized."

"Yes," Reba said, "but those bodies were dead. We aren't."

"Yet," Homer said.

"Is the door locked?" I said in a soft manner.

"Yeah," Steve said. "It is."

We watched them for awhile, then sat in our seats and watched them watch us, their faces and hands pressed against the window glass.

"I feel like one of those lobsters in a tank," Steve said, "you know, the ones where you pick your own."

"And I'm the prime lobster," Grace said, without one hint of modesty.

"I think we're going to need to start the bus up," I said, "drive deeper into the darkness. This bit of shadow doesn't worry them like I hoped it would."

"I believe you are right, Brother Jack," Steve said.

"I say we wait," Cory said. "They're just weird. We're weird. They haven't done anything else."

"One of them has a large bone," Reba said, "and he's trying to work at the edges of my window."

We looked on her side, and sure enough. One of the guys had a big old bone, sharp on one end from having been broken, and he was sticking it in the edge of the window, trying to work the glass loose. He wasn't looking at what he was doing. He grinned at us. He had very yellow teeth.

They began to beat on the windows, all around, with their fists.

"Yep," I said, "No question in my mind. They want to eat us."

"Well, fuck them," Grace said, turned her ass toward the front glass and pulled down her little fur shorties and gave them a moon-shot.

They beat on the glass harder.

"I think you're just encouraging them," I said.

Steve climbed into the driver's seat, hit the key. The engine sprang to life. Steve jerked it in gear and punched it. The bus seemed to leap. The folk on the hood went flying backwards, and there was a sound like someone stepping on crackers in cellophane. The bus bumped twice.

I looked out the back window. A couple of the fish cave folk lay in a bloody wad on the grating, and Bjoe was up and limping after us, shaking his fists. The others were coming at a run, passing him.

We were going pretty goddamn fast for a large bus in a small space with a short length to run. Also there was another problem. A large pile of cars in front of us, and no time to stop, and really, no purpose in stopping.

And there was the little problem of the Scuts, whatever they were, waiting in the dark.

The bus slammed into the pile of automobiles and the darkness that surrounded them.



## 8

The bus hit the pile of cars, hit them hard, knocked our asses about, tossed me over a seat and into another. When I clambered to my feet and looked out, the bus was no longer moving, but it had moved the cars a mite. The darkness had fallen over the front of the bus and covered it like a drop cloth.

Glancing out the back windows, into the light, I saw the fish cave folk were closing from the rear. I could already envision myself being ripped open, my guts pulled out for an appetizer.

Steve jerked the bus in reverse, backed it with a full-throttle wobble, hit a couple of the fish cave folk, drove them down beneath the bus, smashing them like walnuts. Then he gunned the bus forward again, but at an angle. This time he hit one of the cars and really moved it, pushed it back deeper into shadow. He put his foot down hard on the gas, and there was a sound like metal grinding and smoke rose up from the tires. For a long time the bus just held its spot. Held long enough the fish cave folk reached us and leaped against the back of the bus, up on the bumper and beat at the glass and metal wall there.

The cars began to move, began to slip backwards. The bus began to creep forward, taking us and the bus and the pursuing fish cave folk into the darkness.

Steve drove on, the cars parting like the red sea, rolling up on either side of us, tumbling along the grate floor. After a few moments, we were deeper into the darkness and the fish cave folk began to fall back.

"They don't like it here." Reba said.

"Neither do I," Steve said. "I just saw something that didn't look like anything, but like all kinds of things, rush by the hood."

We were still moving, but we had slowed down. We looked out the windows and saw nothing.

"You still see it?" I asked.

"Nope," Steve said. "It went by fast."

"Maybe it was just a shadow," Grace said. "I didn't see anything."

"You weren't looking straight ahead," Steve said. "And no, it wasn't a shadow. Unless they can pull themselves apart from the darkness and... well, I don't know what it did. Run? Flew? Tumbled? I couldn't tell you. It was there, then it moved, then it wasn't there

anymore. It was like it fitted itself into the darkness again. It was...I don't know, darker than the dark."

"Stop the bus," I said.

"You sure?" Steve said.

"They aren't coming anymore," I said.

Steve geared the bus down, brought it to a halt. Looking back, it was as if we were down in a dark hole staring up at the sun. Against the light the fish cave folk moved. They grabbed up their dead, and pulled them to the side, set upon the bodies with knives. Fights broke out.

Bjoe appeared from the midst of the fleshy wad, slashing at anything in his way with a bone knife. A throat was cut. A man fell at his feet. The crowd parted around him, scuttled back. At his feet the man whom he had cut thrashed and squirted blood from his throat.

Bjoe looked toward the bus, knife in hand, hair disheveled, dick and balls hanging like some kind of withered fruit. I guessed he could see our shape. He didn't come toward us though. He just looked at us for a long time, then turned and said something to those around him.

After a moment the fish cave folk moved toward Bjoe, slowly, respectfully. They set about cutting, mostly tearing, at the bus-crushed bodies. Bjoe leaned over and stabbed the quivering man he had wounded a couple of times, ripped him open from gut to gill.

Intestines hissed up steam and blood gushed. Fish cave folk dropped to their knees and dipped their faces into the bloody body. Some ran off with meaty pieces, like dogs.

Bjoe, realizing his prized long pigs were being taken from him, settled down over the man he had killed, bared his teeth. I couldn't hear him from there, but I could sure see those teeth. Could even imagine him growling like some protective wild animal.

"I think it's a good thing we didn't stay back there," I said.

"Yeah," Reba said. "Bjoe has done run all out of nice."

"He was so friendly the other night," Cory said.

"Hell," Grace said. "You wouldn't know. You were drunk. You ought to be glad we didn't leave your intoxicated ass lying up there. We thought about it."

"I'm glad you didn't," he said.

"I don't believe it takes a ton of thinking," I said, "to know that Bjoe is off his nut. He was friendly, and maybe he thought that would work for him. With the girls."

"Yeah," Grace said. "He saw you and me as maybe a willing carnival ride. Then, an unwilling lunch."

"It didn't turn out so easy for him, though," Reba said.

"No, it didn't," Grace said. "And I wish he'd put something over that big old ugly thing of his. It looks like a turkey neck. You know, cut up for boiling in soup."

"Don't make me hungry," Homer said.

"Course," James said, moving his head from right to left as he looked out the window.

"Bjoe and his bunch may turn out to be the least of our worries. I just saw what Steve saw."

# 9

No one else saw it, but none of us doubted there was something out there to see.

"We got some food still," Steve said. "And water. We can settle in for a while, think things over."

"And if we need to go to the bathroom, do a one or a two?" Cory asked.

"Hang it out the window," Steve said. "Have someone watch so whatever those things are don't crawl up your ass."

"It's the bathroom part I hate the most," Reba said. "Not having privacy and some place comfortable to go. And, you guys, you may do number ones, but you don't do number twos. Way some of you smell, those have got to be number fours."

"On that note," Steve said, "what say we hustle up something to eat?"

"And might I suggest we eat small," Grace said. "We want time to figure on Homer's plan."

"I just love that part," Homer said. "Me with a plan."

After eating, we decided on lookouts. We started with Steve. Way we worked was, we let the ones who felt the least tired do the watching. There was no way for us to know how long a watch was, so we just had to go by instinct. If someone felt they wanted to watch for a while, they took over, replacing whoever was on duty at the time.

The plan was, everyone got a watch.

The rest of us, though not sleepy, tried to sleep anyway. It wasn't that hard, really.

Boredom, fear, depression, it all helps you sleep. Only problem for me is, it didn't really give me freedom. In my dreams I thought about the same things I thought about when awake.

As for the plan to escape, nothing more was mentioned about it for a time. But, I did feel my ears pop a couple of times, and I reported it to Grace.

We were sitting up front of the bus, me and her and Steve, and she was speaking softly. She said, "Homer's plan gives hope, such as it is, but I don't know it will actually work."

"It was really your plan," I said.

"Of course," she said. "Thing is, could be our ears pop when we go down, and when we come up. Trick is to know which is which."

"Ah," I said.

"I think I can tell the difference," Grace said. "There's a real pressure when we go down. It's subtle, but it's there. When we go up, or when I think we go up, I feel.. .well, lighter. Thing is, I'd like a few days to really get used to feeling it."

"I get you," I said.

"We go off half-cocked," Steve said, "we'll drown like rats."

"We'll probably drown like rats anyway," I said.

Later in the day, a new problem presented itself.

It was on my watch. I was at the back, looking out the window. Bjoe's minions had carried off the bodies and gone away, but from time to time they showed themselves, moved as far down the grid as they dared, right at the edge of light and shadow.

Bjoe came once. I don't know if he could see me well, or at all, where I stood at the back window. I'm sure he could see the outline of the bus, surrounded by piled cars on either side, but one thing was for sure, I could see him, out there beneath the bright lights.

From what Bjoe had said I could be assured he wasn't a Christian, but, by golly, he had all the makings. Narrow-minded, mean-spirited, judgmental, and hypocritical. He may have been a little too well educated, but on all other fronts he would have made a hell of a fundamentalist, even if he was coming from the opposite end of the spectrum.

All he needed was a suit and a tie and a pulpit. He was just the sort to have a choir boy bent over a spare pew, or his hand in your pocket when you weren't looking, all the while telling you how he knows the truth and you got to get with the program brother.

In a way, he had his own congregation. The fish cave folk. We were to be their source of wine and wafer, flesh and blood. I'd had a run-in with that type before, when we were originally in the drive-in.

But, this wasn't the problem. At the moment, this was an annoyance.

The problem was Cory.

No one was sleeping now, we were just taking turns at the back of the bus, and Cory, he went to the center, said, "I think we're all going to be together, then we got to share better."

"How's that?" James said.

"The women."

"Hey," Reba said. "I think the women get a say in that."

"Listen here, now," Cory said. "Under normal circumstances, I'd agree. But I'm tired of bumping James in the butt. It ain't satisfying."

"And there's that shit on your dick factor," James said.

"That too," Cory said.

"Then stop doing it," Reba said.

"Well now, I'd like to," Cory said. "Me and James have talked about it. We don't like it none. We ain't homos, but we do want to get off."

"Jerk off, and shut up," Grace said. She was still at the front of the bus, and now she rose from her seat, stood in the aisle. She stood with her legs spread, her naked breasts rose with her deep breathing. She looked formidable, but she also looked good, standing like that, her breasts revealed.

Steve said, "What she said."

"It don't have to be nothing special," Cory said. "And you girls wouldn't even have to care or like it. We could do it from behind. You could look out the window. But I say we all get a turn. It ain't right that we shouldn't. We got needs. We're human, and this ain't like at home. Social business and manners, they ain't no good here. It ought not be that Steve and Jack here are the only ones getting their pudding tossed. I say, right now, we make a deal you gals give it up. I don't know we can measure time on whose turn it is real easy, but we can work something out. Grace, you and Reba, you can take turns, you can — "

It was quick. I'll say that.

Grace, who must have been twenty feet away, was suddenly running down the aisle, very fast toward Cory. I knew in my heart of hearts she wasn't hastening to give him some nookie.

I was right.

She leapt in the air.

Cory tried to step back.

He threw up his hands.

Too late.

Grace's foot snapped out and she made with a loud yell, and her leg sliced right between his lifted arms and caught him in the face and there was a cracking sound and his head turned quick and he made a noise like someone who had just stepped on a tack.

When Grace hit the floor of the bus, Cory was already there.

I forgot all about my turn at the watch. I moved forward, stood over Cory. His mouth was open and blood was coming out of it. His head seemed awkward on his neck. His eyes were open, but they had a kind of "I'm wearing milky contacts" look.

Homer eased up, bent over and touched his fingers to Cory's neck.

"I don't feel nothing."

I bent down and checked him out as well. I'd seen enough of it now to know one thing for certain. I was looking at death.

"Dead," I said.

"No, shit," Grace said.

"Yeah," I said. "No, shit. You kick a guy in the neck like that, it ain't just gonna modify his speech patterns. A kick like that, back home, wherever that is, I bet his family pictures fell off the wall."

"I'm not bothered at all," Grace said. "I'd like to make him that way twice. James. You still with Cory on this share the wealth thing?"

"No," James said. "I mean, I could see his point. But not a lot...Not at all...It was a bad idea."

"Damn," Homer said, "you killed that man with a kick."

"I certainly did," Grace said.

"Cool," Homer said. "Not only are you hot, but you are deadly...And, remember. I wasn't in on that...you know, plan."

"Good," Grace said.

She bent over and grabbed Cory by the arm and dragged him to the front of the bus.

"Open the door, Steve," she said.

Steve, briskly, I thought, stepped to where the door device was, grabbed it and pulled. The door hissed open, and Grace, being not careful at all, bumped Cory down the steps of the bus and tossed his ass out into the dark.

There was a rustling noise, and then out of nowhere the darkness became darker and Cory was snatched up. I saw his feet flap once or twice at the air, then he was absorbed by shadow.

Steve pulled the bus door closed quickly, and something dark slammed against it.

"Just in time," Grace said.

She walked to the center of the bus, said, "I'm serious. Dead serious, as you saw.

Anyone else have any kind of plans for me or Reba? Come on. Anyone want to talk pussy?"

No one raised their hands.

"I don't go for any shit," Grace said. "Especially if it has to do with me. And if you think I feel bad about Cory, I don't. I meant to kill him. It worked a bit better than I thought. I figured I'd have the pleasure of beating him to death, but it didn't work out. James, now you ain't even got Cory's warm butt to wrap around your little old pecker. I better not so much as see you look in my direction or scratch out a picture of a vagina on the back of a seat with your fingernail. Hear me?"

"Yeah," James said, standing very stiff at the back of the bus. "I do."

"Good," Grace said. "Now stare at the floor."

James looked at the floor.

"Keep looking down for awhile. Don't look up anytime soon. I don't want to see your ugly face. Got me?"

"Got you," James said, without lifting his head.

Grace said, "Jack. I'll take the next watch."

And she did.



# 10

They keep working their way closer," Grace said.

Grace was still at the back of the bus, at the back window, and when she said this, we all took notice. Fact was, we were paying Grace very close attention.

"I hope you don't kill me for having an opinion," Homer said. "But, what happened to my plan? We sit here long enough, either Bjoie and his bunch will get us, or these...shadows will, whatever they are."

"The bus's lights work, don't they?" I said.

"Yeah," Steve said. "I didn't exactly have time to think about them before, but yeah, they work. I mean, they should, all the dampness didn't short out a wire."

"I say we turn on the lights, drive in deeper," I said. "There isn't any going back, and we're going to try and make our way to the rear of the fish anyway, so, crank it up, turn on the lights, and drive on."

"It's a start," Grace said.

I looked to the back of the bus. Bjoie and his followers were standing out of the light, just over the line into the world of shadow.

Bjoie was worrying his pecker as he glared at the bus. He stepped into deeper shadow, and I couldn't make out his features, then he eased toward us slowly. His minions followed.

"They're getting a hell of a lot braver," Grace said.

At that moment, one of the female minions came forward, bent to the ground there in shadow, and made a movement with her hand. There was a spark. She went at it again. More sparks. Then a blaze.

I realized what they were doing. Striking metal to get sparks, knocking it into some tender. Dried seaweed probably. The little blaze struggled at the shadows then was lit to a torch, most likely coated in fish oil or fish fat. The torch tore a bright hole in the darkness. Other torches were lit.

Soon there was a crowd of torches moving our way.

"They really want you, Grace," Homer said.

"They want us all," Grace said. "We're nothing to them but a big old dinner."

Steve said, "All right then. Now we find out. Hold onto your asses."

He started the bus, hit the lights.

They came on.

A cheer rose up inside the bus.

I know. No big thing. But, hey. We took our victories, small as they might be, where we could get them.

The bus lurched forward, began to pick up speed.

Behind us Bjoie and the others ran after us, their torches bobbing in the shadows like bouncing balls.

Steve put the hammer down, and in a matter of moments they were nothing more than bright pinpricks and soon the little pieces of light quit moving, but we didn't. We rolled on.

"Won't be long," I said, "and they'll all eat each other. It's bound to come down to that eventually."

"Glad to not be part of the feast," Reba said.

We slowed and rolled on. The darkness became darker yet, and there started to be a kind of thumping against the side of the bus, against the glass.

Shadows, like large black pieces of construction paper, but with heft, blew about the bus and rocked it, crawled all over it. We could hear them on the roof, scuttling from one end of the bus to the other. Where they had hit the glass was dark oily slime.

When the glow of the headlights hit them, they scattered. They were ragged in shape. Not one like the other, just torn black curtains of night, the tears all different, all irregular.

Once I saw a split in what could only be described as the dark face of one, and there was something not so dark there. Teeth. Shiny. Almost silver.

"What they fuck are they?" Homer said.

"Parasites," Reba said. "Maybe some kind of crazy cancers. With dentures. They may be killing our giant fish host as well. Only more slowly than they would kill us."

"I think they're just pure pieces of evil," Homer said. "You see, I finally figured out where

we are. It took me some thinking—"

"I bet," Grace said.

"—but I come to a conclusion. It was our time. We died. And we went to hell."

"Why the fuck would I go to hell?" Reba said. "Bad language?"

"Me," Grace said, "I did some serious fucking. But, hey, would that count? There really isn't a commandment that says no sex. Just no adultery. And besides, I don't believe that shit anyway. Which part of the Bible you gonna believe. The mean-spirited mean-assed God of the Old Testament, or the sweet philosopher of the New Testament?"

This didn't faze Homer.

"That's where we are," Homer said. "Hell. We're being punished."

"I don't deserve punishment," I said. "Well, I didn't. I've done some things since coming here that might be debatable. But to get here, if it's hell, hey, I must have got in the wrong line somehow."

"I suppose it could be that," James said. "The wrong line."

He had been real quiet up till now, possibly not wanting Grace to leap in the air like a fucking Ninja Turtle and kick his head around in a three-sixty.

"We thought we was all in the line for drunken fun, movies, sex, what have you, and it was a trick line, so to speak. We got in the wrong line...Wrong place at the wrong time."

"There isn't any hell," Grace said, "and if there is, this isn't it."

"It's bad enough to be a hell of sorts," Reba said.

"We get to make choices still," Grace said. "I figure that's hell, when you can't make choices. When you can't struggle or strive anymore. Can't choose to be who you are no matter what the circumstances. We get to that point, then we're in hell. Right now, we're still alive."

About that time Steve brought the bus to a halt.

What now?" Homer said.

"Well," Grace said, "if we're going to execute your plan, we're going to have to start using our heads. Here's what I suggest. We all relax. Just relax. We keep someone awake at all times. Say two of us. What we do is we start being real quiet. We only talk if we have to. Boring, I know. But what we got to do is be quiet inside ourselves, and listen, and feel for when things change."

"The pressure in the ears?" Homer said.

"Exactly," Grace said. "If at least two of us are awake at all times, and two of us feel it, we try to decide if it's oppressive pressure, you know, going down, or relaxing pressure, surfacing, or being near the surface."

"Uh," James said, holding a hand out to Grace, "not to be kicked to death or anything, but near the surface, wouldn't that be as bad as being way below?"

"Depends on how near the surface," Steve said.

"But how can we know for sure?" James said.

"You can't," I said. "We judge the way Grace says for a time. When we feel we can recognize the way it feels when we get close to the surface, then, we plan for the next time, and go for it."

"Don't your ears adjust after a time?" Steve said. "Get so they don't pop?"

"You better hope not," Grace said. "And another thing, we're going to have to go out there."

"Outside the bus," Homer said. "I don't even like to hang my ass out the window anymore. I got to go, I go damn quick."

"Yeah," Steve said, "the bus is starting to stink, all that stuff on its sides."

"We have go out," Grace said. "We got flashlights, and those things don't like the light."

"How bad do they not like it?" Homer said.

"It's the chance we have to take," Grace said.

"She's right," I said. "We have to go out there and find the way out of Ed. The flush, so to

speak. And when we do, then we got to figure how to ride our way out, and hope for the best."

"We could just stay right here," James said, "inside the bus. It's not so bad."

"For how long," I said. "We'll run out of food. We'll end up eating one another—"

"Maybe it wasn't such a good idea throwing Cory away," James said. "I mean, he was already dead...I'm just saying what I think others are thinking."

"I wasn't thinking that right then," Grace said. "But I could. We all could. Some of us have not only thought it, we've done it."

James's hand went up.

"No shame in that," Grace said. "If the meat is available. It wasn't too good for Olympic hopefuls crashed in the snow, and it wasn't too good for pioneers crossing the Rockies, caught in blizzards, so, by God, it isn't too good for us. But, I must admit, I wasted some not so prime meat."

"Yeeewwwwww," Reba said.

"You just haven't got hungry enough," James said.

"Could be," Reba said, "but I don't want to start being a cannibal anytime soon. I might start to like it the way Bjoelike it. And then I might not want to wait for the food to die. Or, I might even think how nice it might be if someone did die, so there'd be the meat."

"At the time," Grace said, "I was thinking I wanted that bastard out of my sight, not how I could prepare him for dinner. If I really thought about that sort of thing, wanted that sort of thing, I wouldn't have thrown him out there for the shadows to snack on. Thing is, we can't sit here. We have to find a way out, even if it kills us."

"I don't like that kills us part," James said.

"You have no real say," Grace said. "You shouldn't have sided with Cory."

"I only sided a little bit."

"Get quiet again," Grace said. "Thing is, you can stay if you want, but you won't decide for the rest of us. Look here. I'm not going to decide for any of you, for that matter. All I'm saying is I'm going to try and find a way out. You can work with me, or do your own thing. But, me, I'm going."

"I'm in," Steve said.

"Me too," I said.

Reba and Homer agreed. James was silent, the way Grace had asked him to be.

"All right then," Grace said. "I say we start the shifts, for feeling the changes. Up and down. No one has to sleep, but someone, two of us have to stay awake. No talking. Starting as soon as we lay things out. Unless it's necessary to survival. You want to sit up and look about, or try and help the ones assigned to feel the change, go for it. But if it's not your turn on deck, so to speak, either sleep or shut your mouth. We'll record what we find. Jack, I've seen you writing. You got paper, a pen in that pack, right?"

"I do. The pen is starting to run out of ink, but I have an eyebrow pencil and some mascara that I found in a car. Have to, we can write with that."

"Good. As I was saying. A couple of us need to go on an expedition. Outside. See if we can find the exit hole."

"I'll go," I said.

"Me too," Reba said.

"All right," Grace said.

James raised his hand, looked at Grace. "I know this is something I shouldn't ask. But who made you captain?"

"I did," she said. "Problem with that?"

"No. That works fine for me."

We still had a few flashlights, and there were even a couple of matches Grace had produced from somewhere. And there were knives, of course.

Grace, me and Reba moved to the front of the bus. I took one flashlight, Reba the other. We each took a knife. We spoke quietly.

"Thing to do," Grace said, "is go out there, see if you can figure where Ed relieves himself, and can we get out that way. This critter, he isn't going to be like a normal fish..."

"No shit," Reba said.

"No telling what you'll find." Grace said. Then almost too soft to hear: "But you got to find something. Some way out."

"Those things move awfully fast out there." I said.

"I know," Grace said. "I can go instead of you."

"I didn't say that."

"I can, though," Grace said, "but the problem is James. I don't trust him, and with me out of the way, well, Steve could handle him, but I like having him double-teamed. I may just go on and kill him. That would be the smart thing to do."

"But it wouldn't be the right thing," I said. "We start doing things like that, then Homer is correct, we'll be like a lot of other folks on this world, and with no one acting as room monitors, this will be hell."

"I'll try to remember that," Grace said. "Now, you remember Bjo's story, about how the torches his folk were carrying went out, and they were nabbed. I think that's exactly what happened. The torches burned out, and the light went out, and when it did, they were nabbed. Once you turn your flashlights on, don't turn them off. No light, and they come. You've got light, they won't bother you."

"You're sure?" Reba said.

"Of course not," Grace said. "I'm trying to make you feel better. All we know is they don't like light. They might be strong enough to have put those torches out themselves. They might jam those flashlights up your asses. I don't know. I can go, you can stay. One way or another, someone has to go out there and look around."

"We could all go," Reba said. "Isn't it a bad idea to divide? You know, we've all certainly seen enough horror movies."

"If we all go, and it goes wrong, none of us make it," I said. "I wouldn't like that. I want some of us to survive, if for no other reason than I'm stubborn. We don't make it, then we still got others who can."

"You could send James," Reba said.

"He wouldn't be worth a damn if I did send him," Grace said. "I don't like him and I don't trust him. Besides, I'd hope he would drop his flashlight. Here's the bottom line. We got to find a way out. We all go, we wouldn't have a chance. There's only two more flashlights. There would be a wad of us out there without enough light. The two of you, you can fend for each other. I don't know what to say you're looking for. A way out. That's it. We'll all probably drown anyway. But I'd rather do that than sit here and hope there's a god who notices and sends us individual scuba suits."

"I got you," I said. I turned to Reba, said, "Think the way we do this, Reba, is one of us takes up the rear, sort of back to back, and we wave the lights around a lot. Let them know we're armed with bits of sunshine."

"I'll have Steve turn on and flash the lights every now and then. I can't tell time, but I'm going to wet a string, hang it from the ceiling, when the drips fill a paper cup — "

"You don't have any paper cups," I said.

"I'm going to fold one out of a piece of paper from your pack. I'll make it a small one. When it fills, I'll flash the lights. Then I'll flash them again. Three, four times. Then we'll wet the string again, let it fill the cup."

"And if the string dries out before the cup is filled?"

"I'll keep it wet," Grace said, "if I have to pee on it."

"All right," Reba said. She took a deep breath, called over to Steve. "Open the door."



# 12

Even with the lights, it was very dark, and my first thought was that those little pale yellow beams of ours weren't worth anything when it came to the big bad things out there in the wilds of Ed's belly; those dark things all het up and fast and nasty and full of teeth.

Reba actually put her butt to mine and backed. We rotated our beams like search lights looking for Kamikazes. We hadn't gone far when we found the little shadow dears.

They whispered past us, rattled and fluttered there in the dark. I shone my line this way and that, felt something at my elbow, snapped the beam over there, only to have a chunk of the dark pop away.

"Oh, shit, don't fall down, Jack. Don't trip. Don't fuck up. And, for heaven's sake, I hope the flashlights don't go out."

"I've been trying not to think about that," I said. "All I've been thinking is, I ever get hold of the director of this picture, boy is he gonna take a bitch slapping."

"Oh, Jack," Reba said. "It hit me."

"What?"

"Those things. One of them hit my arm. It's bleeding."

"Get the light off yourself. Keep it searching. Keep moving."

"I shouldn't have come. I sounded so brave when I volunteered. But I shouldn't have come."

"Neither of us should have. Do you want to go back to the bus?"

"Yes. But guess what? I can't see it anymore."

I looked back the way I thought we had come. And Reba was right. There was nothing but the dark to see.

The things moved around us as if we were the center of a hurricane. They swirled, crinkled and cracked, like old film negative being wadded. As we moved forward, flashlights extended, waving this way and that, the things scattered.

But it seemed to me they were getting a bit more testy, coming ever closer. Pretty soon, we both had a number of cuts from the edges of the things as they flittered by.

"Look," I said.

So she could look, I turned right and she followed around until I took her position and she took mine.

"My God," she said.

"Yep."

What she was looking at was a narrow metal bridge. A grillwork bridge. It went across into a darkness the flashlights would not cross.

The bridge spanned what looked to be an abyss.

"Let's scoot onto the bridge," I said. "One of us can point our light, get a better look at what's down there while the other watches for critters."

As we made our way onto the bridge we were confronted by a foul smell.

"God Almighty," I said. "We must be at Ed's sewage plant."

"Or a way out," Reba said. "It goes down a ways, but it also veers to the right there, to what could be Ed's rear end. Though, with just a flashlight, it's hard to tell what I'm seeing."

"Let's change roles," I said. "You flash about, I'll have a look."

Reba was right. The hole beneath the bridge dropped way down, and there were worker ladders on either side of the pit, something the robots used for maintenance. But there was a kind of tunnel that went off to the right. I noticed too that it was moving. As I watched, it irised open, then closed. Then repeated itself. Again and again.

It was a sphincter. I saw a mass of something dark rise up from the pit and reach the tunnel, flow into it as if sucked, and disappear.

I lifted my light and joined Reba in flashing mine about.

"I think it's a sphincter that exits Ed's waste. We might could get out that way."

"Boy, won't that be shitty?" Reba said.

"Frankly, I don't see how we can do it. Not and live."

"Grace is right though. We have to try something. We can't just wait here. We'll die anyway. I'd rather go out trying."

"I could go down there and investigate. I think I can swing over the bridge and get closer for a look. Can you stand being here by yourself?"

"Oh, Jesus...Make it quick as you can."

"Kiss me," I said. She did. Quickly. I went to the base of the bridge and started climbing over. Reba's light hit me.

"Shadow," she said.

I jerked my head and my light. My carnivorous shadow friend fluttered away from me.

I got my foot on the ladder and started climbing down. It was hard to do with my flashlight, and I knew if I dropped it, I was dead meat. Maybe the things wouldn't come down here, but even still, if I dropped the light, when I went up, they'd be waiting.

The deeper I went the stinkier it got.

What had seemed like depth from the bridge, darkness in the light, was something moving, gurgling, and stinking.

Ed functioned as a fish, but had never been completed. Like Bjoe said, someone forgot, or the mechanisms just played out too soon. Still, Ed was working all right, and his innards were working satisfactorily enough to manufacture what we in the bathroom business (which is pretty much all of us), would describe as pure-de-ole-identifiable-for-a-fact—you-bet-your-smelly-ass —

S-H-I-T.

No question there.

# 13

I shined my light down there. The tunnel was pulsing, sucking in that nasty goo. I thought, well, I die this way, it isn't a death I ever expected. It was, to put it mildly, a unique way to go. Had to be better than cancer or some sort of horrid disease, going slow, like being gummed to death by protein-deprived octogenarians.

In a way, it was no less dignified than aging and lying in your own shit and being eaten away slowly from the inside. Of course, if I were home, who was to say I wouldn't just die quick of a heart attack at the age of eighty while in bed with a twenty-five year old hooker with her little finger crooked up my ass.

So, that thinking business, sometimes it was better not to do too much of it. It could get you in trouble.

I was pondering this to the point of almost feeling that hooker's little finger in my tail, when suddenly, above me, there was light.

Not heavenly light, but light. And it was too much light for Reba's flashlight. Light from a distance, filtered through something the consistency of a gunnysack. It held for a long moment, then went out.

"The bus," Reba said. "Oh, God, Jack, come up."

I carefully padded my way up the shit-slick ladder onto the bridge, somehow maintaining my grip on the flashlight.

When I was standing beside her, she said, "Wait."

I waited. The birth of the universe couldn't have been any slower than that wait.

Then, the light.

When the beams hit, the darkness shredded like something dark tossed into a fan. There was a sound like a baseball card in bicycle spokes, the bicycle being peddled fast.

"The darkness," Reba said. "It's absolutely alive with them."

"They may be the dark," I said.

When the bus's head beams went out, I made a swooping movement with my light and Reba flashed hers about too. After a moment, I used the light to nab the direction of the bus, though I couldn't actually see it in my feeble beam, and pulled the flashlight over my shoulder. I did this repeatedly, signaling for them to come.

"Oh, Jack, behind you."

I turned with the light. The darkness sucked back a bit, the bridge trembled.

"Sorry," Reba said. "I had the light on it, but it was still coming."

"They're not as afraid now," I said. "They're getting brave."

"Look."

We could see from a great distance the bus beams moving toward us, two head lamps that looked to be the size of the tips of our thumbs.

Seeing the light grow and brighten was as hypnotic to us as it might have been to a moth. Soon, we stood on the bridge in a bath of yellow. It was heartening.

We worked our way back to the bus, and to get in the door, we had to step momentarily out of the glow of the bus's head beams and into shadow. Our flashlights seemed less bright than before, and I could feel those things all around us, closer, touching, almost tasting us. Steve, sitting in the driver's seat, worked the door lever and let us in. As the door slammed behind us, Steve, eyes wide, said, "You don't want to know what was right behind you, almost up your asses."

Inside, everyone gathered around, and we told what had happened. Steve drove the bus right up to the edge of the divide. He let the bus idle. The lights stuck across the chasm like a golden honey bridge.

"It's ugly down there," I said. "Once you go in, you might be wadded up with the turds. If you aren't, you'll be stuffed with turds, won't be able to breathe. I don't see a way to make it work."

"We haven't got but one choice," James said. "We got to go back into the light. Maybe Bjoie will let us stay with him. He might do that. Or we have to fight him. Hell, Grace can kick Bjoie to death. We can become the leaders. We can't get out without being killed, and we can't stay back here in shadow, so seems to me, that's the only way to go."

"In case you haven't noticed," I said, "we're a little outnumbered. Not even Grace can fight all of them, Not even with our help."

"Bjoie might listen to reason," James said. "I mean, we'll be in the bus. We'd have some protection, and we could fight them if they try and come in. I think we got a better chance that way instead of waiting for our fucking ears to pop, diving into that shit and hoping we aren't made into turds or stuffed with them."

"He's got a point," Homer said.

"Much as I hate to admit it, he does," Grace said. "But I'm not big on going back. A place I've already been that isn't good, doesn't seem worth going back to."

"Fucking news flash," James said. "We've already been here, too, and it ain't for shit."

Steve had killed the engine while we were talking, now he turned the starter and fired it up again.

"Hey, man," I said, "what's the scoop?"

"I don't want to go back," Steve said, "and we're at the end of the line here, so why don't we go forward?"

"You been sniffing glue, doing the bag?" James said.

"Do you feel it?" Steve said.

I had, but it hadn't really registered. "We're surfacing."

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Homer said, "Yeah. We are. But for how long? It may have been kind of my idea, but I'm liking it less all the time."

"We can't go back," Steve said. "There's only one place to go...Into the shit."

"Oh, man," James said, "you don't mean it?"

"The bus is our only protection," Steve said. "It might survive the process."

"And if it does," Homer said, "we'll squirt out the fish's ass and into a whole hell of a lot of deep water. We'll sink like a goddamn brick tied to an anvil tied to a Cadillac transmission."

"We have to be ready," Steve said.

"What the fuck does that mean?" James said.

"When we shoot out — "

"—you mean if we shoot out. And if we do, we'll sink, like the way Homer *said*."

" — we have to be ready to open windows. They slide down, so the water pressure ought to allow that. We slide them down, and we swim out."

"Oh, that's a good plan," Homer said. "And why don't we find something heavy to tie to our dicks to make it just a little fucking harder?"

"We haven't got much time," Steve said. "My ears are clearing. We're reaching the surface."

"Count my ass out," James said. "Give me a flashlight. I'll take my chances back with the cannibals."

"It's now or never, folks," Steve said.

I gave James my flashlight, said, "Good luck, man."

"It would be best if we all went back," he said. "Best all around."

"Not gonna happen," Grace said.

Steve opened the door as James turned on the flashlight.

"Goodbye, asshole." Steve said.

"You're all gonna do this?" James said.

"I guess we are," Grace said. "Anyone that isn't, go now."

"I'm crazy, but I'm sticking," Homer said.

The rest of us nodded.

"Goodbye, dumb shits," James said, waved the beam at the pulsating shadows in the door, made them scamper.

He went out.

Steve closed the door.

We moved to the back of the bus and watched James and his light. Actually, just the light. The shadows were too thick to see anything else. The light bobbed quickly as it raced away from us.

"Think he'll make it?" Homer said.

"He can't make it either way," Grace said, fastening the back window down tight. "If those shadows don't get him, the dinner bell is waiting for him on the bright side. Frankly, I don't care if they use his balls for tennis. He made his own goddamn bed, now let him

lie in it."

"I hate to just let him go like that," Homer said. "I mean, I did let him fuck me in the ass. It wasn't that much fun, really, but I let him. I feel like me and my ass owe him something."

"You've heard my thoughts on the matter," Grace said. "I'm all done thinking about him. Your ears still popping, Steve? I can't feel it."

"I think our buddy has surfaced."

"I think it's time to do the big deed, baby," Grace said, Steve made with a wild Rebel yell that shook me to my bones.

"My mama always said I was a little turd," Reba said, as we filed into a seat next to one another, our hands gripping the seat in front of us. "I guess she was right."

"Grab hold of something, and good luck to us all," Steve said, and with the beams on high, a fresh yell on his lips, he punched the gas and we jolted forward, and Reba sang at the top of her lungs: "We all live in a yellow submarine."

"With bad insulation," I said.



## PART 4

In which a yellow school bus is the vehicle for a bizarre exit and becomes a kind of projectile turd that won't float. The great shining bridge is seen again. Ghosting is experienced. Dog urine fruit is digested. Chicken Little Rules. Toys are found.

# 1

Let me tell you, time can stand still.

It stood still as the bus went over the lip of the shitter. I envisioned us perched on the edge of a giant, dark toilet bowl full of someone's little dividend, and we were about to dive in as if we had good sense. Shit-busters to the rescue.

Our own rescue, we hoped.

But, BAM. There we were, on the lip, frozen in time.

We just hung there.

Or so it seemed.

Then all of time gathered up and pushed, and we came unglued.

The bus, a long brightly-lit, yellow, pontooned turd, dripped over the edge and took just two days south of forever before it hit that mess.

I was in my seat, facing down at the dark doom below us, my butt hole biting at the upholstery, clutching the seat in front of me so hard my fingers ached.

And the shit hit the windshield. Hard.

I thought:

With our luck the windshield will blow and that pile of fish turds will smash us all the way to the back of the bus, fill our lungs with digested refuse, then, if we have a chance to live, if any one of us might be a survivor, that fish's asshole will chew us up like a mole in a lawn mower, and out we will go.

Down we went and the light was extinguished by the black goo, and I could feel Reba next to me, but couldn't see her. I could hear her breathing hard, and there was a sensation of being like a BB sinking down into a vat of chocolate pudding, minus the nice smell and the fine taste.

Then the bus started to twist and turn, and I knew it was that weird digestion process that the Powers That Be had constructed, maybe left unfinished. The bus began to spin, and next thing I knew I was knocked into Reba hard. Was bouncing about the bus like a ricochet shot. The smell was terrible, and I could feel that mess on my hands, which meant it was easing in through the cracks in the windows and the doors, had possibly shoved through the window Grace had latched up in back.

But, no, I consoled myself. If that had happened, the bus would be full of that nasty stuff.

Then, as if thought were the catalyst, I felt the horrid mess press up against me like foam, filling my nostrils with its stench, pushing me either forward or backward, down the aisle. I was uncertain which, though I could feel myself bouncing between the seats. There was loud crunching sound, like a smart ass wadding up an aluminum soft drink can, and someone screamed, a loud horrible scream that could not be identified as man or woman. Then I was pushed up against what I realize now was the windshield. The shit shoved me. The windshield made a cracking sound, and I blacked out. But the blackness into which my mind fell couldn't have been any blacker than the world that was already around me.

I came awake.

I was surprised at that.

I was still alive. I could still breathe.

But I was surrounded by wetness. Not the thick mess that I had felt before, but wetness. I was bobbing about in the water and I could see the water rippling and there was great white foam, and sticking out of the foam was the nose of the bus, the windshield gone, the roof crushed in, the front right tire blown.

I had been shoved through the windshield, and the bus had shot to the surface, if ever so briefly. Perhaps the pontoons (which had come loose of the bus) had done it, or as we went into the fish's ass sphincter and he let us fly, the force of it had driven us out and up. Trapped air in the bus maybe. I didn't know. In that moment, nothing made sense.

Reba was clinging to the front of the bus. I could see her pretty well lying in a pool of what I realized was moonlight, silver as mercury. I could see a dark patch on her face where blood had bloomed like a flower; the moonlight made it appear to be a large black rose.

She clung to the bumper, lay across the hood in what could only be described as a dazed state. She looked in my direction, but I couldn't tell if she was seeing me or not. She lifted her head a little, like a turtle sunning itself on a rock, then lowered her head against the bus, continued to cling.

The bus started down, quickly. I tried to yell Reba's name, beg her to let go, but all that came out was a hoarse croak. The water foamed around the bus, churned the fish turds that had come up with it, then the bus dove. Water lapped over Reba and rushed into where the windshield had been, then it was gone, taking Reba with it, leaving only a wide band of chrome-colored ripples that pushed me up and down in the water like a fisherman's cork.

I dove after the bus, but I was too weak. My lungs wouldn't hold the air I had swallowed. It was so dark I couldn't see a thing below. Huge turds bounced against me.

There was nothing I could do.

I fought my way to the surface, screamed as I broke the roof of the water and saw the moon above me. I began to cry. I felt something touch me. A vast patch of water disappeared, and in its place was a great gray wall.

The wall rose higher.

And higher.

It was Ed swimming by.

He dove. The dive pulled me under. I fought with everything I had to make the surface, even ended up putting my foot on Ed's back and shoving off.

I broke the surface and looked in the direction Ed had gone. All that could be seen was a great fin knifing through the dark water. As I watched, something struck me hard in the head, almost knocked me unconscious.

I grabbed at it.

It was one of the pontoons. It had snapped in half, but it still floated. I grabbed hold of it and clung, tried to climb on top of it. It rolled with me, and I lost it a couple of times, but finally I had a solid grip on it, straddled it, latched my legs around it tight.

Across the water I saw a white mist. And then I saw it was not a mist at all, but the ghost of the drive-in. It slowly floated toward me. Floated until it was over and around me. And inside the drive-in I could see everything that had happened while I was there. I could see me and my friends, all dead now, in the camper, tooling along the highway, heading for what we thought would be a great weekend.

There were dinosaurs and such, and all the events that had happened after we escaped the drive-in theater—or so we thought. All that and more. Overlapping, running together, seen simultaneously like a bad TV connection, one program blending into another.

The mist stuttered. Was followed by a sound like electricity shorting out. A snap of light and shadow, a crackle like cellophane being chewed by a goat, and the mist was back.

The Popcorn King.

Those dinosaurs.

Poplalong Cassidy and his carnivorous film. Grace. Shit-town.

The bus. All gray and ghostly and us inside. Outside the bus. Inside the bus. Every view you could imagine. All that had taken place. Reba and I making love. Grace kicking Cory to death. All of us, looking like some kind of ride at Disneyland, a bus full of escaped specters from the Haunted Mansion.

The past and the present rolled in and out. Everything was caught up in that white mess of memory.

I closed my eyes and tried to scream, but my voice was still too hoarse.

I dropped my head against the pontoon, stretched out on it as best I could. And clinging like I was riding a rocket to that silver moon above me, to escape the mists and all it contained, I fell into a stupor as the water rode me up and rode me down.

## 2

It's okay," I heard Reba say, and I could feel her stroke my hair.

I awoke to find she wasn't there. There was only me and the pontoon, and it was a breeze moving my hair, not Reba's soft fingers. The moon was gone and the sun was warm but not too warm, and the water was a bright sheening blue. Beyond, there was a great cloud bank, and in little patches, like glimpses of car metal as seen through clouds of white dust in a dirt track race, I could see the great silver bridge.

I thought of Reba again, bright eyes, fine face, skin made hard from life, her navel like the end twist on a gut-stuffed sausage, the tangle of hair between her legs.

I thought: That's about right. Here I am floating on what is essentially a goddamn log. I've lost all my friends, and my lover, and what I'm thinking about is not her sweetness, and kindness, but the fine wet thing between her thighs.

Men. They ain't worth killing.

And I be one of them.

As I clung to the pontoon, I was thinking: This might be my chance. Just to let go.

Just to drift down, the way poor Reba had. Drift down into the great deeps and fill my lungs with water, and end it all.

Wasn't drowning supposed to be pleasant?

Or did I read it was actually very unpleasant, and the idea that it was pleasant was a myth? Which was it?

Just the thought of unpleasantness was enough to make me dismiss the idea. It was never anything I was in love with anyway. "Jack," a voice called.

I thought: Here I go again.

But this wasn't Reba calling.

It was a man's voice. Sounded like Steve.

Then came Grace's voice calling my name.

I rolled my head to the other side, and out there on the water, floating up and down, were two heads and a body. The body was between the two heads, and they were hanging onto

it. It was not floating very well, and I slowly deduced it was Homer, face down. On one side of him was Grace, on the other, Steve.

I tried to yell at them, but my voice came out in a bark. I realized then that the rushing water had gone into my throat and filled my belly and caused me to throw it up at some point, scalding my throat with stomach acid.

"We'll come to you," Grace said, and they let go of Homer and swam to the pontoon. Homer's body floated lower in the water, so there was really little to nothing left of him to see.

They gripped the pontoon at the front and back. I continued to straddle and clutch the pontoon like a spider on a stick; I began to cry.

"You're okay," I said.

"More or less," Grace said.

She was at the end where my head was, and I lifted my eyes and looked at her. It was really the first time I had ever seen her look the worse for wear.

There was fish shit in her matted hair. Her face looked haggard. Her flesh was waterlogged, her lips were purple. There were patches on her face where the fish's stomach acid had burned her; red spots like flung paint. The look in her eye, for the first time, appeared distant, that hundred yard stare. She too had finally felt the bite of fear.

But, it was still a beautiful face to me.

She said, "Reba?"

I shook my head.

Steve reached out and patted me on the foot, said, "Can we all share this thing a little better?"

So, the three of us, one at either end of the busted pontoon, one in the middle, shifted positions throughout the gnawing hot day to prevent boredom, floated about on what by late afternoon looked like a wine-dark sea.

I noted that the skin on my arms was burned, and I could feel it on the back of my neck, and on my face as well, and I knew soon I would burn even more, and by tonight, or early the next day, I would feel it and not like it.

Grace and Steve were burned as well.

I was thinking about all this, when I saw something that made me croak out. I could hardly make the word. "Lund."

"What?" Grace said. I cleared my throat. "Land."

And so it was. There was a dark line of greenery and a fine line of brown shore, and way beyond it, we could see the dark bridge, or ladder, rising up into the fluffy white clouds. We kicked our legs and tried to work the pontoon in that direction.

We paddled all day, and finally night fell, and we didn't look any closer to me than when we had first spotted the shore.

We paddled throughout the night, one taking turns straddling the pontoon, sleeping a bit, then swapping out to let another do the same. The mist came back and surrounded us all night, and it was hard to see the land there in the dark, even with the moonlight (and tonight there were two moons), and on we paddled, like angry beavers, and when daybreak broke, we were still some distance away. The current was carrying us toward the shore rapidly now, and so we merely clung for a long time, resting.

When land seemed truly within our grasp, we began to paddle again, and it was just growing dark when we made the white sandy beach, abandoned the pontoon, and crawled up on shore to rest.

We didn't make it any farther than that, and I awoke to the water lifting and tugging at me, realized if I didn't get up and move, that it would take me out to sea.

The mist was floating about again, but I didn't even look at it. I shook Steve and Grace, and the three of us staggered farther inland, found a spot beneath a tree with limbs hanging so low and thick they almost touched the ground.

We crawled under them and lay near the tree's thick trunk. It was good and dark under there, and there was plenty of room and the sand was soft and warm. We couldn't see the mist. There was only the sound of the sea crashing against the shore, and a smell of healthy greenery.

Almost immediately, we were asleep.





"Perhaps one of many," she said.

Steve stood next to us, said, "Holy shit. What happened to the sky?"

"We were just contemplating that," Grace said.

We shopped around for food and found some fruit growing on a strange looking little tree. Steve tasted it, pronounced it sour as dog urine (I don't know if this evaluation was from personal experience or not), and we passed on it.

We walked along the beach, looking for other foods, a dead fish maybe, and then I saw her.

Reba.

She lay on the shore on her back.

We ran to her.

She wasn't looking good.

Her face was puffed out from the water and her hair was pushed down over her eyes.

"She's dead," Steve said.

I knelt down and put my arm behind her head and lifted her to a sitting position.

When I did, she coughed, and water projectile vomited from her lungs. It went all over her legs. She coughed some more, opened her eyes and tried to focus.

She almost smiled.

She tried to speak, but when she did, no words came out. Only water.

I picked her up and carried her inland, set her down so her back was against a tree.

"You don't look much like the Little Mermaid," I said.

"Don't feel much like her either," she said.

"We thought you were gone," Steve said.

Reba actually smiled this time. "Not yet. This is it? This is all of us?"

"Homer made a pretty good float," Grace said, "but I think he was dead before the bus reached the surface. He was at the back. The mess came in through the window there, smothered him."

Reba stared off at the water, said, "My God. What's happened to the sky?"

We looked at what we had already seen, but now, there was a portion of the sky actually dipping into the water. That piece moved when the water moved.

We sat there for awhile, and while Steve stayed with Reba, Grace and I went down the shoreline looking for something to eat. We finally did find a dead fish or two, chose the one that was in the best condition, and carried it back. It wasn't a large fish, but it was something. We tore it open with our fingers and shared the cold innards among us. Had I not been starved, it would have been disgusting.

It wasn't much, however, and Grace and I walked back to the dog urine fruit, which was shaped somewhat like a large golden pear, and took a few from the limbs.

We brought them back and had dog urine fruit for dessert. It really wasn't so bad once you got past the smell. And the taste.

Reba, being in as bad a shape as she was, wasn't able to go on. We decided to stay a night on the beach, but did manage to help her back to the low hanging boughs where we had spent the night before.

It was very nice under there. Cozy.

Walking back I saw something I had overlooked before, floating up between some rocks. My backpack.

I went over and got it. Inside was my journal. A few loose pages had come out of it and had washed up on the shore. I gathered them, and while Reba rested, I spread them out on the beach and let them dry.

We spent the night under the tree boughs, and in spite of everything, or perhaps because of it, we all slept deeply.

# 4

I don't remember much," Reba said.

We were under the tree boughs, and it was daylight outside. I was pretty certain time had been working consistently over the last few days, because they had felt exactly like days. My inner clock seemed happy with the timing.

Still, for all I knew, we could have been sleeping for days before the light came.

We had meant to move on the very next daylight, but we hadn't. We decided to let Reba regain her strength. It wasn't like we knew where we were going, anyway. Or if we should go. Or if it mattered if we did go.

"All I know was the bus came up, I was clinging to it," Reba said, continuing her tale, "and I think I saw you in the water," she said, indicating me.

"You did. I dove after you. But couldn't find you."

"I lost my hold on the bus," Reba said. "It came to me that it was taking me down, and I knew it was best if I didn't hang on, but I don't know if I let go, or the force of the water pulled me loose. But I came loose.

"Still, I was too weak to swim, and I just knew I was a goner. Then I was lifted up."

"Ed," I said.

"Yeah. He surfaced, and as he did, he brought me up. I rode on his back for a moment. Long enough to get my breath. Then he dove again.

"I was sucked under. I thought, well, this is it. I blacked out, came awake as I surfaced again, got a gulp of air. Then, guess what? I blacked out again. Next time I woke up you were standing over me, Jack. And, believe me, that was a pretty sight.. .What's the plan now?"

"We kind of loosely thought we should go along the beach a ways, just to see what's about. Then cut inland toward the bridge. We don't know why, but — "

"Why not?" Grace said.

"Yeah," Reba said. "Why not?"

We abandoned the idea of walking along the shore. It had seemed like a good idea at first. Dead fish could be collected. We might even find a way to fish for fresh ones.

But, now that we had learned to eat the dog urine fruit, we decided to break it open and let it dry, pack it in my pack, along with my de-sodded writing goods, and carry it as food.

We wanted to go straight for the bridge.

Another thing. We thought it might be the safest place.

The night before, while sitting out on the beach, a star had fallen from the sky and landed in the water, washing a large wave nearly all the way to our sleeping tree.

The next night, we had seen the moon sag.

And that morning, much of the blue sky on the horizon was hanging low and being washed and moved by the water. The sun was almost in the wet itself.

"I get the feeling," Grace said, "that those who put this whole thing together aren't home anymore."

"Or they've lost interest," Steve said.

The jungle was dense, but we found a trail, an animal trail, I presumed, and we went along it as fast as we could go. It was strange. We had no idea where we were actually going, but we were damn well getting there fast.

I suppose I could say the bridge was our goal. And being as how I had become very goal oriented, because staying in any one place on the drive-in world soon led to depression, it gave me a feeling of motion and accomplishment.

We stopped several times to rest. We found plenty of water in nice gurgling pools, and there was a lot of the dog-urine fruit. We kept our dried fruit and ate the fresh stuff, and when night fell, we slept beneath trees. That is, until one night we heard a cry from the island forest so frightening that we took to the trees after that.

I thought of the trees as Tarzan trees. They were large with broad limbs, and there were enough smaller limbs about, coated thick in leaves, you could find natural hammocks to sleep in.

I felt good about this, until I thought our screaming predator might be able to climb trees.

In our nice tree hammocks, twenty to thirty feet off the ground, Steve and Grace tucked up in a bundle of limbs above us, Reba and I talked about all that had happened, about all that had been before the drive-in, about what we would do if we ever escaped this world and returned to our own.

We even discussed the idea of staying where we were.

The island was beautiful, and if we could find something better to eat than the dog urine fruit — fish maybe—we could stay here for a long time. Maybe forever.

Eventually, Reba said, either she or Grace would become pregnant, no matter how careful we were, and there would be children.

It was a thought.

A nice island.

Cool winds. Lots of water.

Plenty of dog urine fruit...Well, that wasn't so good.

Most likely we would learn to catch fish, and maybe there was other food on the island. Had to be. From the sound of that scream, that was a predator, and predators had to have something to eat besides dog urine fruit.

And maybe this wasn't an island at all. We had come to call it that because of the way it looked. But it could have been the edge of a continent. A place away from all the weird movie worlds and strange occurrences; an oasis in a morass of what Reba called Weirdity.

And, of course, for me, there was Reba.

She was pretty and smart and we didn't seem to age.

How would that work for children? The children in the drive-in hadn't aged a lot.

They grew, but, come to think of it, none of them ever made adulthood.

Then again, how long had we been here?

The oldest the kids had been was three or four, and most of them died. Or got eaten.

And there were the weird creatures. The results of the Popcorn King's poisoned sperm.

They had grown very fast, to a kind of retarded adulthood on one level, and on another, to an advanced childhood where they could move things with their minds.

And there was the drive-in mist. When we were close to the sea, it would come out of nowhere, floating along the black water. But it never came to shore.

Never. It was a sea-going thing, or so it seemed. And Grace had a theory about what it

was.

It was similar to my own idea. Television ghosting. If this was a movie world with different stories going all at once, perhaps our past and our present were colliding; different channels and episodes running together; movies mixing and misting, and falling apart. It was a disturbing thought.

My mind rambled like that, going from this to that, as Reba and I lay in the boughs, she cradled in the crook of my arm, my eyes on the sky.

And I thought: What a pretty thought. To stay here. To have children. To live naked and free and full of piss and vinegar to the end of our days.

Lots of lying about in the sun. Lots of fucking.

Lots of doing nothing and needing only something to eat and drink.

Life was really simple if you let it be.

But life was never simple here. You could never let down your guard. My arm had gone to sleep and I wanted to move it, but hated to for fear of waking Reba and disturbing the wonderful fact that I had a fine looking woman on my arm. For she had recovered fast. The puffiness was gone. Her hair had lightened. Her body was lean, but not starved, and her skin had developed a glow. She also wasn't wearing much in the way of clothes. Always a plus.

Yet, even with that wonderful thought to consider, we were still here.

On the Drive-in world. And this was a world where Chicken Little would be right.

The sky was falling.

# 5

On the morning after my night contemplating, thinking maybe this place was as good as it got, and that was good enough, I awoke and climbed to the top of our tree and saw an amazing and disturbing sight.

First off, the world was blood-colored; the sun had sunk halfway into the sea and great clouds of steam were rising up from it.

The water was drying up, running away from the shore. Fish were leaping about as they were boiled alive. All of this I could see, and when I told the others, we made the decision to hasten our pace, to see if we could reach the great bridge to the sky.

Steve said, "I was thinking, wouldn't it be nice to go back there and get some of those boiled fish."

"And I was thinking," Grace said, "the time we spent doing that might be a bad idea. We too could soon be boiled. And if the sun goes completely down into the sea, will it rise again? Will there be only night? Will the moon come out? Will it fall too? Will the stars drop off? Time, however it works here, is not on our side."

So we went along swift in the blood-red light, and in time that light turned stranger yet as night fell. The sun didn't want to go away, so there was a red stain across the night sky. The moon shone silver, and full, and the stars were dots of fire, and if you looked real close, there seemed to be creases in the night, as if dark velvet cloth that had been stretched was no longer taut, but was in fact drooping.

We ate the dried dog urine fruit, and kept pushing, and just as the moon dipped away, and the day came on bloody-dark, we began to smell the odor of death. It was a stiff odor that shoved at us, but we ignored it. We could see the bridge clearly above the trees, and we pushed on in that direction, the stench growing strong enough to cut and make bricks.

It got so stout, that each of us took turns puking, but we kept on keeping on. In time, though the smell never went away, our nostrils and our stomachs accepted it.

By the time night had come, and we had slept, and risen again before the moon fell down, we came up on the source of the odor. The tropical forest had disappeared, and there was just a bleak stretch of ground, and a great mile-high (I'm guessing here as to the height) pile of something we couldn't identify. We stood there looking at it, and as we did, slowly, the moon fell off and the dying sunlight was all we had, giving us a rusty glow and a view of the clearing and the pile in the middle of it.

"My God," Steve said.



"If God had anything to do with this," Grace said, "then he's just as big an asshole as I've always thought."

I had to agree.

It was a great black pile, and the pile buzzed and flexed and moved.

## 6

When we came closer, an immense cloud of crows rose up against the red sky with a caw and a savage beating of wings, and with them rose a swarm of humming flies.

The bloody sunlight, formerly shiny on the dark wings of the birds and the bright green and black bodies of the flies, now shone on a pile of human shapes. Some of the shapes were of wood, some of metal, some of plastic. There were crudely whittled soldiers with tall hats and chin bands, painted up red and black with big blue eyes and Groucho Marx mustaches. There were less crudely molded metal soldiers with turnkeys at their backs. There were women, too, and unlike the male soldiers with painted-on clothes, they were roughly shaped with blonde and red hair and big bow mouths and wide blue eyes, pink knobs for nipples and quick swipes of black paint for pubic hair. Some of them, like the soldiers, were made of metal and were slightly better formed with windup keys at their backs. Their flesh tones varied: there was white, black, and yellow, and even green; there were all manner of shapes and sizes. Amongst these human-sized, crudely-whittled, and sophisticated windup toys, were what looked like mannequins with perfect-painted features and real hair on their heads, male and female. And on these were truer anatomical features; missiles for the men, grooves for the ladies, patches of what looked like real pubic hair.

Twisted in amongst them were long green tentacles and bulbous heads and huge pop-eyes. Rubbery looking aliens and some that looked to be made of flesh; flesh going gray and dripping with slime. I had dreamed of such beasts from time to time. Up there in the sky somewhere, twisting dials, moving cameras, proceeding along dolly-runs. Making movies, with us as their reality show. And here they lay.

Further up the pile were what appeared to be real human bodies, rotting, arms dripping off like melting plastic, legs falling free of the bone, heads twisted, coming loose, the eyes plucked out. At first I thought some of the bodies were moving, but soon realized it was the maggots squirming amidst the real corpses and the termites chewing about in the wooden figures, the crows flapping about, giving the glancing illusion of the human shapes making movement on their own.

"My God," Reba said. "What place is this?"

No one had an answer.

Beyond this pile was one great beam of the bridge. And it was very wide. We couldn't see the edges of it. All we could see was the gold and silver metal that made up the bridge, and those huge black cables, twisted thick and numerous as armpit hairs on a French lady.

Way up, dead center of the pile, was a dark hole in the sky, like someone had burned the tip of a cigarette through red construction paper; a hole like the one that had pulsed and

shat its refuse above the drive-in.

"It reminds me of some white trash fucker's yard," Reba said. "Throwing shit out the window. You know, food and cans and such. But here we got a waste disposal of giant toys and dead bodies. Still, the attitude, it's the same."

Grace moved over close to the pile. She said, "Look at this."

We eased next to her. The stench was so strong I wasn't sure I was going to be able to stand in front of the pile another second. My stomach did a flip-flop, gathered itself, and the feeling of nausea and light-headedness passed.

Grace reached out, took hold of a rancid, blackened arm, said, "This one has been here a while. Look at it. Look close."

The arm had rotted and the crows had been at it, and though the arm was clearly meaty, inside it I could see a flexi-metal rod that served for bone, and twisted around this "bone" were wires, red, blue, white and yellow.

"Part human," Grace said. "Part machine."

"Holy shit," Steve said.

"Question now," Grace said, "is do we still want to go up there?"

She pointed up at the wall of metal, the jungle of wires.

"I don't know what else to do," Reba said. "The world is caving in on itself. Whoever runs this crazed-ass shithole must be up there. I think it's time to confront him. Beard God in his own goddamn cheap-ass naugahyde, cheetah skin decorated den, and kick his ass."

"Hear, hear," Steve said, and stuck out a hand.

We piled our hands on top of his.

"Up, up, and away," Grace said.

"By the way," I asked, "how do you know if there's a God he s got naugahyde shit up there?"

"It fits his toss out the window white trash image," Reba said.

"Ah," I said.

## PART 5

Complexities are contemplated. A bridge is climbed. Toy soldiers get funky. Experiences with rubber, wood, and flesh. Aliens are found. Bad things happen to good people. The world is folded and our remaining heroes travel through a glass darkly.

# 1

Let me tell you how we did it, took that climb.

We decided, as we always knew we would, to go up that great beam, which was slanted slightly and had those multitudes of cables to cling to. From a distance those twists of wires had looked like one big dark cable on either beam of the bridge. Now, I could see it was not a bridge at all, but what it was, I was uncertain. The metal beam and its skin of tangled wires ascended into the red sky, disappearing, not into the waste hole, but advancing to the top to be wrapped in clouds like a precious possession in fluffy balls of cotton.

It was not a short trip, dear hearts.

It might not have been Everest, but it wasn't a hill back home either. It was WAY THE FUCK up there.

So, we took the dried fruit from my pack, laid it out, determined it was not enough. We went about picking more fruit and drying it. It was a scary decision. Every moment we wasted, meant the sky could fall, doing us in. But, if we were to take the climb unprepared, and if it was as high up and difficult to travel as we suspected, then we could die of thirst and starvation. Not to mention we might fall off and smash our asses.

Maybe that's where the bodies and shapes of humans had come from. They had fallen, not been pushed.

But, shit, man. Did those wooden critters walk?

Or were they just prototypes?

And how were those great potato chips made so thin and vacuum packed in a can without crushing all of them.

I wish I were home with a can of them, sitting in front of the television set watching a rerun of THE LONE RANGER. Guns snapping, bad guys falling. But no blood, man. No blood. No real terror.

Of course, when we got to the top, we could find ourselves in worse shape. But again, it was that goal business, dear hearts.

The goal.

The reason to strive.

It's what made us want to climb, and it beat standing around with our thumbs up our asses, waiting for the world to fall apart and the sun to blow down on our heads and cook us.

Steve found some gourds and we labored at hollowing those out by twisting off the narrow, blackened, umbilical cord tops and working a sharp stick down into them. We wormed the stick about until we liquified the gourd's guts, then we poured the goo out. There were numerous pools of water about, and we dipped the gourds in those and rinsed them, filled them with sand and let them dry while the fruit dried.

We even went back to the beach and found some of the boiled fish. We ate some, and found that they were pretty good, considering we had been living off dog urine fruit, which made for a very real and very regular bowel movement, dear hearts. I figured, way we had been eating and shitting, the woods were full of scat.

We cut the boiled fish open with scoops made of sharp sticks, wrapped them in leaves and stuffed them in my pack. We made spears by twisting off limbs in such a way that a sharp piece was left on the end. It wasn't a great weapon, but it was all we had.

On the day when fruit and gourds were dry, we packed my pack full of the withered dog urine produce, filled the gourds with water, corked them with pieces of wood, made slings of vines to carry the gourds, made similar straps with vines so we could fasten them to and carry our spears on our backs, then we started out.

Our plan was to take turns with the pack. We all carried our own water gourds and spears. As for the pack, I carried it first. We took a hike around the pile of busted toys and rotting bodies, made our way to the shiny beam that rose up to heaven.

And with the red-stained sky dripping down frighteningly low, we did the pile on hands thing again, made with a little one for all grunt, and started up.

It went well enough at first. The wires were thick and they gave you something to cling to. The beam slanted enough you weren't just hanging out in space, but it didn't slant enough for you to be comfortable. It didn't take long before I was tired. I thought it was just because it was my turn to tote the pack, but when Grace took it over, I found I was even worse off, as if the weight of all that food had given me what strength I had.

Finally we came to a great bolt in the beam, and the wires were nestled about it in a wad. We found we could crawl up in that wad, and the wires were bundled tight enough, very little light got in. We crawled in there and pressed up together, mostly in a sitting position, opened the pack, ate and drank sparingly, then rested.

Resting turned out to be a full bore doze.

When I awoke, stars were in the sky, and I watched two of them drip off and fall. I could see way out there, dear hearts, and I watched as the stars hit the sea and the water rose up big time, came crashing down on the island, washing trees away like matchsticks with a garden hose.

The drive-in mist, which was cruising the water below, was hit by the waves and disrupted. It curled and coiled and broke apart.

Reba, who I didn't know was awake, said, "We left just in time."

"It's not going to wash the whole thing," I said, "not this time. But what if the moon falls?"

"It's all over," she said. "Davy Jones' Locker, baby."

The moon was out and it was bright, but that old lunar wad nodded from time to time, as if it might doze off and drop into the waters below. We watched for awhile, until the drive-in ghost had regrouped and began to float over the waters, then we decided to wake the others, keep climbing, making time while the moon was up and its light was high.

As we climbed, Grace and Steve in the lead, Reba (carrying the pack now) and I lagging slightly behind, Reba said, "What do you think about all those bodies down there, the toy soldiers, the mannequins and such?"

"I don't know. I'm having some thoughts, but they aren't altogether formed, and what thoughts I'm thinking I can't express, but, baby, somewhere back to the rear of the old bean, I'm not liking what I'm thinking at all."

"Want to share?"

"I meant what I said. I don't know how to explain it. It's more a feeling than an expression. But it comes to me, you'll be the first to know."

"I think I do know what you mean. Something is nagging me, too. And it feels uncomfortable. Like a pretty bad thought is trying to burrow out, and I won't let it."

"I hear you." I said.

Many days and nights passed, and sometimes there was no place for us to really rest, so we had to keep on climbing. And sometimes, when we found a bolt, where the wires were always clustered, we decided to stay for a day or two, if anyone could in any way decide

on what a day was.

In time, more stars fell, and the water rose up way high, and soon there was no land or trees below us. Oh, for a few days it was there, in patches, and the water would roll back and show us at least the tops of trees, and now and again a patch of mud, but eventually that went away too. And then one night the thing we had feared happened.

The moon came up and went down fast and furious. Striking the sea so hard it sounded like an atomic bomb had gone off. The great beam vibrated and the metal sang with a sound like a scream from a robot's lungs.

The ocean yawned and the water went all about, then it gathered itself together with what sounded like a moan and rushed forward. All the waters of this drive-in earth appeared to have loosened their bounds, and they had gathered together in one great wet flood; it thundered below us with a gush, and it began to rise, like a plugged toilet, and in a time so short as to be somewhere between our taking a deep breath and cutting a fart of fear, the water charged up and around the beam, rose nearly to our feet.

Well. Okay. That's an exaggeration. But it rose up as high as we had been two drive-in days before. Had we decided to hang out a little longer down there, we would have bathed the big bath, baby.

The flood brought with it a bullet-hard rain and a cloud of mist, and the mist collected itself and became the drive-in ghost. We looked down on it, and I saw within it the island and us on the island, and then I saw us and the pile of corpses, false and real, and I quit watching then. Feared it might show me our future. And, frankly, I didn't want to know.



## 2

All these wires," Steve said, "I think they run the drive-in world. They travel along these great beams, and the interconnecting parts that look like ladder rungs. They run through those. They go from the sky to the ground. They're worked into this world's fabric. They give it light. They make the sun, the moon and stars, night and day work. Or did. They're starting to go bad. Shorting out maybe. No maintenance. The whole goddamn thing is breaking up. I don't know, maybe it's on purpose. But down there, it's all over. I'm sure of it. From sea to shining sea, from one end of the jungle to the other, all the way down that single stretch of highway, the drive-in at either end. It's done, companions. Done."

We were resting in a mess of wires by one of the huge bolts, and Steve, he was running on, talking ninety miles an hour, as if he were on some kind of caffeine high, which he wasn't, unless the dog urine fruits were naturally rich in it.

And maybe they were, because we were all in one of those late night type of conversational, philosophical moods that one usually associates with coffee houses or university lifers or chat-it-up smart guys trying to score pussy.

Only thing was, it wasn't late night, it was day, but the day wasn't much. The sun was down low, literally, and it was leaking its light over the water, making it the color of rich bourbon. There was a lot less water now. Much of it had been steamed away. But still that sun dripped into the sea, and our version of Sol had begun to lose its shape, like a rotting fruit going quick-fast to liquid. On the sea bed all manner of creatures, giant squids, fish, and even our great catfish friend, Ed, squirmed in the mud.

From where we were, we could see the great fish clearly. The dark things, the ravenous cancers, or pissed-off shadows, whatever they were, those hungry things that had been inside of Ed, had exited the old boy's ass. The shadows fluttered about the muddy sea bed like crickets. There was too much light for them, fading or not, they hopped and twisted and fell about like dying locusts, came apart in little black pools that ran into the mud and were absorbed.

The people who had been inside Ed exited as well. They were very small from our position, the size of termites. But we knew they were people. They came out of the gaping mouth of the fish and disappeared into the mud. It probably went very deep, that mud. Maybe miles.

If anyone was still in the fish, they might stay on the surface for a while, as Ed covered a lot of space and was sinking more slowly, spread out like that, but he was sinking. We could see that big buddy going down.

Goodbye, Bjoie, if you're still there. Goodbye you man-eating, dick jerking, asshole.

The horizon had become a charcoal gray band, and it was broadening. Soon, all the world below would be dark.

Above us, the clouds were near touchable. Puffed up and white as a Jesus robe.

I said, "I think, tired as we are, we should start moving again, while we can see to climb. If the sun holds out just a while longer, I think we'll reach the clouds."

"And if we do," Reba says, "who says that means anything? It can be just as dark inside a cloud as out. The sun goes, what the fuck does it matter where we are?"

"I'm thinking the beam leads somewhere," I said. "Remember Popalong, he climbed up here, through that hole over the drive-in, and it was nearly as high as this. He saw things. He told us a little about them. This world has an attic."

"But there's no guarantee this leads to it," Reba said. "This world, in case you haven't noticed, lacks logic."

"Doesn't matter," Grace said, "we made this decision, and now we're stuck with it, we either ride the dick or use our fingers."

"Say what?" Reba said.

"It's an old saying I just made up, meaning, we've made a decision. We don't know if it's the real thing, the big cosmic fuck, or just us playing with ourselves. We won't know till we get up there."

"There really isn't any other way to go," Steve said. "Well, other than down. And if we climb down, I don't think we're climbing down to much. A lot of mud, dead fish, and such."

"You're right," Reba said. "Of course you are. I'm just tired."

We started climbing again.

There was something I hadn't mentioned to the others. The clouds. I feared our oxygen would thin. But it didn't. Truth was, the sky, the clouds, the whole arrangement, was way lower than back on earth. But it was a bit chilly. As we climbed through the clouds, they felt wet and sticky, like cotton candy.

And then we broke through a bank of clouds so thick you could swat them with your hand and knock them about. When we rose above them, struggling our way along the wires on the beam, we saw it.

A hole at the top of the world, the beam traveling up through it like a knife through a

wound.

### 3

When we came to the top of the beam it began to narrow dramatically, and eventually we had to go one at a time. Grace was the first inside, followed by Steve, then Reba and myself. Behind us, the sun dimmed even more as it dissolved into the mud.

We climbed over the lip of the sky and stood in a room.

A dusty goddamn room.

A big room, I might add. But, a room.

Dimly lit, but lit. The source? Unknown.

There were all sorts of things there, and many of them were things I remembered Popalong Cassidy describing. There were backdrops of all sorts and tins of film, and loose film scattered helter-skelter, piles of television sets, all sizes.

Looking up, I could find no ceiling. Just darkness. In fact, I couldn't see any walls. There was just a floor and lots of junk and lots more for as far as the eye could see in the dim light.

"There seems to be some kind of path along here," Grace said.

And there was. A break in the backdrops and tins of film, forming a little corridor. Dust clouds rose and floated as we walked. We were all soon coughing, but in time the dust ceased to bother us, and we proceeded at a brisker pace.

"I remember Popalong Cassidy said he could walk into the backdrops," I said.

"Yeah, I remember that too," Grace said.

"We find one of home," Steve said, "we're set."

And as if wishing would make it so, we found just that. A huge backdrop hung down on chains attached at the top to... Who knows what? The backdrop was so long it curled on the floor. It was a painted outside view of the pool hall back home, the street out front. It was where my friends and I had conceived our plan to visit the Orbit Drive-in; it was where Willard had kicked some ass protecting Randy, the two who were later welded together by a lighting strike, welded in such a way they became one mean creature, the Popcorn King.

"If we can step through that," I said, "we will be in my hometown. Everyone can find a way home from there."

I turned for an answer from the others, saw another backdrop across the way. The Dairy Queen in my hometown. A tear abruptly dripped out of the corner of my eye, ran down my cheek.

"We could search about," Grace said, "but if we can step through it, if we can go back to East Texas, close enough for me."

"You said it," Steve said.

"I'm up for it," Reba said.

I walked slowly toward the backdrop, stuck out my hand, and, ran up against canvas. I pushed again.

Harder.

Nothing.

I hit the canvas with my palm. Then my fists. Hard as I could. It rippled a bit, but I didn't pass through. I fell to my knees and pressed my forehead against it.

"The lying sonofabitch," I said. "He didn't go anywhere. Popalong said he could go through the backdrops. He said it."

Reba bent down and put her arm around me. "Come on, Jack. It's okay."

"No. It's not okay. I've had about all I can take."

"Get the fuck up," Grace said.

I turned and glared at her. She stood there in all her glorious, topless beauty. I had turned and was prepared to be angry, but looking at that woman, her face full of confidence, all I could do was make myself stand. I said, "Sorry, I had a moment."

"Okay," Grace said, "but now the moment's over. Popalong, who knows, maybe he did pass into these things. In his mind. And what works one time, may not work the next. We aren't whipped yet. We're never whipped till we say we're whipped."

"I don't know," Steve said, "I'm feeling a little whipped myself. I just don't have the energy to fall down and cry, or I would."

"Me too," Reba said.

"We can rest, or we can search," Grace said. "And, another thing, something important, I think.. .Right over there. A wall."

It was. A nice brown wall that ran way up into the darkness, out of sight. There was a standard light switch on the wall. I hit it. The lights in the great room brightened. There was a creaking noise, and the backdrops began to move about on their chains, changing positions. They locked in and were still.

"Now there's something cute," Grace said.

It was a door, revealed by the movement of the backdrops.

Grace strolled over, took hold of the knob. "When I turn," she said, "be ready for whatever."

She turned the knob, pulled the door open.

Nothing leaped on us.

No whatevers.

Inside the room were all manner of mirrors, and looking into them, we looked different in every one. Not just short or fat or tall or wide, but, we had different faces. I could recognize them as our faces and bodies, but they were different.

Even Grace showed discomfort, started moving along quickly. For in many of the mirrors her shape was not so attractive. Her breasts drooped, and she looked tired and scared and old.

I looked weak, bent over, my fingers almost touching the ground. Steve's face was blank in many of the mirrors, and Reba was chunky and big-legged and exhausted.

"It's how we really feel," Reba said.

"I don't feel that way," Grace said. "Not at all. I think it's how this world wants us to feel."

"Whatever, I'm for going back to the other room," Reba said. "At least some of the backdrops are pretty."

But we kept moving, and soon the mirrors were gone, and there were these rows and rows of what we had seen in a pile on the ground beneath the hole in the sky. They hung on cables from the ceiling we couldn't see. There were crude cut bodies and nicer ones, and really fine ones, some with windup keys at their backs, many without, all the fleshy ones nude and shiny. No one stunk here. They looked fresh. And there were aliens. The ones in our dreams, and in the pile below the sky.

The aliens were in great chairs in front of enormous cameras that were poked through

holes in the floor, and the chairs, they rode up in such a position that the alien's filmed-over, bulging eyes were pointed down into the cameras, and the creatures were held in place by belts and straps so they wouldn't fall from their chairs. They didn't move.

We walked slowly toward them, threading our way between the hanging figures. A tentacle dripped over the side of one giant chair, and I reached out to touch it. It was slick with decay and smelled.

"Dead," I said, "all dead."

We moved between the chairs that held the many aliens, came to a canyon in the floor. We looked over the rim, all the way down. All we could see was a dim red glow. We could feel heat coming up through the opening.

"This must be the garbage hole, where the bodies are dumped," Grace said.

"My guess is," I said, "that red glow is the sun. It has fallen onto the drive-in world, heated it up. I bet all that's left now is lava."

Looking across the vast expanse on the canyon to the other side, I could see cars and buses, planes and trains. They looked small and were all heaped together in the manner of toys tossed aside at the end of the day by an exhausted child.

"I bet we're looking down the funnel from the sky," Steve said. "It could be that, instead of the waste hole."

"The funnel was far away," Grace said. "The waste hole was just below us."

"Maybe," Steve said. "But time and distance...Nothing makes sense here. And there's some of the same kind of stuff that was thrown down the funnel over there," he said, pointing at the autos and planes and such on the other side of the great gap. "But who, and why?" Reba said. None of us had an answer.

We went back and looked at the hanging bodies, and Steve said, "You know, I think these human shapes haven't gone rotten because they've never had the spark of life. The ones below, I bet they , had it, and they didn't work out, had to be discarded. The others, they can be wound up, but these...Look up there, see, the more human ones have wires going into their heads."

I looked, and sure enough, I could see the wires twisting down and into the tops of their skulls."

"Oh, God Almighty," Reba said.

We rushed over to where she stood, and what we saw made us all gasp and go weak.

Hanging in a row were a number of alien and human bodies. We recognized the human shapes. There were several copies of each. There were crude carved wooden copies, and windup copies, and I suppose there could have been copies in the pile below, and we just hadn't seen them, or they were too rotted, or too mixed together.

It was all the members of the drive-in.

Replicas of them.

I saw my old friends, Randy and Willard.. .Crier.. .Many others.

But there was something even more stunning.

Us.

Figures of us.

Rows of us.

Hanging there. Mouths open. Wires running into our heads. Windup versions. Crude wooden versions. Naked little suckers letting it all hang out.

"Ain't this the shits?" Steve said.

"I think my tits perk higher than that," Grace said, looking down the row of replicas.

"Damn, Jack," Steve said. "Are you really that well hung?"

"He is," Reba said.

"I second that," Grace said.

"I wish I hadn't asked," Steve said.



# 4

Grace had Steve boost her up to the top of one of the hanging figures of herself. She put her hands on its head, said, "The cable has a little hook, and it fits into a thin loop around the bodies' necks. The wires, they.. .seem to be just pushed into the tops of the skulls."

Grace yanked at the wires. They came free. "Yep," she said. "I'm going to unhook this one."

She did, and swung down, and Steve managed the copy down. We pulled the body away from the hanging rows and out into an open space where there was a little more light.

We all bent over and pushed the inert figure's hair around, felt where the wires had fastened into its skull. There were these little bumps, and if you looked close, really close, you could see the holes where they had gone in.

"What the fuck could this all be about?" Steve said.

"I have an idea," Reba said. "And I don't like it."

"What?" I said.

"Bend over, Jack. Put your head toward me."

I did as I was asked. Reba ran her fingers through my hair. She said, "I found these before. I just thought they were birthmarks.. .They look like the marks from the wires in the Grace figure head."

"Now, wait a minute.. .Coincidence. They're just little birthmarks or something. I didn't even know I had them."

Reba didn't answer. She just bent forward, offering me her skull. Reluctantly, I ran my trembling fingers through her hair. There were little bumps.

"The same," I said.

Grace ducked her head forward. I ran my fingers through her beautiful, blonde hair. Same bumps.

Steve ran his own fingers through his hair, said, "Me too."

"I don't think I like what I'm thinking," I said.

"The catfish," Grace said. "Ed. Remember, there were edible wires inside his flesh. They

were so big, we could see them. But with us...They're small. They could be...must be inside us."

"No," Steve said. "I'm human. Can you make a machine hungry, make it want sex and Coca-Cola? I don't think so. Shit, man, I had a life before this crazy place. It sucked, but it was better than this. I got all kinds of memories. I got a divorce for heaven's sake. I mean, what robot wants to shit or pee?"

"We all have lives," Grace said.

"No," Reba said. "Think about it. The windup versions, the woodcut versions. It's like whoever made them was learning. Advancing."

"But, couldn't they just be models based on us?" Steve said.

"We all have the place for the wires in the tops of our heads," Reba said.

"It's too crazy," Grace said. "You mean, all our memories are...false."

Reba nodded. "Could be."

"We're just goddamn robots," Steve said.

"Technically," I said, "I think we're androids."

"But East Texas. Our homes...You mean, they never were? We never left this world? Or rather, we've always been here?"

"I don't know," I said. "But, I'll tell you what. I'm pissed. We've been fucked...Jesus. That means Mom and Dad. They never were. Or they were machines. Like everyone else."

"Like us," Reba said. "What I'm thinking is they may never have been your parents. It may be all in our head. In our.. Jesus.. .in our wires and circuits. We were given past histories, tossed into this world for something's entertainment. Even the aliens, they're false. They're just bodies. Rubber at first. Then devices like us. Something someone was playing with until he figured out how to do it better, and then, he/she/it grew bored."

"That would explain why the world is coming apart," Grace said. "Our creator. He just doesn't give a shit anymore. I always thought, you had a creator, he had to be better than some egotistical Christian god, wanting everyone to love him and worship him while he killed people with diseases and made them suffer...But, you know, compared to our god, that Christian god is looking pretty good...If there ever was a religion called Christianity...My Lord, everything is in question."

"All of it must have been based on some truth," I said. "Our creator's truth."

We all sat down around the Grace shape on the floor. Just sat there. Quiet. For a long, long time.

Finally Grace said, "I say we find this creator, and kill the sonofabitch."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Wouldn't that be a bad idea?" Steve said. "He is, after all, our Frankenstein.. .And how do I know that? Is there really a character called Frankenstein? Or is that just part of the whole brain implant — probably a chip in my head of some kind. Man, everything we know or have learned may be a big old fart-smelling lie."

"We're each different," Grace said. "Where he fucked up, is he gave us free will. We can do what we want. And that means killing him. Hell, wanting to do that. Have some kind of revenge. That makes us human, don't it?"

"If there ever were humans," I said.

It took a long time for us to make our way around the funnel, to the other side. We ended up sleeping a lot, and eating all our fruit. But finally we made our way to where the planes and buses and such were.

Some were real, or looked real. Some had windups at their backs. One of the planes, a little two-seater, had a propeller in the front that was attached with a tightly wound rubber band.

The machines were average sized. One of the cars was a 1966, tan, Chevy Impala. The window was down. Grace stuck her head inside, said, "The keys are in it." She got inside, turned the key. The car started.

"Now there's something neat," she said. "Low on gas, but I say we try it."

We climbed in, Grace at the wheel. She wheeled around the automotive and aerial debris, and we were off again, tooling along a great tile floor.

# 5

We found a wide gap in a wall, a mouse hole, and we drove through that. There were trees in there, but they were prop trees, the sort that looked real front on, but at their backs were little stands that held them up.

We passed towns made the same way. Towns we knew. It was Interstate 1-45, or so said the road signs, and the towns were the right towns, but they weren't real. There were even people standing about, at the sides of the road, but they too were false, with little stands at their backs. False cars. False dogs and cats.

Everything a plywood and cardboard lie.

We drove on, and the little towns fell away and gave place to more woods. The woods grew darker and we could see huge sets of glowing eyes out there.

"Man, what could that be?" Steve asked.

"I don't think we want to know," Reba said.

We hadn't gone much farther when suddenly a set of the eyes rushed forward.

A mouse.

A big fucking mouse. Bigger than a horse. It darted for the Impala.

Grace gave the Impala the gas. I glanced back through the rear windshield. The mouse stood on its hind legs and waved its paws in the air in frustration. As it tracked back into the woods, I noted there was a windup key in its ass.

"It isn't even real," I said.

"Neither are we," Reba said, and she began to cry. At one point, we saw beside the road a whole row of tin soldiers. They had rotating keys at their backs. They were dancing together, and it was funky stuff, that's what I'm trying to tell you. "Who winds them?" Steve said.

"That would be the motherfucker we're looking for," Grace said. We drove in dark silence for a long time, and I know that each of us was thinking of our lives, wondering if any of it was truly our lives, or if we had even lived the drive-in lives, let alone the before the drive-in lives. Just driving along, thinking all this, feeling hollow as a chocolate Easter bunny, remembering sweet moments and sad, thinking, did any of this shit happen or did all our ideas and memories run through chips and wires hidden in our bloodstreams. And is the blood in us blood, or Karo syrup, or is there such a thing as blood, or even humans,

and which or what are we, and did this mean someone other than George Lucas made up *Star Wars*?

Sometime during our drive, the lights were cut off by someone or something. They just snapped off. We turned on the car lights and proceeded. We pointed the car at a silver glow we could see on the horizon, on down that pseudo 1-45.

We drove until we came to an end of the highway and all the props, and still we drove on, across a flat expanse of nothing, almost as bleak as the highway into Amarillo, Texas, if there is an Amarillo, Texas or a highway in that direction, if there is a direction. My God, was there North, East, West or South?

It made the chips and wires and such in the goddamn plasti-flesh skull ache, is what it did.

Not long after me thinking all of this, wondering where this highway ended up, the Impala ran out of gas. We got out and walked toward the glow on the horizon.

We walked and came upon...tools. Giant screwdrivers and pliers, and there were wires and tubes and dials tossed about. We weaved in between them, kept going toward that glow. The goal the glow, baby. The glow the goal. Finally, we arrived at the only place we could arrive. The End Of It All.

There was just the table edge. Nowhere else to go but back, and that wasn't appealing. The dim light in the distance was not so distant now. It was a huge television, nothing on it but a white glow and an Indian head test pattern. We could hear it hum. And in the TV's projected light, we could see a great room. On the white-sheeted bed was an elderly man and there were metal stands by his bed, and they held bottles of liquid and tubes ran from the bottles into him. They were affixed to his arms and head. Around him were machines with lights and dials on them. To the right of the room was an open window, and moonlight seeped in quietly to rest on the sill like drift-down glitter. To the left of us, setting on the table was a toy, a rubber band windup plane and a checker board with a box of checkers next to it.

There were shelves in the room, and they were covered, or perhaps the word is littered, with all manner of old toys and books.

"By now," Steve said, "I've seen everything but a pig doing the hula while wearing a tutu and a top hat with a cork in his ass, but, I got to admit, my little old brain, or computer chip, whatever, is doing the dipsy-doodle on this here shit." "I'll second that," Reba said. "Thirds," Grace said. "Oh, hell, count me in too," I said.

"I don't know if you have noticed," Grace said, "but what we're on, isn't quite as wide as it was. And now that I can see better about the room, I spy a chair, a couch, and guess what, we're on a table." "I'll be goddamned," Steve said.

"I see a lot of test tubes," Reba said. I can see them over there, near the bed.. .Goddamn, look at that."

We looked where she was pointing. The TV set. The set crackled like Rice Krispies and lines appeared and met in the middle, and out of the lines came an image, and the image moved across the room toward us.

It was a young, thin, pimply man with unruly hair and glasses thick as goggles. He wore blue jeans and a white shirt with a pencil and pen pack sticking out of the pocket. The pants were a little too short, and you could see his white socks with little blue clocks on them. He wore brown loafers.

As he moved across the dark expanse of the room on a beam of light, he said, "Hi. My name is Billy."

The beam from the TV brought him down on the edge of the table, and there he stood, looking as solid as us.

"A lot of people call me Little Billy, or used to. I am your creator."

# 6

Then we're going to kill your ass dead," Steve said.

"Actually, you can't," Billy said. "Or, you won't have to. I'm not me... Really."

"That figures," Grace said. "Nothing is real here."

"Oh, yeah. Some of it's real. This room is real. The things in the room are real. To me, anyway. The little toy plane on the edge of the table is a real toy plane. I'm not really coming out of the TV set though. I just thought that seemed cool. I'm coming out of him."

Billy turned and pointed to the old man on the bed.

"And who is he?" I asked.

"Me. The older me. The creator of the creator, me creating me. The younger me."

"I think we ought to just walk back and get eaten by the windup rat," Steve said.

"He's a partial," Billy said. "The rat, I mean."

"Do what?" Grace asked.

"He's a partial. Part flesh, part machine. But, not really."

"Glad that's straightened out in a confused manner," Steve said.

"We want to kill you," I said, "but, you know what, since you're just a beam of light, I'm gonna guess that isn't going to happen."

"No. It won't. Told you that. Besides, what you want, is not to kill me—"

"Oh," Grace said, "I assure you, that's what we want."

"What you want," Little Billy said, "is to know the truth. Everyone wants to know the truth. And the truth is this. The world is bigger than you, and you are on my bedroom table, in my lab. And I'm eighty years old. This is how I remember myself. As a kid. But, I'm eighty, and my time is nigh."

"That's why everything is breaking down," Grace said, "you're not maintaining it anymore, because you can't."

"That's right."

"So, you built prototypes," Grace said. "Until you got something more lifelike, discarded the old ones in a waste heap, then gave us, the keepers, false memories and turned us loose in a horrible world. Gave us memories so we thought we had a past and could long for going home?"

"Sort of," Billy said, taking off his glasses, cleaning them on his shirt.

"You're a fucking monster," Grace said.

"No. I was just playing. I'm not even really very smart, so I didn't exactly do that."

"What did you do?" Grace said.

"Philip K. Dick asked once, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, and the answer is, they do dream."

"Okay, now I really want to get eaten by the windup rat," Steve said.

"On the bed the man is not a man but an android. He is a creature and creation of this world, which is a creation by human beings. Maybe. I don't even know that answer. Humans. Androids making androids. Androids making humans. God making humans, a single cell of thought floating in ether, imagining it all? Whatever."

"So we are the android's androids," Reba said.

"No," said Little Billy. "You are the android's dream. The android, Little Billy, is a beautiful creation like his mother and his father and his now dead sister. He could procreate. He was as human as a human. And like a human, he dies."

"Can't you like jump him off?" Steve asked. "You know, battery cables or something?"

"He is an android," Little Billy said, "but he is too human to be fixed like a machine. He ages. He dies. That's the short and the long and the abbreviated middle. He created your world and all of you to give him life inside his head, since life no longer exists outside of it. On the bed, inside his head, he knows the truth now, that he is an android. He didn't even know, until now. All the secrets of the universe, his own and others, are revealed. And he sends me to you, in his younger form, to talk to you. He's sorry you've been through what you've been. But not really. He had fun believing it all. Believing for a time he was a great creator of aliens and androids and of a marvelous dark world. In his head, images nestled in a little speck of chip smaller than a virus, he enjoyed the idea that he carved you first, and wound you up, then wired you up, and made you all, put you in the drive-in world, created problems and let you go. You see. But he did that all in his head. He never put a knife to wood or a wire to chip, flesh to machine. He/me loves movies. A man of unseen wires and parts loves the dreams of the machine, the camera, the devices,



the effects. And you, are in fact, the dreams of a machine."

Little Billy glitched, cut out, came back.

"I haven't long. Old age...or what we think of as old age, has caught up with us. Me/Him. And when I go, the world as I know it goes, and the world I have created goes. And our knowledge of who we are and why we are, goes with us. And by the way, Grace, three points for not wearing a top."

"Now let me get a handle on this shit," Steve said. "We ain't really androids neither. We ain't nothing but a dream?"

"You are what you are," Little Billy said, and there was a glitch and his image jumped away, jumped back, then faded.

And was gone.

We stood stunned, and when I looked back at the way we had come, there was only the table, and I could see the end of it, and beyond it, the dimly lit wall of the room. Finally, I said, "I'm as real as I want to be, friends. And I say we do what we've always done. Charge on. Live what life we have for as long as we have it."

This was considered, Grace stuck out her hand, palm down. I put mine on top of hers. Steve and Reba joined in. We said, "Hooyah!"

"Now," I said, "might I suggest transportation? The toy plane? It's a four-seater."  
"What the hell?" Steve said. "Why not?"

We made our way over there. The plane was pointed toward the back wall. Steve and I had Reba and Grace climb up on the checker box and step inside the plane. Grace took the little wheel in her hands.

"Do you think it works?" she said.

"Don't know," I said, peeling off my tied-up clutch of spears, tossing them on the ground. "We're gonna turn it so it faces the window. Then we're gonna wind it up, climb in and let it go." "How?" Grace said.

"I have an idea. A spark inside my little brain that is neither flesh nor computer chip, but the makings of an old man's dream. His brain is my brain. And that brain tells me we are going to turn the plane around, me and Steve."

We struggled to do it, but managed, then shoved it up close to the checker box again, pointed it in the direction of the window.

Steve and I went around front, got hold of the propeller and began to wind it, grabbing each new propeller blade as it came to us, winding it tight.

"When we have it wound tight," I yelled up at Grace, "take your bundle of spears from your back, and stick the whole bundle between the blades, and you and Reba hold the propeller in place till we get inside."

We kept winding, and soon it was as tight as we could wind. "Now," I said.

Grace stuck the bundle of five spears between the blades, and with Reba helping her hold them, we let go. One of the spears snapped, the propeller moved a bit, then held.

Steve and I scrambled on top of the checker box, slipped into the back seat of the plane.

"When I say," I said, "jerk up the spears and toss them away." Grace nodded. "Now," I said.

She and Reba jerked them back and tossed them loose of the plane, and the little toy rattled and roared and wheeled across the table, came to the edge of it, and launched. It dipped at first, then rose up and glided, wobbled a bit, then headed straight on toward the open window.

"How long do we last?" Steve said.

"As long as the old man," I said. "As long as life gives us. As much as life gives us. Hell, nothing's promised to human or android or dark little dream, so goddamnit, we'll live what's there." The plane sailed smoothly out of the window and into the moonlight and into a cool fall breeze that swept under the plane and lifted it higher. White moths burst in front of us and beat wings to the sky and became white flakes in the darkness. Above us, stars — real stars as my false memories remembered them — shone above us, bright and sharp. And there was the moon. A great silver plate lying on the black fabric of night. The air smelled of fresh mowed lawns, and there were warm lights in house windows and a long dark yard where grass grew, and I knew instantly, that this was the world I had come from; this was my East Texas as created for me by my android sire who lived here in his East Texas created for him by... Whoever.

I took in a deep breath of cool night air and felt good and strong and strangely alive. I thought: There's no reason to write anymore, so I will not. I tore open my pack, took out my journal of composition books and pages, tossed them high to the sky.

The fluttering pages evaporated in the air like cotton candy birds licked wet, then the front of the plane faded, and I laughed, and I saw Grace and Reba fade, and Steve looked at me, and smiled, and faded, and so did —

## **EPILOGUE**

The end ain't the end, and the mystery ain't the mystery, and the grooves of the pseudo-mind are dark and, well...groovy.

## FADE IN, DEAR HEARTS

We were back.

"What the fuck was that?" Grace said.

"I thought the old man died," I said, "taking us with him."

"He must have had a moment," Reba said. "A mild stroke."

"Don't matter," Grace said. "Tree!"

The plane, which really had no guidance system other than windup, aim, and point, went straight for a large oak. I threw my hands over my face and the plane hit the tree and knocked me loose of the seat.

I woke up lying on the fresh cut lawn.

I sat up slowly. Nothing seemed broken. I eased my pack off my back, tossed it aside, made it to my feet, staggered toward the wreckage. I saw Grace crawling out of the cockpit. There was a thin line of blood across her forehead.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" It was Reba, calling from the other side of the plane.

When I got there, Reba was on her knees, bending over Steve.

"He's dead," she said. "His neck."

Steve's neck was twisted in such a way it reminded me of a neck-wrung chicken. His teeth littered the moonlit grass around his head.

Grace came around the plane slowly, her forehead bleeding more now, running over her pretty features like a flood. She looked at Steve, then eased toward him.

"Goddamnit," she said. "Goddamnit."

She dropped down on her ass, cradled his head in her lap. It rolled over as easy as a sock puppet's head. Blood ran out of her mouth and onto her bare legs. Her naked breasts heaved in the light.

I looked away, back at the house. The lawn was littered with my journal papers.

"And the fun just keeps on coming," I said.

"Yeah," Reba said, reaching down to touch Grace's shoulder. "Look."

She wasn't excited, just stating a fact. The distance was squeezing in. The yard was constricting, the houses were fading. It was like an invisible fire had surrounded us and was burning toward us, taking everything in its path. Where there had been something to see, lawn and trees and houses, now there was darkness.

Above us, the moon and the stars winked out.

We, me and Reba and Grace, the body of Steve, our plane, were at the center of a long, narrow, valley. The walls that rose on either side of it were dark and bumpy, pulsing and sparking. Wires ran along the bumpy walls like veins. The sparking gave off spotty, strobe-like light, so it was hard to see how far the valley, or to be more accurate, the trench, ran.

"Now what?" Reba said.

"His brain," I said. "The old man's brain. Made of flesh and wires and micros smaller than virus sized chips, made of this and that and things we don't know. His brain's business, my friends, we're inside it."

"That makes less sense than being part of an android's dream," Reba said.

"He can't create the world out there anymore," I said. "Can't project his thoughts the way he could before. He's dying. It's all pulling into the source. We're inside his head. We're impulses in the grooves of his mind. He's probably in a coma. We were never part of any kind of dream. We were invented. And we are real. What happened to Steve is real. How I feel about it is real. He has sparked us to life. He is God, and we are his creations."

"You don't know that," Reba said.

"No, but it's as good a theory as any, and it's my story and I'm sticking to it."

Grace rose up slowly and laid Steve's head carefully on what served as ground —pulsing meat.

"I wonder if there's anywhere to go," she said.

"One thing I've learned from you, Grace," I said. "Don't be a quitter."

"That's the goddamn truth," she said, taking off her ragged fur bottoms, using them to wipe the blood from her face. She tossed the rag aside, stood there in all her magnificent naked glory. "Look there," she said.

It was the drive-in world mist. It was flowing down the brain-corridor, white as a geriatric's head.

"As Steve would say," Grace said, "ain't that the shits?" She turned to us, put out her hand. "As long as it lasts," she said.

"He could be in a coma for moments, or years," Reba said.

"Or there may be more to it than we know," Grace said. "As soon as we peel one layer off the onion, we find another. My guess is there are plenty more layers, more truths to discover. Fact is, we don't even know how true our recent truth is."

"It's really nothing new," I said. "It's just like the way we thought life was, and certainly must be. Unknown. Unfocused. Unpromised."

"You are one fine-ass philosopher, Jack," Reba said. "How long do I hold my hand out?" Grace asked. I smiled, put my hand on top of Grace's. Reba placed hers on mine.

We said, "Hoooyah!"

Slowly, we gathered ourselves, then standing shoulder to shoulder, we started down the long, dark, sparking corridor through the mist and all its specters, moving onward to someplace or no place. It was our mystery to discover.

THE END



