

***Z*erostrata**

Also by Andersen Prunty

The Overwhelming Urge
Jack and Mr. Grin

Zerostrata

Andersen Prunty



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For Gretchen, Supreme Loveymonster, forever

Chapter One

Coming Home to the Sad House

The first thing I noticed was Mother, collapsed on the lawn just in front of the porch, a cat on her head. The giant Victorian loomed over the expansive, gently sloping lawn. I stood on the sidewalk, looking through the rusted wrought iron gate. I wasn't alarmed about Mother. This was not particularly strange behavior for her. She certainly didn't notice me. She was probably in some kind of narcotic dreamland, waiting for someone to come and rouse her from her stupor.

I wondered if Father was inside. I wondered if my brother still lived here.

The place was even more dilapidated than I remembered. It was one of the oldest houses in the neighborhood. One of the oldest and the most shabbily maintained. A dark cloud permanently roiled above it. It was spring. Beyond the perimeter of the yard, the sun poked out from behind the clouds but, standing there, it was dark and gloomy. I looked at the simple black mailbox to my right. Little stickers that had once been an iridescent white but were now gray spelled out our family name: NOTHING.

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That's right, we were the Nothing Family. One of my ancestors' cruel jokes. The jokes didn't end with my ancestors. My mother named me Hansel, after the story. My brother got the name of Zasper. Mother said his name was from a story also but she never told us which one and, despite reading all the books in the family library, neither one of us was able to figure it out. If she was going to name her child after a character in a story, one would think she might keep the story lying about. The numerous times Zasper and I grilled her about this, she would smirk knowingly and say, "Maybe it hasn't been written yet."

In my case, while she may have enjoyed the fairy tale, I still feel it was meanspirited to name me Hansel. Consequently, I have felt like a little boy, lost and wandering through a dangerous forest, since birth.

I pushed the gate open. It squeaked loudly, the sound both grating and comforting. It was like a welcome, waking Mother from her stupor.

I walked slowly toward her. I walked slowly because I rarely walked quickly. It was no longer in my nature. Years of injurious clumsiness had taught me to slow down. She stood up from the dewy lawn and dusted off the front of her black satin robe. The cat remained on her head.

"Hansel," she said as I drew closer.

"Mother."

I reached her and stopped. There wasn't a hug or any other sign of open affection. We had never been that kind of a family and ten years of my absence wasn't going to change that.

"Where have you been?"

"I don't know. I think I spent some time in the desert."

"You smell like fire."

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“I’m kind of thirsty.”

“Let’s go inside and I’ll make us some coffee.”

“You have a cat on your head.”

“I thought you might notice that. That’s my little Tricky. Short for Trick-or-Treat.”

“You named the cat ‘Trick-or-Treat’?”

“Sure did. I was out lying in the yard one day and he just came and climbed onto my head. It was painful at first, his claws kept digging in, you know, so I took to wearing this wig and that kind of tones the claws down.”

“I didn’t even notice the wig.”

“It’s made to look like my real hair. Are you sure you weren’t in a fire? You smell like you’ve burned up.”

“I think I would have remembered something like that.”

“Well, come on in. Let’s stop standing around out here. It’s gross.”

I followed her up onto the porch, lined with wilted ferns, and into the dusky interior of the house that lay behind the heavy dark wood door.

Chapter Two

Coffee with Mother

Once inside the house, rain began beating down outside. I followed Mother through the entryway and into the Welcoming Room—a room that had always been sterile and empty save for the staircase winding its way up to the second floor. I took a deep breath. Nothing had changed. The house was as lifeless as ever. She turned left, heading into the kitchen. I followed her. Once in the kitchen, she directed me to sit down at the table. Even though this was where most meals were taken it was not the dinner table and it was not fabulously large. It was a small round table that sat in front of a window so one could look out of the house, down the lawn and past the fence and to the sidewalk. The table demanded one to look out of the window and possibly catch a glimpse of passersby, maybe even someone who had some shred of joy left in his life.

I sat down.

Mother went to the gray countertop where several pills rested in a pharmaceutical line. She poured a glass of water from the tap, picked up each pill individually and fed it into

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her mouth until it was full before drinking the water, swallowing all of the pills in one gulp. She came over to the table and sat in the chair opposite mine, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her robe. She lit her cigarette and pulled the ashtray toward her. She rarely had more than one cigarette butt in the ashtray at any given time. She used it to deposit her ashes and crush out the butt before dumping it in the trashcan.

“Cigarette?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

“You don’t smoke anymore?”

“I don’t think so. No. I don’t know. I can’t remember. I don’t really want one. I feel kind of parched. I don’t want to breathe fire.”

“Coffee?”

“No thanks. Some water would be good.” I hopped out of the chair. “I’ll get it.”

I took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with tap water.

“So what have you been up to?”

“I really don’t know. Can we talk about something else?”

“Like what?” She took a drag from her cigarette and exhaled toward the window, staring absently out of it. The smoke, caught in the meager sunlight, curled itself into nefarious blue fingers.

“I don’t know... How have things been here?”

“Oh, you know...”

“No, not really. I’m not sure I know much of anything anymore. Where’s Dad?”

“Gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes. That’s what I said, isn’t it? Gone.”

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“But where did he go?”

“Oh, you know your father. An ass. An utter, incomprehensible ass. The day he left he said he was going to become a superhero.”

“A superhero?”

“Yes. Do I have to keep repeating myself to you? Have you become hard of hearing in your absence?”

“No. It just seems a little bit shocking. Was he serious?”

“Knowing your father, he probably was. He said he wanted to feel like a force of good in an otherwise rotten world. Those were his exact words.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

She spit out a mouthful of smoke in a sarcastic chuckle. “Hell, as long as his checks keep coming I don’t really care where he is.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“Oh, nearly two years now.”

“Huh.”

I sat back down at the table, taking a drink of the cool water. It felt good on my dry throat. It felt like the whole inside of my body had gone dry. The water slowly trickled down and I felt it run into my stomach.

“Are you hungry?” Mother asked me.

“Not really.”

“I could have Francis cook us up something.”

“Francis still works here?”

“Poor gal doesn’t have anywhere else to go during the day. She’s the reason it’s as clean as it is in here. I sure as hell wouldn’t bother to clean any of this stuff up. It’s all other people’s junk anyway. Your father’s. Your brother’s...”

“How *is* Zasper?”

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“You can see for yourself. He’s still down in the basement. Hasn’t hardly left since he graduated high school.”

“I should have been here for him.”

“He always looked up to you.”

“I would have buckled under the responsibility.”

Mother crushed out her cigarette and her eyes seemed to grow a little bit blank.

“Why did back here you come, Hansel?”

Her awkward phrasing took me off guard. I thought about asking her why she had said it like that but figured she would be defensive about it.

“I don’t know. I guess I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go. I feel so sad... And lonely.”

“And you walk or wheel to this place here when you feel sad? On your walks? Or wheels? This is a sad place. More sadder it could turn you.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“So what is it that if you want you could?”

“I want to feel happiness.”

I didn’t really know what she had just asked so I didn’t know if I was answering a question or just making a statement out of the blue.

She let out another one of those sarcastic laughs that sounded more like a cough.

“Does you really want this happiness thing for yourself there?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“Then there’s someone that maybe you should look at with your eyes. See. That is. This man. Doc-tor.”

“Wow,” was the only thing I could really say, now so flabbergasted by her utter lack of clear speech. “Is he the one who gives you all those pills?”

“Oh not yes. That’s Dr. Calibretti. Who puts pills in my face. He gives me pill money to take to the store.” Prescriptions? “You should go look to Dr. Blast. I can get his telephone call things for you. In a little bit. Or a while. I’m gonna take a little rest.”

She scooted her chair back and slid onto the floor, completely gone. I guessed our conversation was over and decided to go downstairs and see my brother. I stood up from the table and caught Francis out of the corner of my eye, coming in for her day of dusting, cooking and vacuuming. She saw me and stopped.

“Hansel? Is that you?”

“Yeah. How are you, Francis?”

“Oh, you know. Why are *you* here?”

“I don’t really know.”

“You shouldn’t be here. Do you know the only reason I come here is to make my own life seem that much happier?”

“Are you happy... when you leave?”

“Happier than you could imagine.”

“What do you do that makes you so happy?”

“Hansel, I leave this place and just feel happy I am who I am.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean... You’re all defective... or something. That’s what I mean. Forgive me for being so forthright but, since you’ve been away so long, I feel like I can be a little more open around you than I can the rest of them. Look at yourself. You all have everything you could ever want and you’re all miserable.”

“But maybe it’s because we want more.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe we want what you have.”

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“Haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

I didn’t know how to answer her. The phone saved me. A horrified look crossed Francis’ handsomely middle-aged face.

I went over to the black phone hanging on the wall beside the refrigerator and picked it up.

“Nothing Residence,” I said.

“You stay away from my daughter,” an old female voice said from the other end.

“Sorry?”

“You heard me. Just stay away.”

I hung the phone up. The woman’s voice filled me with a sense of dread even greater than my usual sense of dread. I looked at Francis and noticed she still wore the same horrified grimace on her face.

“That phone hasn’t rang in two years. Who was it?”

“I think it was the wrong number.”

“Yeah, well, nice to see you again. I have to get to work. Don’t worry about your mother. She’ll wake up in a couple of hours. Remind me to feed that cat though, if you see me again.”

“Okay.”

I had stopped paying attention to the cat during my conversation with Mother. Turning back to look at the sad heap on the floor, I saw Tricky was still there, all curled up and sleeping on her head.

Chapter Three

Zasper Nothing

A doorway separated the basement stairs from the rest of the house. Opening the door was like stepping into a different dimension. I couldn't believe my brother had chosen this area of the house as his quarters. Why not something lofty like the northeast turret?

Cautiously, I crept down the steep stone steps, all traces of light diminishing as I reached the bottom. Once at the bottom of the stairs, shrouded in this cavelike, absolute darkness, I encountered another door—a heavy, wooden battered thing. Sometimes, as a child, I imagined the other side of the door to be pocked with teethmarks from the rats undoubtedly living there, struggling to get out. It was my instinct to turn the knob and walk into the basement but then I paused to think, “Was he living in the *whole* basement?”

Of course he was. That was the only reason I could think of anyone wanting to live in this part of the house. Zasper needed the space for some reason and the basement certainly served that purpose. A sprawling affair, it was as large as the ground floor of the house with no walls. The only obstruc-

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tions were a few unattractive iron poles descending from the equally unattractive rusted iron support beam running along the ceiling.

I knocked on the door but Zasper did not answer. Perhaps he was asleep. I heard sounds coming from inside. It was a virtual cacophony. I couldn't pick out one single sound. That is, I couldn't tell if it was the television or a stereo or what it was. He certainly wasn't entertaining a crowd of people. The sound was too loud for someone to be sleeping.

I knocked again. This time a little louder.

"Who is it?" His voice sounded dazed, weakly cutting through the rest of the noise.

"It's me, Zazz."

"Who is 'me'? I don't recognize your voice." I didn't know how he could hear me at all.

"It's me. Hansel."

"Hansel?"

"Yes."

"Okay. You can come in."

Opening the door, I stepped into the murky twilight of the basement proper. The low light only suggested the chaos strewn around the room, not bright enough to completely expose it. It didn't help that most of the furnishings were black or gray and there seemed to be a good deal of black cloth covering many objects that might have been some other kind of furniture. The room was lighted by candles only. A few red and yellowish-green lights blinked on and off at various intervals throughout the space. And it wasn't just physical disarray, either. From everywhere came that sound—a wall of noise. There were voices and some musical things and some things that were just white noise.

I didn't see Zasper right away.

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When I found him, I wasn't incredibly surprised to see him lying on the floor. His bed was immediately above him, piled with books and records... sketch pads.

"Hey, Zasper, how you doing?"

"Not so good." He was dressed in a black jumpsuit and his hair had grown considerably longer since the last time I saw him.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, I was trying to read but then I read a couple of pages and wondered what the point of turning the page was so I've just been reading this same poem over and over again."

"What are you reading?"

"Baudelaire."

"Good stuff. Which poem have you been reading over and over?"

He laughed. "I don't even know what the title is. I had to ask myself if it really mattered if I turned the page or not. I've read a countless number of books and look where it's gotten me. Maybe I should just stop reading altogether."

"What is that noise?"

"That's the New Music."

"The New Music?"

"My New Music."

"It sounds like noise."

"No, it's harmony. Or chaos. I haven't figured out which one yet. At times it's beautiful. At other times it's horrific. And sometimes it just doesn't make any sense at all. Like now. I don't particularly like the way it sounds now. See, that's the beautiful thing about this New Music. There aren't any albums or songs or titles. There's never any duplication. It's always live and always continuous. It can never reach the end... Unless the power goes out. Then I'm fucked I guess."

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“So what is this New Music?”

“Well, there’s a television going over there.” He pointed somewhere back into the darkness. “I’ve faced it against the wall so I don’t have to put up with the light and the images. The second you put an image to sound it becomes something totally different. Right now it’s tuned to the religious channel. There is a radio tuned to the classical music station but sometimes it picks up country music and that totally changes the sound. There is yet another radio tuned to static. The static changes constantly. Which is interesting because I always thought static meant something that never changed. Sometimes it sounds like waves and other times it sounds like a high pitched whine and sometimes it sounds like choral chanting. There’s my 200-disc changer filled with music I used to like. It’s set on random so it skips around from song to song. And there’s a record player. That’s the only thing I ever have to actually change but then I figured out a good idea. See, because when *I* changed it it was no longer totally random, so now I have Francis come down every half hour and change it. I told her not to look at the labels or the album sleeves, just reach into the dark and pull one out and that will be fine. She’s also the one who lights the candles so I don’t have to move so much. She says I’m creepy.”

“Yeah. She just called me miserable.”

I stood for a moment in that half-light, letting the sounds sink into me. At first they were distinct sounds. Zasper mentioned the television and I could pick the television out. He mentioned the CD player and I could pick that out. But I found the second I stopped paying any attention to it, the moment I stopped trying to single those sounds out, they all blended together and I could see how, at times, it *would* be a beautiful sound. Like a crowded city street. But that was what

was missing. The people. As big and loud as that noise was, it was still a very lonely sound. And there was something else I couldn't quite pick out and didn't hit upon as Zasper was giving me his sonic inventory.

"Is that all the noise in here? It seems like I'm hearing something else."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. That's my keyboard. It's against that wall over there. I left it on and, occasionally, I throw things at it. Sometimes they land on the keys and keep them pressed down, adding another sound."

"I like the sound it's playing now."

And I did. It made me think of childhood. Of bright Saturday mornings when I was still a happy child and totally unaware of all the sadness around me. Unaware that sadness would one day infect me.

"I like that sound a lot."

"Well, if you want, you can take the keyboard. I don't care much for it anyway."

"So what have you been up to lately?"

"Oh, you know, not much. Mostly lying here. You look so uncomfortable standing up there. You should come and lie down on the floor. It's really more comfortable than it looks and, don't worry, Francis vacuums in here weekly so there aren't any creepy crawlies or sticky stuff."

"Okay." It wasn't right that I was the only family member in the house who was still standing upright so I crawled down on the floor next to Zasper.

"What have *you* been up to?" he asked.

"I don't really know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Is that strange?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Kind of. Maybe you don't

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want to know.”

“Mother wants me to go see a psychiatrist.”

“Dr. Blast?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not really a psychiatrist. I don’t think he has a medical license or anything. He calls himself a ‘therapist.’”

“Yeah? Have you been to see him?”

“No. Mom tried to get me to go a couple of years ago. She thought I would get out of high school and go off to college and live some grand life but... like that was ever going to happen. I was wired for failure. Have been since the day I was born. I just wanted to lie on the floor and think about things.”

“Haven’t you been thinking about things a long time? You’ve been out of school what, five years?”

“Can you ever really think too much?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you run out of stuff to think about? Don’t you have to experience things in order to think about them? Analyze them?”

“No. That’s reflection. Not pure thought. What I do is pure thought. Like this New Music. It’s like I have the whole human world around me but I’m something different. I have stepped out of the human realm.”

“You’re still human.”

“But I’m a guilty human.”

“You feel guilty to be a human?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re the cause of everything bad in the world.”

“Really? Humans cause earthquakes? Storms?”

“Well, all of those are created by God and we all know

humans were created in the image of God. Throwing millions of humans together is like creating an earthquake on a daily basis.”

“But you’re an atheist.”

“So.”

“Sophist.”

“Zealot.”

We both emitted staccato bursts of breath, our idea of laughter. It felt good. We used to have conversations like that all the time but, in our youth, the conversations had a little more promise. There used to be a world of possibilities yawning out before us and we talked about which one of them we would pursue. Now it just sounded like two sad and tired old men talking about what could have been or what went wrong. Only, neither one of us was really that old.

“Do you remember being happy when we were kids, Zazz?”

“I’ve been deeply depressed since I turned twelve.”

“I know. But before that. Do you remember laughing and playing and not thinking so much? Sometimes I think the more I think the fewer things I do. I remember thinking a lot over the years and I don’t remember doing very much. I think thinking paralyzed me.”

“I only feel alive when I’m crawling around in my own brain.”

“Do you remember Zerostrata?”

“Of course I remember Zerostrata.”

“Is it still there?”

“When was the last time you were outside? This morning?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s been two years since I’ve been outside. It

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was still there the last time I was out. Something probably blew it down. Hopefully.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s so childish. It’s a fucking *treehouse* for Christ’s sake.”

I thought about Zerostrata. Suddenly, I was filled with an urge to be inside it. Out in the backyard, high up in the trees. It was the first time since I could remember I had actually wanted something, that I had actually looked forward to something.

I stood up so quickly dizziness washed over me and I swayed to the side, bracing myself on Zasper’s bed. The books and records that were stacked high went tumbling, some of them onto the floor, onto Zasper.

He grunted as the heavy objects pelted him but he made no attempt to actually move.

“I’ll be back,” I said.

“You can’t go back to your childhood,” he stated very matter-of-factly, a Celine on his forehead, surrounded by his beautiful noise.

But he was wrong. That wasn’t what I wanted. That wasn’t what I wanted at all. I didn’t want to be a kid again. I just wanted to be in Zerostrata. I just wanted to look out over things, from that height, with virtually nothing holding me back from the world around me.

Chapter Four

Zerostrata

Outside, the rain had tapered off to a mist. I hadn't thought about Zerostrata in so long I had no idea what to expect. I was sure it wouldn't be there anymore. After all, it had to be quite an eyesore at this point. The city had probably made them take it down. But another part of me knew it would be there. Of course it would be there. It *had* to be there. Things and places like Zerostrata didn't just go away.

Standing in the backyard, the mist swirling around me, I looked up at the sky, up toward the top of the huge oak tree and I saw it, raised to heights in defiance of all child safety. Zerostrata, looking just like it always had.

No. That wasn't true. It was more beautiful than I remembered. When I was a child, I had never thought of it as beautiful... just *neat*. But now it was imbued with my whole childhood and, looking at it, all of that magic, all of that *happiness* came swirling back to me.

I approached the tree, the ground mushy beneath my feet, smelling the grass and the fertilizer and the rain and thinking maybe there was a slim possibility everything could be all

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right with the world. Or at least with my place in the world.

My father had hired a carpenter friend of his to construct Zerostrata when I was nine years old. As a structure it wasn't really anything spectacular but as a treehouse it was fabulous, almost supernatural. The most striking thing about it was its height. It was nearly at the top of the oak tree, hovering well over every house in the neighborhood. As a child, being up in Zerostrata was like sitting in a cloud, looking down at everything else. And it was a good-size treehouse. It was the size of an average bedroom and the ceiling was at least eight feet high. To get to Zerostrata, the carpenter had constructed a crude elevator. By crude, I mean it only had the barest essentials. There weren't any walls. Just a wooden platform to stand on and a corrugated metal roof. Toward the front of the platform was a little pad on a pedestal that had the only two buttons it needed—up and down. The limbs and branches in the path of the elevator had been cut away and I was glad to see they had not grown back.

Hopefully, the elevator still worked.

I stood on the platform and pressed the little 'up' button. The button was a yellow smiley face, now faded with age. The 'down' button was a frowning face. That was my father's idea.

The platform wobbled but, after a few shaky seconds, I began to rise to the top of the tree.

I named it while Zerostrata was still under construction. I would go outside with my notebook and pen and look up at the carpenter working away. While glancing up into the tree and the sunlight, I wrote down all kinds of names in the notebook. Most of them were made-up names because I didn't want the treehouse to have a name like anything else in the world. When I finally came to 'Zerostrata,' I looked at the

name written there in my childish scrawl on the blue-lined notebook paper and decided I liked the sound of it. I liked the way it looked. I thought it was mysterious. I could make up any sort of meaning for it I wanted to, depending on my mood for the day. Giving something a meaningless name meant it was up to the namer to bestow this meaning upon it. That would be the challenge for my fevered child brain. Only now did I think I truly understood the meaning. What it had come to mean was all the afternoons Zasper and I and whatever friends we could find spent in that place. Just the word now sparked that imagery, that *freedom* we felt while we were up there.

And I was there now.

The elevator stopped when it reached the top and I made the delicate step from the platform to the inside of the treehouse.

It smelled exactly like I remembered. It looked similar too. A little smaller because things always looked smaller as an adult. And a little shabbier because it hadn't had anyone to love it and look out for it all these years. The walls were a faded yellow and the ceiling was a sky blue, as close to the color of the sky as an imaginative but resourcefully limited child could get. Large glassless windows were opened on the three sides that didn't house the door.

This felt more like home than the house ever could or ever would. This had been mine. And Zasper's. And it had never really been anyone else's. Maybe it was the last thing I had ever really considered mine. There are really two kinds of adults. Those who acquire possessions and those who have their possessions stripped away. Thinking of Zerostrata as mine was a good feeling, I thought, because it was such an incredibly childish and selfish one.

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Zerostrata was virtually empty. An oval rug, something I had smuggled out of the house, covered the middle of it. The rug was now nearly black with mildew. There were a few board games over in the corner to my left, the boxes bloated and warped with age and moisture. These things felt like imperfections. I grabbed the rug and threw it out one of the windows, watching it tumble down the branches of the tree until it hit the ground. Then I grabbed the board games and did the same with them, watching as the boxes broke apart and the pieces inside scattered everywhere.

The door faced west. That was why there weren't any windows on that side. It kept the bulk of the harsh sun out. I went over to the eastern window and looked out.

In our neighborhood, the houses were well-spaced apart and there was a patch of trees in the middle of the large block. Trails ran, spokelike, through the trees. Every neighbor could reach every other neighbor's house by walking through the woods, a concept no one had utilized in my lifetime. The individual trails met in a central hub, meant to be a gathering place. In the hub was a fake pond with a fountain in it. There were benches situated around the fountain and a small playground for children. Very few people ever went there. Looking down at it now just made me sad. Here was a place designed for neighbors to meet and enjoy the company of one another and it was completely empty. Or maybe the purpose of its design was what made it feel so empty. Certainly just a pond with no one around it wouldn't have seemed empty.

The misting had stopped and the sun was once again trying to peek out from behind the clouds. I wanted the sun to burn the clouds away but it didn't really matter because it always felt sunny inside of Zerostrata. Sunny, without being hot. I never remembered being uncomfortably warm in

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Zerostrata. There was always a good strong breeze blowing through the windows, swirling around the inside and cleansing it of any staleness.

I went back into the middle and sat down. I must have fallen asleep or went into a hypnotic state or something.

When I woke up it was nearly dark. Rain hammered down. I stood up and went to the eastern window, looking out over the park.

That was when I saw her.

Chapter Five

The Thickness of Rain

I looked down at the neighborhood, cloaked in rain, the scant fog causing all the lights to blur into a soft yellow. I saw movement coming from the house directly across the woods. Given my altitude and the distance, I couldn't make things out perfectly but because of the wide trails connecting our houses I had a good vantage point.

It was a girl who emerged from the house.

I was pretty sure she was naked. She was pale like the moon. She rapidly ran from her back porch and turned to her left. There she began running along the trail that encircled the entire park. Then I lost her behind the trees. But I waited eagerly for her to come around the second turn so I could have a better look at her.

I was completely enthralled. At first, there wasn't anything perverse about my standing there and eagerly watching for a glimpse of her although, later perhaps, it would become something bordering on perversity. What kept me there that first night was the total oddness of the situation. I had never seen anything like this and now was the ideal time. Immedi-

ately after coming home, all of those questions and forgetfulness attacking my brain, after reuniting with Zerostrata and deciding I wanted things to change, here was this girl who was doing exactly what I had wanted to do all my life. She had simply stripped down and charged through the rain completely naked. I wanted to join her right then and there but the inappropriateness of it would have been too great. I would have felt like I was invading something.

And there she was again, running along the western side of the trail, the side closest to our house, through the rain and under the mostly obliterated moon, never breaking stride, never letting up. Another part of me feared for her. I hoped she didn't fall down or get sick or attacked or anything.

As she ran along a part of me ran with her. She continued north along the path and again disappeared behind the trees. I felt a loss when she disappeared. Eagerly, I watched and waited for her to complete her run. *Would* she complete her run? Would she stop when she got back to her house or would she just keep running? Perhaps this was something she did every night. Perhaps she was conditioned to run around this trail many more times than just the once. And *was* she naked? I wasn't so certain after seeing her run by. I hadn't even really been paying attention. Maybe I had just *wanted* her to be naked. Did anyone else know about this ritual, if it was a ritual at all? Or was this the first and only time she had done it?

And there she was again, on the far side of the path, dashing along and back up onto her porch where an older woman waited for her with a large white towel she draped around the girl.

This was a mystery and I didn't have a clue as to what the answers were. But, at that moment, I was filled with the

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singular desire to meet this girl. She was a part of me that I had lost. Some part of myself I had begun to think of as irretrievable but now flaunted itself in front of me.

Not now, not tonight, I knew. I would think about it first and it was nice to have something like this to think about. Something I *wanted* to think about, something that filled me with a sort of free happiness I longed for.

Adrenaline racing through my veins, I opened the door, climbed on the platform, and descended Zerostrata.

Chapter Six

Dinner

Back in the house, every room except the dining room was darkened. The dining room was very brightly lighted by the sparkling chandelier suspended above the table. Mother was seated at the head of the table, dressed in a sparkling black ball gown, Tricky firmly ensconced atop her head. A strange man sat to her left. He wore a very nice suit, had a large brown mustache and a head full of dark curly hair that could have easily been a wig. Francis hovered around the table even though she didn't really have much to do. She was dressed in the traditional yellow jumpsuit my mother had made her wear to serve dinner in since before I could remember.

I was very excited about the girl I had just seen. My plan was to run down to the basement and ask Zasper if he had ever seen or heard about this girl. I suppose I could have asked Mother, she was probably more likely to have seen the girl than Zasper but, for some reason, I didn't feel comfortable talking to her about it. Before I could skulk away to the basement, Mother barked out at me.

“Hansel! The table is set for three!”

Zerostrata

I would have refused. I refused this call to dinner all during my teenage years but, since it was my first day back in nearly ten years, I felt as though I owed it to her. Besides, I was now curious about the man sitting at the table.

I sat down opposite the man. That left half the table empty and barren. I don't know how long it had been since Zasper ate dinner at the dining room table. In middle school, he demanded to sit on the table and then, eventually, he demanded to lie on the table. And then he stopped coming to dinner altogether. He seemed to exist on an endless supply of stored snack food.

Mother didn't sound as weak as she had this morning. She spoke clearly, enunciating every word at maximum volume.

“SO WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL DAY?”

“I went out to Zerostrata.”

“I THOUGHT YOU HAD RUN AWAY AGAIN.”

“No. Just out in the treehouse. Besides, I didn't really run away. I was eighteen.”

“YOU LEFT WITHOUT TELLING ANYONE AND THEN YOU DIDN'T COME BACK UNTIL THIS MORNING. THAT IS RUNNING AWAY.”

“Whatever.”

“WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW WHO THE DASHING MAN SITTING BY MY SIDE IS?”

“Sure.”

“THIS IS MR. DONOVAN.” After she said that, she stopped speaking so loudly and assumed something like a loud whisper. “Mr. Donovan will be sleeping with me tonight.”

“Oh.”

“Don't get me wrong, we are not engaging in sexual intercourse. I merely need someone to sleep next to me for

warmth and comfort. That is the only thing I missed when your father left me so I went out and bought a replacement. And Mr. Donovan is a very worthy replacement. Take off your shirt, Mr. Donovan.”

The man pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, removing his sportcoat and unbuttoning his shirt, revealing a powerful torso covered in hair. He looked like a wolf.

“Mr. Donovan is very warm. And very firm. Everything I could ask for in a sleeping partner.”

“That’s great, Mom.”

“So what were you doing out in the treehouse?”

“I was just kind of lying around.”

“Like your brother downstairs. Did you talk to Zasper?”

“Yeah, we had a little talk this morning.”

“And how is he doing? I haven’t talked to him in months.”

“Oh, he’s doing okay, I guess.”

“Please, Mr. Donovan, put on your shirt and sit down.”

Mr. Donovan obliged. He seemed to be very obedient. Once his shirt was removed, he had just stood there, waiting for the next order.

“Have you thought any more about going to go see Dr. Blast?”

“Not really.”

“I’ve made an appointment for you to go see him tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“Will you go?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Excellent. His is a very unique brand of therapy. Francis? Could you bring me my pills along with dinner?”

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“What are we having?” I asked.

“Cold cuts.”

“Oh.”

Francis entered the room with a tray heaped in bologna, salami, ham, roast beef and various other nearly unidentifiable meats. She brought the pills on a separate plate.

Apparently, there wasn't any need for silverware. Mother reached out and grabbed her handful of medication, dumping it into her mouth and rinsing it down with half a glass of water. Then she grabbed a fistful of meat and took a delicate bite of it.

Following her cue, Mr. Donovan did the same. I decided to have some for myself.

Mother finished half a piece of bologna and put it back on the meat tray before lighting up a cigarette.

“Boy, I'm full of food and stuffed and full feeling. That was good meats Francine.”

I wondered what kind of medication she could be on to make her speech so stupid.

I excused myself and got up.

“Why do you leave this place of flat wood?”

“You mean the table?”

“Psshht,” she sighed. “Franco has fluffed down your sleep place.”

“That's okay. I think I'm going to sleep outside tonight.”

“Ah.” She looked down at the table, confused, trying to remember something. “Yes, and she says that the phone screamed today?”

“Yes, the phone rang.”

“Who lived inside it?”

“I don't know. Some crazy old woman.”

Andersen Prunty

“Oh,” she said before collapsing onto her piece of bologna. Mr. Donovan gave me a look that said he knew how to handle this. He plucked the cigarette out of her hand and crushed it out in the ashtray before hoisting Mother up over his shoulders and carrying her toward the master bedroom, Tricky clinging tenaciously to the top of her head. I decided not to go downstairs and talk to Zasper. Instead I went back outside, fighting the urge to go to that girl’s house and knock on her door. Tomorrow I could ask Zasper about it. Tomorrow I could talk to Dr. Blast about it and I knew, tomorrow, I would be waiting in Zerostrata, staring out its eastern window to try and see another glimpse of the running girl.

Chapter Seven

The Amazing Dr. Blast

The following morning I went to see Dr. Blast. I was not impressed. It seemed dehumanizing to drag myself from the beautiful day that had risen over Grayson to come and sit in this drab office. The office was very sterile and clean in its various shades of cream and light brown. Sitting on Dr. Blast's couch, I felt like a stain.

I had plenty of time to look around because Dr. Blast didn't say anything to me at all when I first came into his office. I sat on his beige armless couch and stared around. First, up at the acoustic-tiled ceiling. To the right, at the bookshelf taking up the entire wall, filled with books that were all the same brown color and uniform in size and thickness. They couldn't be real, I told myself. Nobody could have reading tastes that singularly focused. All of this was to avoid making eye contact with the doctor himself. But eventually I had to. I stared forward at his blonde oak desk and tried desperately to look past him at the cream blinds hanging over the large picture window.

For the first time since returning home, I desperately

wanted a cigarette. It didn't help matters that Dr. Blast was enjoying a cigarette himself. I glanced at him. My fear of eye contact was totally irrelevant. He wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to me.

He leaned back in his chair, holding his cigarette in his right hand and occasionally scratching his woolly gray beard with his left. After scratching his beard, he pushed his round glasses up on his nose.

I didn't like this man at all. What kind of therapy was this? I didn't even feel like I was getting my mother's money's worth.

I tried to find other things to stare at, wondering why he wasn't saying anything. The more time that passed, the more paralyzed I became. At that point, even saying a simple 'Hello' would have been impossible.

So when I finally started to stare at Dr. Blast it was more out of anger than anything. I was determined to make him say something first.

Casually, slowly, he crushed his cigarette out on his empty desk. What a functionless desk this was, without a single pen or piece of paper or computer on it. There wasn't an ash-tray there either and the fact that he was crushing his cigarette out on a very expensive piece of furniture also angered me. Once the cigarette was snuffed, Dr. Blast inserted it carefully into his left ear. Then he swiveled around in his chair, rested his arms on the desk and looked at me. We stared at each other for several minutes, neither of us looking away or speaking.

He sighed and pushed his chair back from the desk. Then he stood up and came around to the front of the desk. Astonished, I noticed he wasn't wearing any pants. Only a pair of very skimpy black underwear. He crossed to the front

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of the desk, turned around and put his hands on it, bending slightly and pushing his buttocks toward me. Then he started flexing his buttocks, the underwear lodging in the crack of his hairy ass as he did so. I wanted to laugh but was too angered by his flagrant disregard for doctoral conduct. But I knew he wasn't a doctor to begin with.

"Okay, that's just stupid," I said.

"I win," he said, immediately ceasing his vulgar display and retreating back behind his desk.

"What did you win?"

"The talking game. We were both going to see how long it took before the other one said something and you said something first so... I win."

"Fine, you win. That's great."

"I think so. I never hardly win. You were a worthy opponent. When I first saw you come in here, I didn't think you had it in you."

"Didn't have what in me?"

"I don't know... the stamina, I guess. Why are you here anyway? Do you have an appointment or are you selling something?"

"I had an appointment."

"What's your name?"

"Hansel Nothing."

"Stupid name."

"Thanks, Dr. Blast."

"Well, we can't all be winners, I guess. And some of us are sore losers."

"Is there a point to any of this?"

"Sure. There's a point to everything, isn't there?"

"Wow, that's philosophical."

"I'm not a philosopher. I'm a therapist. Now are we

going to talk about your stupid problems or not?"

"I could just leave."

"Or you could stay. I don't really care anymore. I'm just here so people can listen to themselves talk. There's not really much of a point to it. No one actually listens to me anyway. I just tell them what they want to hear and then send them on their merry way."

"That doesn't seem like a very good attitude. Besides, you just said there's a point to everything."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"Your mother tells me *you* don't have a very good attitude."

"You know my mother?"

"Of course I know your mother. She's good friends with a colleague of mine."

"The one who gives her all the pills?"

"That's what she wants. That's what he gives her. If she didn't want pills, she would still be *my* patient."

"Well, I don't want you to tell me what I want to hear."

"Fine then. Go home and kill yourself. There's no point in living. I'm sorry, that's just the way it is."

"I think I already tried that once."

"You don't remember?"

"I don't remember much of anything."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I'm here because my mother wanted me to come. I guess she thinks there's something wrong with me."

"You know, in every suicidalist, there is a murderer. Here, you don't even need to go home. Take this. We'll have a duel."

Dr. Blast opened up one of the drawers in his desk and

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pulled out a pistol, tossing it haphazardly across the room at me. He pulled out another for himself.

I caught the gun so it didn't hit me on the shoulder, but then I put it down on the floor. I had always hated guns.

"I can't use that," I said.

"So you *are* afraid of dying?"

"I don't want to die right now."

"There must be a reason you don't want to die right now. I mean, is there a point to living?"

"I think there *has* to be a point to living."

"Oh, so now who's the philosopher?"

"I was just making a statement."

"And what do you think this point to living is?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I hope you're not counting on me to give you any of the answers."

"No, I stopped looking for answers."

"So why do you want to keep living?"

"Because, well, right now, living feels good."

"Really, why is that?"

"Well, last night, I saw this girl."

"Really? So you think you're living for love?"

"No. I don't love her. I just saw her. She was running in the neighborhood but I have, ever since seeing her, been filled with the desire to know her. To sit down and talk to her. To touch her. Ever since seeing her, I haven't been able to think of anything else."

"Sounds like you're smitten."

"Maybe so."

"Is this girl of legal age?"

"I don't know."

"You might want to find out before touching her too"

much... Otherwise..."

"No, I know that... I doubt I'll ever *get* to touch her..."

"No, you won't get to touch her if things continue the way they have been."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, brace yourself, here's the part where the real therapy comes in: Over the past ten years, you have done nothing but try to escape from the reality of the world, a reality you were already tired of before trying to escape. You came back home because you were hoping to catch some faint glimmer of your shredded boyhood because that was the last time your brain would allow you to think of anything magical or fantastical. Again, this is because you are tired of the real world, blah blah blah. So now you see this girl and she certainly seems fantastic and you have this desire to simply come into contact with her but she is, at this point, just as much of a nonreality as your castles and dragons of childhood. You have to stop thinking like yourself, Hansel. You might even have to stop *being* yourself. Things have to change. Things have to change in your brain before you can come out of whatever shell it is you've wrapped around yourself. You left to see the world, the real world, and what have you come away with?"

"Nothing?"

"That's right."

"But I want to change."

"Well, if you want to change I have a choice for you to make." Dr. Blast stood up again. Amazingly, he now wore pants. "If you want to go back to your reality, the same grim sad reality that infects your entire family, you will walk out that door and turn your back on this office. Now, understand that I can't promise you all of the fantasies of your childhood, but if you want to change, if you want to see things how you

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have never seen them before, if you want to see things that you have *never* seen before, you will jump out this window behind me.”

“But I don’t even know what’s back there.”

“Maybe it’s just another room. Maybe it’s a pretty good fall. I’m certainly not asking you to trust me. I, for one, do not see anything wrong with a little pain. I’m just asking you to make a choice. The door or the window.”

“Will she be out there?”

“I can’t possibly answer that.”

I sat there for a second and thought about it. But thinking wasn’t the answer. Standing up from the couch, I charged at the window, all at the advice of a man who had thrown a loaded gun at me and asked me to use it on him. When I drew a step away from the window, Dr. Blast threw open the blinds and I screamed through the glass.

Chapter Eight

The Window

Only the glass wasn't really like glass at all. It was more like water. I closed my eyes on impact, expecting a painful crash. Instead, all I felt was something substantial and cool coating my body and then I free floated. It was scary. I didn't know if I should open my eyes or not. If I was racing down toward the ground below I wasn't sure I wanted to see it. On the other hand, if I was falling through something strange and magical, I didn't want to miss it.

So I opened my eyes. I had to. If I was going to die upon impact then I thought, at least, my eyes should be open to my last few moments of the world.

But I wasn't going to die.

Truly, the office was much higher up than I would have thought. I didn't even recall climbing any stairs to go see Dr. Blast but, then again, things were supposed to be different now because I chose the window when I could have chosen the door.

Below me was a large orange trampoline. Absolutely huge, it gleamed like some kind of sun growing from the

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ground. For the next few moments I felt the wind on my skin as I fell faster and faster. I spread out my arms knowing it wasn't death awaiting me but this trampoline.

Bracing myself, I hit the trampoline and sprang back up into the air before coming back down and going back up. This went on, my bounces becoming increasingly lower in altitude until I was resting on the trampoline, nearly sick from all of the bouncing. It wasn't the time to be sick. I couldn't feel sick because there was some kind of new found energy racing through my body. Energy I hadn't felt in a very long time. Suddenly, a lot of things started to make sense even though there was something about the whole situation that didn't make any sense at all.

Like where I was.

Even though I clearly had to fall from somewhere, there were no signs of any such structure in the vicinity. I was in the middle of a vast rolling field, dotted here and there with trees, a dirt road running down the middle of it.

Grayson was not without its share of farmland but, if Dr. Blast's office had been downtown, I wondered where I was now. Had I skipped worlds completely? Was I in some unfound territory or had I just jumped somewhere in space so I was only moved from downtown to out here in the country?

Slowly, I climbed down from the trampoline. The grass around me was impossibly green and perfect, unbroken by any weeds. And the sky above me was a deep and flawless blue. In the distance on the dirt road, I saw a figure. I ran to the figure and, drawing closer, identified it as a one-legged man.

He wasn't an amputee although he only had the one leg. It looked more like his legs had grown together to form one super thick leg right in the middle of his pelvis. He had a

strange contraption wrapped around his shoulders.

“Hi,” I said. “Where am I?”

The man stopped his moving, sort of a hopping kind of thing.

“You’re about a mile outside of Grayson. Did you come from the trampoline?”

“I thought I came from my therapist’s but, yeah, I guess I came from the trampoline.”

“Then you must be exhausted. Would you like a ride back into town?”

“No, I can just walk.” I said this only because I didn’t really see how this man was going to give me a ride, having no car.

“No, I insist. A friend of Dr. Blast’s is a friend of mine. Look, I’m all rigged up to give you a ride.” The man tugged on his leather harness. “It would be rude to refuse.”

“Well, okay, if you insist.”

The man squatted down and I climbed into the harness. Occasionally he had to direct me but, eventually, I was settled on his back, the harness holding me in nice and snug.

“My name is Hansel Nothing, by the way. Thank you very much for the lift.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome.”

The man started bouncing along. For having only one leg, he was surprisingly fast. Eventually, I saw Grayson before us. I wondered if anything had happened there. I was kind of excited to get home.

The man wasn’t much of a conversationalist. I tried to ask him questions and talk to him about the most banal things imaginable but he only responded with grunts. Maybe this was due to the strain of carrying me on his back or maybe he just wasn’t much of a talker.

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We reached Grayson and he continued to hop, taking me back to the gates of the sad house. He bent down and began helping me to unfasten the harness.

“Wow, I didn’t even tell you where I live.”

“Oh, we all know where everybody else lives, if you think about it.”

I thought about it for a second but still didn’t really get what he meant. This new world that Dr. Blast proposed was absolutely rife with crypticness.

“Well, thank you,” I said and felt compelled to hug the man so I did. He hugged me until I stepped away and looked at him, making eye contact before preparing to turn back to the house. Then he dipped down and jumped, continuing straight up into the air. I watched until he became a dot, getting lost in the gloom over the house.

I wondered why he had hopped all that way when he could have just flown.

Chapter Nine

How Do You Wait When There Is No Such Thing As Time?

When I returned home, things were certainly not as I left them. The only thing I could think about was going through the house and out into the backyard where I could take the elevator up to Zerostrata and wait for the running girl. But the happenings inside the house temporarily distracted me.

I heard noise coming from the living room so I walked past the staircase, going deeper into the house. All of the lights were on in the living room. Mother was on a pogo stick, unsteadily hopping around the room. Tricky was on her head, completely affright, his back arched, his claws digging into Mother's wig. Mr. Donovan was there. He stood in the corner, his shirt off, a bucket of eggs sitting on the floor beside his leg. He was throwing them at Mother as she hopped crazily around the room. Every egg I saw him throw missed, splattering on the floor or the wall. Francis frantically ran around with a bucket full of soapy water and a sponge. An egg would explode on the wall and she would be right there to clean it up.

I wondered what pills had caused Mother to start act-

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ing like this. This energy was definitely out of character for her.

She noticed me standing there in the opening and temporarily paused her pogoing.

“Hello, Hansel!” she called. She had color in her cheeks I only remembered being there as a small child.

“Hello, Mother.”

“How did your appointment go?”

“Well... I guess. I think it went well. I feel better now.”

“I feel pretty good too.”

“So what pills are you taking to give you this much energy?”

“Pills? Oh, I decided not to take my pills today. I think this was the first original thought I’ve had in years. The pills tend to make me want to go to sleep but, this morning, when I decided not to take them, I asked myself, ‘Now what would *you* like to do?’ And the answer came to me and do you know what it was? It was to find your old pogo stick, pogo around the house, and have Mr. Donovan throw eggs at me. This is the most fun I’ve had in ages. Would you like to join us?”

“No, thank you. So, do you know what time it is?”

“I most certainly do not. All of the hands fell off all the clocks in the house so I don’t have any idea.”

“Oh, okay. Hi, Mr. Donovan.”

He raised his hand in a wave and then faked tossing an egg at me. I pretended to be surprised, recoiling at the splatter of the egg I knew would not come.

“Well, carry on, Mother. I’m going to go out and sit in Zerostrata for an inordinately long period of time.”

“Have fun!”

She began bouncing up and down once again.

“I’m sure I will. You do the same.”

Andersen Prunty

On my way outside the phone rang. I went into the kitchen to answer it because there was too much wild laughter coming from the living room. It rang something like five times and I wondered if I was the only one who heard it or if I was the only one in the house bothering to answer it.

I picked it up and said hello.

“You are a dirty man.” It was the same old woman who had called yesterday.

“I think you have the wrong number.”

“I know I have the *right* number. You are a dirty stinking man and I hope you rot in hell.”

“Whatever,” I said, hanging up the phone even though there was some grain of perversity inside me that wondered exactly how nasty this woman was willing to get.

I took a deep breath and headed outside.

Chapter Ten

Chasing the Girl Who Seems Forever Out of Reach

I don't know how long I waited, standing at the window in Zerostrata longing to see this girl again. It filled me with all kinds of perplexities. I knew where she lived. I thought about just wandering over to her house and lurking around but then I would feel like a peeping Tom. I thought about getting my telescope from my room but that didn't seem exactly right either. Instead, I stood and waited.

The past couple of days had been strange. Had my life always been like this? I didn't know. I couldn't remember. I didn't think it had been because, if it was, I don't see how I could have possibly forgotten any of it. Time ceased to have any real meaning for me. The past ten years could have been the past ten minutes. And now I found myself eagerly looking forward to every approaching minute. I didn't know if I would be able to make any contact with this girl or not but just the thought of someone like her existing made me a more content individual.

That was insane, I knew. It was insane that simply see-

ing a naked girl running along in the rain could fill me with such a feeling but it was the truth. And it was a truth I welcomed. It wasn't harsh or ugly like many truths could be. I tried not to let myself dwell on the various fantasies my mind normally constructed about such things. I tried not to imagine us doing things together, having conversations together, laughing together. I tried not to think about any of that because it would be painful if those things never happened.

I just stood there and thought about her. I thought about how much I wanted to see her this one more time. But what if I didn't see her again? What if she didn't come running out of her house? Would I be crushed? I didn't know. I had become incapable of knowing anything. If I had been told that morning that I would come home to find my mother on a pogo stick in the living room, I wouldn't have believed it. I never thought humans could fly either. Or that buildings could simply disappear.

And all of this, all of these things happening over the course of a short day, I took to be reality. I didn't for once think I was going insane.

And there she was again.

She ran out of her house just like she did yesterday, into the twilight. I saw her much more clearly now. She was definitely naked. My heart sped up. This was what I had waited for all day. Was I just going to let her run past me again, not noticing me? Was I going to treat her like some movie or piece of entertainment, there for my viewing pleasure?

I didn't think I could.

I had to join her. I didn't have to think twice about it. I hopped on the elevator and descended from Zerostrata, taking off my clothes as it bumped down the tree, leaping off before reaching the ground.

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Completely naked, I took off running toward the trail, looking for the girl. She had rounded the second turn and was rapidly closing the distance between that and the third as I raced across the backyard to join her.

I don't even know if she noticed me or not. By the time I reached the trail she was already ahead of me. She ran much faster than I did. There would not be any catching up to her. I ran behind her, ran as fast as I could, watching her naked buttocks and her orange hair swishing along the tops of her shoulders.

It felt good to be behind her, that much closer, sharing in some kind of experience. She didn't look back once and the run didn't seem to take any time at all. She rounded the fourth turn and I knew she was almost home. I wondered if she would stop and talk to me but, when I saw her racing toward her porch, I knew she wasn't going to. She probably hadn't even seen me back there.

And then, just like that, she was gone again. I didn't really know what to do so I just kept running. I looked at her house for as long as I could. The older woman opened the door, letting the running girl back in. The older woman noticed me, a haunting click of recognition as we made eye contact. Then the door shut and I felt very alone. I ran past all the other houses on the trail, suddenly very self-conscious about my nudity. Maybe I could just cut back to the house through the woods. But I wasn't wearing any shoes either and didn't think my feet could take the abusing the woods would give them.

Resigned, I tried to enjoy it as much as I could. There was something incredibly liberating about it. Running without any clothes to restrain me. Feeling the wind rush across my skin, cooling the sweat as soon as it emerged from the pore.

Andersen Prunty

Trudging through the early night I comforted myself with the thought that she would probably be out there tomorrow doing the same thing. It had happened two days in a row, after all. It was now a pattern.

Chapter Eleven

The Lettuce Boys

I would have made it home okay if it wasn't for the gang that decided to stop me on my way. I rounded the first turn from the girl's house, enjoying myself. Now that I wasn't chasing her, the pace wasn't so strenuous and I didn't wheeze as much. I looked off into the distance, focusing only on the next turn, the one that would take me home and not paying attention to much else. Then I tripped over something and went sprawling onto the soft dirt of the trail. I immediately thought it must have been a rock or a rogue branch. I was mistaken.

I turned over onto my naked butt and looked up. Facing me were five teenage boys dressed like pirates. One of them had tripped me. Why hadn't I noticed them?

The meanest looking one was in front. They were arranged in a tightly militant 'V'.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"I was just running."

"Naked?"

"Yeah, well, I guess I forgot my clothes."

"That's ridiculous."

I wanted to point out the fact that he was dressed like a pirate but realized I was now old enough to have a preternatural fear of teenagers.

“What were you really doing?” he asked. “Were you chasing the girl?”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Everybody’s seen her. You’re not the first, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not the first person to chase her. You might as well give up though. She’s not going to pay any attention to you.”

“I don’t know if I want her to pay any attention to me.”

“Sure you do. Everyone wants her to pay attention to them. She’s like everyone’s secret. No one really talks about her. It’s almost like she doesn’t exist but everyone thinks about her and that is all I will say about it.”

“Does she do this every night?”

“What did I just say? You don’t listen very well. I said I wasn’t going to talk about her anymore. Bad things happen to those who talk about her. I should kick your ass.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re just a dirty old pervert running around naked in a public park but I’m not going to kick your ass because I’m made of lettuce.”

“What?” Now I was totally confused.

“I said that I am made of lettuce so instead of kicking your ass I am going to make you a salad. Get up.”

I stood up.

“Julio?” the boy called to one of the boys in the back.

“Do you have the bowl?”

Julio brought the bowl forward and the boy opened

Zerostrata

his shirt. Sure enough, he was made of lettuce.

“This is going to be the absolute best salad you have ever eaten and you have to promise me you will eat this salad tonight. If you wait until tomorrow, it’ll go bad. This way it’s fresh. Besides, it’ll help you sleep better tonight. If you’re thinking about her, you’ll never sleep.”

He went about pulling away chunks of his lettuce skin and putting them in the bowl. The salad did look better and better as he put it together. When it was finished, he handed it to me and told me to get lost.

I took off toward the house at a slow trot, eager to go inside and eat the salad.

Chapter Twelve

Sidekick

I made it to the backyard and put on my clothes. I couldn't wait until I got inside to eat the salad. It smelled too delectable. It tempted me with its fresh garden scent, begging me to eat it, although I knew it would not be incredibly filling. It was of a modest size and it was, after all, just a salad. So I found myself sitting on the steps of the back porch, holding the salad bowl in my lap and eating the green leaves with my fingers. After the first leaf, I knew I would not be able to stop. Even though there wasn't any dressing or other frivolity that often goes with a salad, it was absolutely scrumptious. It took me less than a minute to devour the entire thing.

I left the bowl sitting on the porch step. Perhaps the lettuce gang would find it there while parading through the neighborhood looking for booty. They *were* pirates, I told myself. One can never really trust a pirate if all the stories were true.

Before going into the house, I paused to contemplate what the situation would be like. I wondered if the chaos had died down at all and I wondered if I preferred the chaos to the

Zerostrata

sadness or the other way around.

I think I liked the chaos better. When I had entered the house after my appointment, it contained a certain buzz I had never felt before. Even as a child, the only one in the household who provided any kind of energy was Dad. And I think the energy he exuded was due to this sheer enigmatic quality he had. I was never exactly sure what he did. He always said he was an inventor but I never saw all the gadgets and gizmodgery one would expect to find in an inventor's house and he seemed to be home all the time. The items he claimed to invent, things like clouds and wood, were ludicrous. Unless he was God.

Maybe he had just invented one thing and retired off that. Something so embarrassingly simple he didn't even feel the need to tell his children what it was.

I opened the door. The house was darkened. That was relatively normal. Francis had probably already gone home. She usually went around the house and turned off all the lights before leaving since Mother typically turned in right after dinner and Zasper never left the basement.

Of course Mother had to be in bed. She must have been exhausted. What I had seen her doing earlier would have been a workout for a young person who hadn't been addicted to prescription drugs and cigarettes for the past twenty years or so.

I stood there, confused. I wasn't sure why I was even in the house. Wasn't I going to sleep in Zerostrata again? It seemed to serve me perfectly fine last night. Maybe I was just checking in to make sure everything was okay. It probably was. I imagined Mother curled up in the hairy arms of Mr. Donovan and Zasper lying in his customary position in the basement.

I turned to leave when I heard a loud thump. It startled me and I went to its source. It seemed to come from around the staircase.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, I found Zasper lying in a heap on the floor, dressed in a skintight black jumpsuit, newer and shinier than his previous jumpsuit.

I flipped the light switch, filling the area with a mellow glow.

Zasper moaned and clutched his head.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

I lowered his arms from his head and he looked up at me. He looked like he had been badly beaten. One of his eyes was blackened and he had a small gash above the other.

“Jesus, you look terrible.”

“No,” he moaned. “I’m okay, really.”

“What were you doing? And why are you wearing a cape?” I noticed this particular accessory as he struggled to stand up. It was a short cape, coming down only to about the middle of his back.

“Haven’t you heard? Dad called today.”

“Really?” I didn’t know what that had to do with Zasper’s present situation. I waited for him to elaborate but he just kind of stared dazedly forward as though he were in the early stages of a concussion. “And what did Dad say?”

“Oh, yeah, right... You know he left to become a superhero? That was quite a while ago. He called today to tell me he completed his first successful mission. He managed to save some obscure African tribe from total assimilation. It was a small task, he admitted, but one he was particularly proud of.”

“Good for him.”

“Yeah. He calls himself The Whirlwind and he asked

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me if I wanted to be his sidekick and I said yeah so I went out and bought this new jumpsuit and this cape and I've been throwing myself from the top of the stairs all day, trying to fly, and now my head really hurts and I still don't know what to call myself."

"I'm sure it'll come to you. Maybe you just need to rest for a bit."

"Yeah, maybe. Are you planning on sleeping in Zerostrata tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Do you care if I sleep with you?"

"That's fine. You might want to bring a pillow or something."

Chapter Thirteen

I Never Could Understand What You Saw in Something That Was Only Everything

Zasper and I lay on the plank wood floor of Zerostrata. The wind rustled through the surrounding trees. It was a sleepy sound, like the ocean from a distance. All around us were the comforting smells of the neighbors' laundry and the dirt and the grass and the old wood of Zerostrata.

"I never could see what you saw in this place," Zasper said.

"Ever since Dad had it built, I never wanted to be anywhere else."

"Why?"

"It just feels good."

"I've always been terrified of it. I don't like heights that much anyway. You know, I don't think I ever came up here by myself. I think I was always with you or some neighbor kid. This place was quite legendary in the neighborhood when we were children."

"I don't think we would have had any friends at all if it wasn't for Zerostrata. Everybody wanted to come up in it at

Zerostrata

least once but most kids' parents wouldn't let them."

"It's dangerous."

"Of course it is. I think that's part of the thrill of it."

"The fear of death. Even now, I think I'm terrified of it. Mother said something about pirates living in it last year. It was their hideout."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but she wouldn't turn them in because she said she was just glad to see somebody putting it to use."

"She likes to see things going to use, doesn't she? She has that big house nobody uses and that big bank account nobody uses. All these things and nobody seems to be using any of them."

"I'm glad you're home."

"Thanks." I paused, not really knowing how to process this unusual display of affection from Zasper. "I'm glad to be home. I'm glad to see all of you. In a way it doesn't feel like I've been away all that long."

"You're not really planning on staying, are you?"

"I guess I don't think I'm really planning on staying very long."

"Why did you come back?"

"I think I had to come back."

"That's not true. You don't really have to do anything."

"One has to do a lot of things. But it's not like that. It's not like paying bills or going to school or getting out of bed in the morning. It's more like having to do something because you know it's the right thing to do and if you do this one thing you know you have to do then you hope it will make your life okay again. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure. So what did you do when you went away for so long?"

Andersen Prunty

“I don’t know. I think I wrote some stuff.”

“I always liked reading your stories.”

“Yeah? It never really panned out. Things happened. The dreams dried up.”

“How do dreams dry up?”

“I don’t know. I used to think the only dreams that could come to me would be in my head.”

“Isn’t that where dreams come from?”

“I used to think so.”

“You don’t think so anymore?”

“No. Now I think there are dreams outside of my head. Like Zerostrata. I had been away from it so long but I never realized how much a part of me it had become and, before I came back, before I rode the elevator up here, I almost couldn’t believe it was real. I used to think a dream was something I could never really have but then I realized that was wrong. In fact, thinking like that was downright cruel. A dream had to be something you could have. A dream had to be something you could make physical. I think that’s why I wrote. It got the dreams out of my head and put them onto paper and into other people’s heads and, I don’t think many people read my stories, but for every person who did, my dream became that much more real.”

“Right. It’s like my New Music. My music is like your writing because even though I kind of created it, others can experience it. It is unique to me but it’s not wholly mine.”

“Yes.”

“So what dream are you talking about now? What are you chasing?”

I debated telling him. Part of me wanted to keep the girl a secret. But I figured if the pirate boys knew about her, chances were a lot of other people did too.

Zerostrata

“Have you ever seen a girl running behind the house? In that trail there around the woods.”

“I’ve never *seen* her. But I’ve heard about her. She’s been doing that for years. It’s become pretty commonplace. She’s naked, right?”

“Completely. And you’ve never seen her?”

“Nope.”

“Hm.”

“And you think this is why you came back?”

“I don’t know, Zazz.”

We lay in silence for a while. Maybe we had run out of things to talk about or maybe each one of us was waiting for the other to say something.

“So tell me more about this sidekick thing with Dad.”

“I’m hoping that works out. You’re going to think I’m crazy. I thought Dad was crazy when he first told me but, apparently, I can fly.”

“I don’t think that’s crazy at all. I saw a person fly just today.”

“You never used to see that.”

“No, that’s true. You never used to see that.”

“Dad said I flew once when I was little.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yeah. Maybe this is why I never really liked Zerostrata that much, either. When it was first built, you took me up in it and I promptly ran out the door and off the elevator the first time your back was turned. Dad said he saw the whole thing from his study window. He said I fell about halfway down the height of the tree and then stopped in midair before flying to the porch.”

“How did it go today?”

“Pretty good, I guess. I think Dad will take me on as

Andersen Prunty

his sidekick whether I can fly or not.”

“And then *you* ’ll be getting out of Grayson.”

“Probably.”

“That’ll leave Mother.”

“But she’s happy here. She’ll have Mr. Donovan and Francis. That’s all she really needs, I think. She was never much of a kid person.”

He was right.

We lay in silence and I slowly drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

The Storm

The next day flew by. When I woke up, Zasper had already left Zerostrata. He had left Zerostrata but hadn't made it to the house. He had attempted to fly from Zerostrata and now hung from a branch about midway down the oak tree. I hopped in the elevator and started down. The elevator didn't have a stop button so I just kind of batted at him as I went past. The branch shook a little bit, threatening to loose him. From this altitude, it would have undoubtedly resulted in serious injury had he actually slipped from the branch. But he didn't. He remained suspended.

"I'll get help," I called.

"Take your time."

Inside, Mother sat at the kitchen table. Mr. Donovan was on top of the table doing a hideous dance, seemingly invented solely for my mother's amusement and everyone else's disgust. Mother was glistening and she had painted Tricky a deep purple color. The cat continued to hang on like a trooper, despite her antics. She had affixed a headband around her wig. The headband had two small bowls on either side of it. Tricky's

food was over her right ear. It looked like he was having table scraps this morning. His water hung over the left ear. Tricky had taken up smoking. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, two plumes of smoke now drifting up from Mother's head.

"Why are you glistening?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, I got up this morning and decided I needed a shower but I didn't feel like taking off my clothes."

"There was something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh yeah?"

"But I can't remember what it was."

"Then it probably wasn't important."

"You've said that ever since I was a small child. Every time I've forgotten what it was I wanted to tell you you've said it isn't important. Have you ever wondered if all those things I forgot to tell you were maybe all of the really important thoughts I ever had?"

"No, not really."

"Oh! I remembered what it was. Zasper is hanging in the tree outside. I didn't know if you wanted to call the fire department to come and get him down or what but he's out there, hanging all strange like. It might kill him to fall. I'm not sure."

"Aw, just drag your dad's old bean bag out there. That'll cushion his fall. He could probably use the lesson anyway." Then, addressing Mr. Donovan, she said, "Why don't we take our little act outside. You can dance under the tree and if the boy happens to fall, you can catch him. Think you can do that?"

Mr. Donovan nodded his head and, still dancing, still moving in that way that was comical, sickening and perhaps, to some, erotic, he hopped off the kitchen table and began moving toward the back door.

Zerostrata

“There was something I wanted to tell you, too,” Mother said. “Someone called for you last night, while you were out. I left a message on the refrigerator. Guess I’ll go outside and see what Zasper’s gotten himself into.”

“And if he falls you should tell him that, for just a second, it looked like he was flying. Okay? That would really make his day.”

“When are you guys going to grow up and stop being so weird?” she asked before heading outside, glistening wet, with a purple smoking cat on her head.

At the refrigerator, I noticed Mother had actually scrawled the message on its stainless steel surface with a marker. Maybe she was in a drug haze when she wrote it, or maybe it was just that the caller was talking too fast for her to take dictation, but this was what the refrigerator said:

STAY AWAY DO NOT COME ROUND HERE I KNOW
YOU OLD BAB BAB CRIGGET I CAN HEAR YOU
BREATHING HANG UP DOWN WHYS THE WALL
TALKING HORIBUL POOP

And then, below that, in a virtually unidentifiable scrawl was what I interpreted as the word ‘Jib.’ I didn’t know what that meant but I knew the overall message meant my caller had called back and I again thought of that old woman who welcomed the girl back to her house after each of her trips. It had to be her.

Standing in the kitchen I was amazed my entire family was outside. I decided tonight, no matter what, I was going to catch the girl. I didn’t care if she didn’t want to be caught or if catching her would somehow objectify her. I just knew I had to get her attention. I had to make eye contact with her. I had to talk to her. Tonight was the night. I would make certain.

I went outside to enjoy this pleasant summer day with

my family. It was strange, all of us out there in the backyard. I couldn't think of the last time it had happened. I was even beginning to see Mr. Donovan as part of the family. When Francis showed up to begin her day of cleaning, Mother demanded she stay outside and vacuum the lawn and dust the plants. When Francis suggested she could *cut* the lawn and *prune* the plants, Mother told her that was gibberish and if she was going to think soft thoughts like that then she needed to "drag her ass back home." Francis listened and obeyed. I think she even had fun out there, performing ridiculous tasks.

Throughout the day, the wind picked up and then Francis told us the man on the television had said there was going to be a really big storm coming through the area.

Zasper fell asleep in the tree and eventually fell off the branch. Unfortunately, Mr. Donovan was distracted when this happened so Zasper landed on the ground. His arm fell off. He stood up and looked down at the arm, a confused expression on his face. Then he bent down, picked up the arm and reattached it to his shoulder. He muttered something and then went back into the house.

"I think we had all better go inside," Mother said.

"I'm going to stay out here."

"Are you an idiot? There's a storm on the way."

"I know. I like storms."

"You're not going to go up in that monstrosity are you?"

"No. I think I'm going to go back on the trail and obsessively wait for the running girl to come."

"Don't get mixed up with her. She's crazy, I hear."

"I intend to find out."

She shook her head sullenly and followed Mr. Donovan inside.

Zerostrata

I walked through the backyard and went to sit on the trail. I went over to the girl's second turn, roughly where I had met the pirate boys, and plopped down. I was hoping I would be able to see her coming and give myself plenty of time to stay in step with her.

The sky grew dangerously dark. Thunder rumbled. The air smelled of cold rain ready to quench the heat of the day. This didn't bother me. I knew the girl would come. And when she came, I would be there, sitting on the trail and waiting for her. I didn't even care if she thought this act was particularly scary.

And, as the first cold drops of rain began hammering down over the small patch of woods behind the house, turning the soft dirt of the trail into mud, I saw her.

I looked up as she came toward me, my dream made flesh. Quickly, I stood up. I tried to make eye contact with her but she seemed to be looking at something just in front of her and didn't even look at me. I heard her puff past me, could almost feel the warmth of her exhalations, could practically touch the cold chills covering her pale skin. I wanted it. I wanted it all. I took off running after her, realizing I hadn't removed my clothes. Maybe that was why she wouldn't acknowledge me, because I wasn't naked like her. I thought about stripping my clothes off as I ran but knew I was way too clumsy. I was lucky just to be able to put on a pair of pants without falling over, let alone trying to remove pants while running at full speed. Hell, I had to focus just to run at full speed and not fall down.

Nevertheless, I ran, keeping pace, almost able to reach out and touch her. Then, instead of rounding the fourth and final turn, she did something else. She veered to her right, off onto one of the smaller trails cutting through the thin woods.

I followed her.

The thunder boomed in the sky, rattling my teeth, shaking the ground. The lightning flashed its neon skeleton's hand. I chased the soft lilac scent of the girl in front of me.

She slowed down and turned toward me.

She reached her hand out to me and, without looking at it, I grabbed on. I was too busy looking at her face. She was beautiful. A unique beauty. And it was here in front of me. She smiled. I thought she would look more grim and determined. To do all that running, surely she had to be determined. But she smiled, showing a set of perfect white teeth as the lightning flashed green in her eyes. She pulled me toward her and I wanted desperately to be out of my clothes.

I leaned in and kissed her. My entire body had gone cold and her mouth was so very warm. Her hands worked at the button of my pants and my hands worked at the buttons of my shirt. I was happy that I was able to remove it without breaking the kiss. Her tongue entered my mouth. Now my clothes were gone and we moved closer, into each other's heat. My hands ran over her body, her skin soft beneath. It was like holding a flower.

Then we were on the ground and I was inside of her. Never breaking the kiss, never drawing away from each other.

I made the discovery of everything perfect. She felt perfect. She tasted perfect. She smelled perfect.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, a storm within the storm. Time didn't matter anymore. I had discovered where I wanted to be for the rest of my life.

The whole thing built to a shared crescendo. There was a violent gust of wind, a deafening roar, and everything went bone white. She rolled me onto my back and lay on top of me, finally breaking the kiss.

Zerostrata

I smelled smoke and heard wood split.

“I have to go.” Her whispered breath was warm against my ear.

“No,” I said.

“I have to. Tomorrow, we go deeper still.”

Before I could say anything else, she was going away along the trail, headed back home.

I stood up and gathered my soggy clothes, slowly trudging back home.

From the perimeter of the backyard, I noticed things didn't look right.

The oak tree was severed. It was less than half its former height. Lying on the ground up by the house, in ruins, was Zerostrata.

My family waited on the back porch, a blank look on each of their faces.

“I'm sorry,” Mother said.

Zasper put his arm around me, something he had never done before. I shrugged it off, got down on my hands and knees and crawled under a piece of Zerostrata's roof.

Chapter Fifteen

Name

I woke up to a group of kids throwing rocks at the demolished Zerostrata. I peeked my head out from the shelter and one of the rocks glanced off my forehead.

“Ow,” I groaned.

A savage looking child, wearing only a loincloth, stared down at me and said, “Serves you right, you dirty bum. We’re taking this neighborhood back! Taking it back from people like you!”

He turned and ran off and I crouched there on the lawn, half-in and half-out of Zerostrata, thinking, “But I live here.”

I turned around to grab my shoes. Startled, I noticed Dr. Blast crouching in the back corner. He was eating a delicious-looking banana, staring at me.

“So how did it go?”

“It went great, I think.”

“That’s good. Have you noticed that things have changed?”

“Yes. They certainly have.”

Zerostrata

“And do you think they have changed for the better?”

“Oh, definitely, everyone seems so much happier.”

“Good. Well, I gotta go.” Then he reached down and started digging in the lawn.

“You know, that could take days. I could probably get someone to give you a ride back to the office.”

“Not necessary. Sometimes I like to dig. I’m rather good at it. Also, I find it soothing, relaxing... and it provides me with a very good workout.”

“Okay then, go right ahead. I won’t disturb you.”

I left him to his digging and went into the house to get something to eat.

Walking to the refrigerator, I noticed Mother had left another message scrawled on it. It looked like I had received another call. Actually, studying the scrawls, it looked like I had received two calls.

This is what the first one said:

DAMN BUGGER I SEEN YOU FILTHY STUPID STAY
AWAY MEEN IT

The second one was a little more concise. It simply said:

THE COMMANDER CALLED

I didn’t know who the hell The Commander was but if I was ever meant to find out then I would, given time.

I couldn’t wait for the day to pass. I don’t know why I didn’t just go to the girl’s house and knock on her door. I felt embarrassed I didn’t even know her name but that wasn’t the only reason. I knew who else lived there. I knew, without a doubt, it was my cranky old woman caller and there was something about her that greatly disturbed me. She had warned me to stay away. She had forbidden me to come near her and I didn’t feel like testing those waters just yet.

Andersen Prunty

I sat down at the table and ate a bowl of cereal, slowly, not really having much else to do.

It was sunny outside and I liked the way the light glinted on the dew clinging to the wrought iron gate. I liked the way the white clouds swirled over the trees across the road. I liked where I was.

There was a commotion from various rooms around the house. I thought about inspecting it but didn't think there was much of a need. What it sounded like was assorted things being broken. Not in rapid succession. It didn't sound like anyone had gone on a rampage or anything. It sounded more like someone was carefully selecting and then methodically destroying these objects. There would be the shatter of something that sounded like glass and then there would be a few moments of silence before something else was broken. Perhaps this something was made of wood, a kind of splintering sound emanating through the house.

Francis came into the kitchen as I finished my bowl of cereal and said Mother wanted me to fix the grandfather clock in the hallway.

“But all the hands fell off. It's been that way for days.”

“She said you could fix it.”

I agreed, putting my bowl in the sink and leaving the kitchen in search of the grandfather clock. It was a beautiful clock, ridiculously expensive. Part of me didn't want to put the hands back on the clock. Part of me didn't want to know what time it was. The more aware of time I became the slower it would go. If I actually knew what time it was, I would probably be checking the clock at regular intervals, mentally pushing it along and feeling every slow dripping minute as some kind of strict and unique torture.

I opened up the heavy door of the clock and picked

Zerostrata

the hour hand up from the ledge. Wouldn't it be nice if it was like eight o'clock? I thought. That would be right about the time the girl usually took her runs and I now thought I had every right to openly approach her.

I stuck the hour hand in somewhere between the seven and the eight on the clock. Then I put the minute hand on the nine. I probably did it all wrong. I would be lucky if the clock worked at all. For all I knew the minute hand went *under* the hour hand. I had no idea.

Then I shut the door to the grandfather clock and a strange feeling rushed through my body.

Suddenly, I smelled food coming from the kitchen. Zasper did a painful-looking somersault off the steps to my left, disappearing before he could hit the bottom, consumed by time. The sky darkened outside. I peeked into the kitchen and saw Mother, Tricky and Mr. Donovan first sitting down at the dinner table and then sitting back in their chairs, satiated.

Mother, seeing me, said, "Thanks for fixing that clock."

I nodded and went outside. I reached the trail and stood there, waiting. I waited in between the second and the third turn. I didn't want the girl to think I was too eager.

I saw her rounding the second turn. She didn't run nearly as quickly today as she had the other nights and when she saw me, she slowed down a little, walking toward me. I waited for an embrace or a kiss or something. Instead she stuck out her hand. She wore a white gown that looked about a century out of date. Suddenly, taking her hand in mine, I felt like some kind of awful trespasser.

"I guess I should introduce myself," she said. "My name is Gretel Something."

"Of course it is."

Andersen Prunty

“Why do you say that?”

“My name is Hansel Nothing.”

“Incestuous.”

“Absolutely.”

“How would you like to do something different tonight?”

“Like what?”

“Follow me.”

She turned to her right, toward the middle of the little patch of woods.

“Tonight I want to take you to the moon. So we can talk and no one can listen in.”

“Your mother...”

“My *grandmother*. My parents died when I was very young.”

“So where is The Moon?” I thought maybe she was talking about a bar or a coffee shop or something.

“Why, it’s right up there, silly.” She pointed to the full white thing in the sky.

“Oh, okay.”

“You think I’m kidding?”

“Well, no, it’s just, well, that’s an awful long trip. I don’t see how we can make it.”

“But it’s not that long at all. Look.”

She looked up, just above our heads, at a rope ladder descending from the sky.

“You go first,” she said.

I took the first rung of the ladder in my hands and slowly started climbing it. Occasionally I glanced back to make sure she was still there. The ladder was very wobbly and I didn’t want to accidentally shake her off.

She was right, the moon wasn’t very far away at all. It

Zerostrata

only took us a few minutes and I found it a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be.

Chapter Sixteen

So This is What the Moon is Like

I climbed from the ladder onto the surface of the moon, turning and helping Gretel.

“You decided to wear clothes this evening?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I hope I didn’t ruin your running.”

“Not at all.”

“Why did you run naked before?”

“Because I wanted to. I liked the way it felt. Even in the cold, it felt good because I was only outside for a while and I knew the house would be nice and warm when I came back to it.”

“Makes sense.”

“We should lie down somewhere. The stars are really beautiful up here.”

We walked along the surface of the moon until she found a spot that looked right and said, “Here is good.”

She plopped down onto the moon’s gray dust. I plopped down next to her.

“This is a lot more comfortable than I imagined it would be.”

Zerostrata

“Did you often imagine lying on the moon?”

“A couple of times, maybe. I always thought it would be a lot rockier. But this is like a bed. Very nice.”

“Not many people get to come up here.”

“I would guess not. Wow, the stars *are* nice.”

“Better than any place else.”

We lay there, looking out at space, at all the twinkling stars. They were larger than they were on earth. Not a lot larger. But enough to make them more impressive. And I saw them more clearly.

I couldn't believe I was lying here next to this girl. And she wasn't just the girl anymore. She had a name.

“It's interesting that you're named 'Gretel.'”

“Why's that?”

“I thought my mother was the only person who used names from books and stories she liked.”

“I don't know why my mother named me that. I think she always hoped I would get lost in a forest and eaten by a witch. But then she died and I got to live with one.”

“Your grandmother?”

“She's not a very nice person.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She likes to keep me in the house. She doesn't like for me to leave.”

“How old are you?”

“Old enough to be out on my own but I would hate to leave her alone in that old house all by herself.”

“Do you go to school?”

“Not for a while.”

“Does your grandmother ever call me and leave hateful and accusatory messages?”

“Yeah, that's probably her. Every time I mention some-

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one, that's when she calls them and leaves messages. She's really quite harmless. At least, I think she's harmless."

"So you mentioned me?"

"Maybe."

"But she was leaving the messages before we ever..."

"I know. I think I mentioned you the first day you came home."

"Really. You knew about that?"

"Well, it's kind of a small town, we've lived in the neighborhood for a very long time and neither one of us hardly ever leaves. You hear things."

"I just didn't think something like that would be worth mentioning. It's not exactly like it was big news or anything."

"Except it was kind of big news. In a town like Grayson, when people leave, and they leave all the time, the town still has a way of keeping tabs on them. Like we all know where people go to college and what they're doing and in what state and all that. All it takes is asking a couple of people and keeping your ears open and you learn all kinds of things."

"Really? I never even thought about the people I went to school with after I stopped going."

"You're an exception. Nobody knew what happened to you. You graduated high school. You left and then what? There weren't really even any rumors. So what have you been doing for the last ten years?"

"I don't really know."

"That's not true, is it? Do you really not know?"

"It's more like I can't remember."

"Maybe you don't want to remember."

"Or maybe it's not worth remembering."

Gretel scooted over from her place on the moon until

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she pressed up against me.

“I’m sure it’s worth remembering,” she said. “Have you even tried?”

“Not really. It sounds so weird. I have a couple of theories.”

“What are they?”

“You probably don’t want to hear them.”

“No, I want to. Theories fascinate me.”

“Why?”

“Because they change all the time. If they didn’t change then you couldn’t call them theories. I like change.”

“Me too. Okay, well, when I left school, I think I wanted to be a writer. No, I know I wanted to be a writer and so I did some writing.”

“Did you get anything published?”

“I think I did. But then I stopped.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I think I went sort of crazy. I started to feel all these strange emotions all the time. I thought that when I left my house I would have left all the doom behind but I just took it with me and there it was in my brain and when I woke up in the mornings my hands would be shaking and I’d go through the rest of the day telling myself everything was going to be okay even though I knew everything was probably not going to be okay and it just started to consume all my thoughts and I didn’t have any more time for writing because I couldn’t find room for all those thoughts. Or, maybe, I had a couple of things published but they were really violent or mean and I wanted to write something that was beautiful. You know? Something without any violence or hate or anything in it but I don’t think I knew how I was going to do that. And it was a paradox, you know. I always wrote because it was like build-

ing something, it was the closest I ever came to making something and if I was going to make something then I wanted it to be something beautiful, not ugly or destructive. And yet, every time I sat down to write, that was the only thing that came out and I just started wondering what the point was.”

“So you spent ten years wondering what the point was?”

“No, and here’s the really strange part—I think, somewhere along the line, I went to hell.”

“You went to hell? What do you mean? You became like a wreck or something?”

“No, I mean I went to Hell. Like the really biblical kind of Hell with demons and Satan and all that stuff.”

“Was it scary?”

“I don’t know. I think that’s the part I don’t remember too well. I think it was dark and hot and cold all at the same time and maybe a little bit painful too but it’s all very cloudy. That’s stupid, I’m sure I didn’t go to Hell.”

“No you’re not.”

“I don’t even believe in Hell. I’m not sure. I think I really did go there and when I came back, when I came back home and started remembering again, my mother said it smelled like I was burning and I was so thirsty... All I could think about doing was getting a drink of water, just something to get rid of the burning in my throat.”

“Well, I’m glad you came back.”

“I’m glad I found you.”

“Why?”

“Because I think you’re everything I need.”

“But you don’t even know me.”

“And I don’t ever really want to know you.”

“What do you mean?”

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“If you can ever completely know someone then that means that person has stopped changing, has stopped thinking, has stopped doing anything it is that makes a person unique and individual. The fun is in getting to know someone. Experiencing things with them, watching them change and just hoping they don’t change so much they no longer interest you.”

“I don’t really think about things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I’m not allowed out of the house so much.”

“So what do you do all day, you and your grandmother? Does your grandfather live with you?”

“No.”

“So what do you do?”

“I don’t know. The time just passes. I lie in my bed most of the day and dream about life outside that house and look forward to my run. Grandma rearranges the house on a nearly daily basis. Right now, she has all of the furniture nailed to the walls. She says this makes it easier to vacuum and sweep everywhere but I know that is a lie because there really isn’t any cleaning to be done with just the two of us living there.”

“It must get awfully boring.”

“No, I’ve gotten used to it. I like to lie in my bed and dream. I can dream about something every day. Something new. I have created societies in my head and then watched the fall of their civilization by the end of the day. And when I run, it clears everything out so I have to start again the next day.”

“Do you have books or a television or anything?”

“Oh, yeah, we have quite an extensive library. I’ve read most of the books a dozen times. And we have cable television, all of that. A person can’t lie around and dream *all* the time.”

“What about this place? Did you dream it?”

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“The moon? No, that’s been overhead for well, since the beginning of time, I guess.”

“I know that but, come on, one can’t really climb to the moon using a ladder made of rope. It’s just too far away.”

“Are we here?”

“Where?”

“On the moon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look around you. Does it look like the moon? Does it feel like the moon?”

“No, I already told you I thought it felt more comfortable.”

“But, other than that?”

“Other than that, I would have to say it is the moon.”

“So why can’t you just rest and enjoy it? Tell people you have been to the moon and then laugh at them when they don’t believe you.”

We talked like that for the rest of the evening. Once we got tired of lying we walked around the surface of the moon. We looked at the earth and didn’t even think about talking about our place on that big blue thing. We didn’t need to talk about our place on it. We had found our place. Our place was wherever the other one was. That was okay with both of us. It was almost like talking with myself. Even the silences seemed infused with a secret knowledge. We held hands as we walked around the moon and it felt right and it felt good. I had never felt anything like that before.

The conversation was easy but it wasn’t even the focal point of our time together. And it was refreshing that all of this took place on the moon because there wasn’t really anything to observe there, nothing to comment on. It made the conversation more pure.

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And it had to end, but again it ended with the prospect of tomorrow and, even though I would never be ready to leave her, the idea of seeing her again made the absence that much more bearable. She said it was time to go and I started to lead her back to the ladder but she stopped me.

“No, the ladder is gone. It won’t be there.”

“How do we get down?”

“I think we’ll have to get back using the hot air balloon.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Hot air balloons are very entertaining.”

I watched the approach of a bright yellow hot air balloon descend to a spot on the moon just beside us. I climbed in first and then helped her into the basket.

Again, the time seemed to pass all too quickly.

We approached the earth at dawn. She leaned against the side of the basket and I stood behind her, my arms around her stomach, my nose pressed against the back of her head and smelling the clean scent of her hair that held all the magic of the moon and the stars and long runs through the rain-filled night.

The balloon touched down in the middle of the little park in the middle of the little neighborhood in Grayson. I wanted our parting to be long and drawn out. I wanted to exchange kisses. I wanted to bring her into me to feel the press of her heat, something to take with me, but she said, “I have to get home before my grandma wakes up. The imposter I sent there after my alleged run has probably fled by now.”

“You have an imposter?”

“I have to go.”

And then she was off in the lightening dawn. I climbed out of the basket and began walking home. I looked back to

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take in the grandeur of the bright yellow hot air balloon but it had disappeared.

When I reached the house, I saw Zasper standing in the middle of the backyard with flashlights, signaling something in the sky.

Chapter Seventeen

The Fixer

“I did it! I did it!” Zasper shouted.

I joined in the excitement, hopping up and down, unaware of what Zasper had done but feeling as though, in some way, I too had done whatever “it” was.

We did this weird little dance, both of us hopping up and down, hands clasping each other’s forearms as we bounced around.

Both of us being essentially lazy and slothful, it didn’t take us very long to get tired. And then we stopped and stared curiously at one another.

“What did you do, Zasper?”

“Look! Just look!” And he gestured toward the middle of the yard, toward what used to be the towering oak tree. The oak tree towered once again. All signs of the lightning striking it had been erased and it loomed majestically over the yard. Situated at its top, as it had been for nearly as long as I could remember, was Zerostrata.

“Wow! You did fix it! How did you do that?”

“Remember when I fell out of Zerostrata the other

day and my arm fell off?”

“How could I forget?”

“At first I thought it was something really serious like, ‘Oh, shit, my arm just fell off.’ But I didn’t let myself panic. I reached down and picked the arm up and knew I could put it back on my body with no problem at all. So I bent down and scooped it up and put it back on and it stayed there and it’s worked just like new ever since. So the next day, I went around and broke everything in the house I could find and then I tried to fix them using nothing but my hands to hold and my mind to fix the actual breakage, and I was able to do that too. So then I decided to tackle a really big project so I came out here and tried to do this and it worked. So I think I finally have my super special power and shouldn’t have any problem being Dad’s sidekick. Oh, and by the way, he no longer calls himself The Whirlwind. He said that was too nebulous and slightly confusing. He thought people would become leery about signaling him if he was called The Whirlwind because, you know, that sounds so destructive.”

“So what does he call himself now?”

“Now he’s The Commander.”

“The Commander. I think he called the other day.”

“I saw that. Mom really needs to learn how to take better messages.”

“I don’t think I really want to get any of the messages I’ve been getting.”

“No?”

“No.”

We stood in silence for a minute. I stared up at Zerostrata, feeling fatigue slug its way through my body. I wanted nothing more than to go up there and lie down on the warm wood floor, dozing off to sleep as the sun rose and

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filled it with light.

“So when are you thinking about heading out with The Commander?”

“I don’t know. I guess whenever he calls me up.”

“Well, if I’m not around when the time comes I want you to know I’ll be sorry to see you go.”

“I’ll come back.”

“Good.”

“So you don’t think you’re going to be around much longer either?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t know if I want to be.”

“Things are going well with her, huh?”

“Better than I could have ever imagined.”

“That’s really good to hear.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to go in and get some rest. You going up?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Mother has kept your room exactly the same for the past ten years. I think you would feel perfectly at home there.”

“But I’m not the same person I was ten years ago. I’d feel like an intruder. Or a nostalgic cynic, if such a thing exists.”

“Everything exists. You should know that by now.”

“I think I’m warming to the idea.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

I took the elevator up to Zerostrata, the lifting of darkness feeling like the lifting of some kind of security blanket.

Chapter Eighteen

Circus

I slept the next day away. Well, I slept as much of the day away as I possibly could. I woke up to the loudest racket imaginable. There was instant confusion upon opening my eyes. I was still not used to waking up in Zerostrata even though I wasn't incredibly sure of where it was I had woken up before. The sun beamed into my eyes, bright and harsh. From somewhere below, there was something that sounded like the continual crashing of cymbals.

I went over to the window and looked down at the backyard.

Mother had hired a circus to come and perform. There was a large red and white striped tent that occupied the space from Zerostrata nearly to the back of the house. Around the tent, I could see the animal caretakers tending the circus animals. There were cheers and wild screams coming from inside the tent.

I had never really liked the circus and suddenly found myself wanting to be away. I imagined Mother and Mr. Donovan somewhere inside the tent, having a wonderful time,

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and that was enough for me. As long as someone was enjoying it. I took the elevator down to the bottom of Zerostrata, hopped on one of the circus camels and made my way to the edge of town. I instinctively knew where I was going. I had some things I wanted to discuss with Dr. Blast.

When I reached his office I wasn't surprised to find he was no longer there.

Instead, there was a sloppily made piece of paper with his new location on it. It wasn't any particular location. It was more like an area. This is what it said:

DR. BLAST'S OFFICE HAS MOVED. PLEASE VISIT HIM IN THE NEW OFFICE. GO TO THE OTHER EDGE OF TOWN AND LOOK FOR THE BOX.

So I hopped back on the camel and took it to the other edge of town. Halfway there, the camel told me its hooves hurt and I told it to keep on going, we didn't have much further, but the camel revolted. He told me to get off and said he had to excuse himself. I did what the camel told me to do and hopped off. The camel turned and ran away on its hind legs.

The edge of town wasn't as run down as it sounded. In fact, it was simply a middle class neighborhood. I didn't think Grayson had anything that was lower than middle class. This made Dr. Blast's office easier to find. His was the only box. Set up on the corner of a sidewalk in front of a Cape Cod-style house.

I wasn't sure how one approached someone who lived in a box. I didn't think it would be polite to simply barge in so I gently tapped on the cardboard.

He peered out of the tiny peephole he had poked into the cut-away door.

"Hansel?" he said.

"Yes."

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“Come in. Come in.”

I pulled the little cardboard door outward and stepped into his damp cardboard-smelling office as he stepped out.

“What’s with the new digs?” I asked.

“I had to scale down.”

“It’s cozy.”

“Certainly is and it gives me all I really need.”

And this was, apparently, nothing at all.

“Have you come for another session?”

“No, I just came to talk.”

“Okay. Well, start talking then. I’m just going to take off my clothes and lie on top of the box but don’t worry, I’ll be able to hear you just fine.”

We talked about nothing in particular until Dr. Blast said one of his neighbors had noticed him and he needed to get back in the box before they called the police. There wasn’t room for both of us so I left.

Chapter Nineteen

The Graveyard of Dreams

By the time I got back home the circus had cleared. I went into the house but there wasn't anybody there. A note lay on the kitchen table. It said Mother and Mr. Donovan had retreated to an undisclosed location to get married and she was sorry no one was invited.

I went down to the basement to look for Zasper but he wasn't there either.

I had left a circus and come back to nothing.

I wandered around the house. This was the first time in a very long time I had been completely alone in the house. It felt comfortable. It felt good. Maybe, for the first time, I saw the house as an entity unto itself. I thought about it as part of the family. Certainly, it had been there just as much as Mother and Father. It had been somewhere to come home to and somewhere to leave. It was indifferent but there was a comfort to this indifference. I didn't have to try and impress the house. Whatever I did would be greeted with the same indifferent there-ness.

I worked my way through the whole house. It was

empty for being such a large house. One would think someone purchasing a house of this size would have a lot of things to fill it with. I kind of zoned out by the time I had worked my way back to the kitchen. I looked out over the front lawn. It was sunny and beautiful. It was only a few days ago that it was dark and gloomy. And the gloominess had seemed more than simply weather-related. It had been all pervasive. It had seemed oppressive but now I was actually happy to be standing there.

The phone rang and I jumped.

I didn't want to answer it. It had to be Gretel's grandmother, calling to try and scare me with a series of hollow but malicious comments. Then I decided I had to answer it. I had grown to secretly enjoy the old woman's spite.

"Hi there!" I said cheerfully as I picked up the receiver. To my surprise, it wasn't Gretel's grandmother at all, but my father.

"Hello there yourself. This is The Commander."

"Oh... Hi, Dad."

"Never mind that. Have you seen The Fixer?"

"I saw him this morning."

I was sort of surprised that, of all people, my own father did not try and make even the smallest small talk with me. He didn't sound like his old jovial self. His tone was clipped and impatient—as though he was in the midst of some ultra-important work.

"If you see him again you do The Commander a favor and tell him I've been looking for him. I need him. It's urgent."

"Okay."

Then the phone clicked down on the other end. I imagined my father flying over someplace (did he fly?) across the

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globe, on his way to rescue a doomed schoolbus or drag people from a burning building or stop an evil thief from robbing a poor innocent family that happens to stumble down a dark alleyway. I imagined him calling from some kind of cell phone that had been professionally fit into the cuff of his costume. I wondered what kind of costume he had chosen. Was it as ridiculously sinister as Zasper's black jumpsuit?

Realizing I still held the phone in my hand, I put it back on the wall and wandered outside to wait. It wouldn't be long before she came to me. I waited, trying to lose track of time until I saw her round the second turn and then, suddenly, I wanted nothing but time. I wanted the seconds to grind by so slowly they felt like days.

"Come on, we have to hurry before we miss the bus."

She grabbed my hand and led me through the backyard and out to the front of my house.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, you'll love it."

So I followed her to the front of the house.

A yellow school bus waited out on the curb.

The bus driver saw us and pulled the doors open. Gretel walked up the wide rubberized stairs first and I followed her. She whispered something into the bus driver's ear as we sat down in the wide green seat behind him.

The bus driver wore a fake mustache, sunglasses, and a curly brown woman's wig. He was creepy looking. It was hard for me to imagine him driving a bus load of kids around. He fought hard to stay awake.

Gretel and I held hands in the seat. I stared intently at the road ahead as the bus driver turned into town. I noticed he had a name tag that said "Greg." It was one of those name tags that was really just a sticker. Someone with very bad

handwriting had written his name on it. Probably him.

He had a hard time driving in a straight line.

“Where was it you said you was goin again?” he bel-
lowed.

“I didn’t,” Gretel said.

“Well that’s just great. Now I won’t know where to
go.”

“Doesn’t matter, we’ll find it,” she said.

“Look... I’m lucky just to be able to see the road.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I’ve taken so many drugs that I should
not be operating a motor vehicle.”

“Do you drive kids in this thing?” I asked. What I re-
ally meant to ask was if he drove kids in this thing in his cur-
rent state.

“Yeah, that’s what I do during the day but at night I
more or less steal the bus and operate it as my own cash cow.”

“And you haven’t been caught?” I asked.

“Naw. I ain’t too worried about it.”

“Are there a lot of people who ride your bus at night?”

“No, not really, I mostly drive it to various houses on
drug runs. Nobody would think to pull over a school bus.”

“That’s good logic,” I said.

“Besides, I lost the insurance on my own vehicle a
while back and being a bus driver keeps me in a set of wheels.”

He jerked the bus back onto the road after nearly hit-
ting a parked car. “That was close,” he said.

Gretel and I talked easily the rest of the bus ride. I was
crawling with anticipation. I was hoping our destination would
be something like the moon but then I figured she probably
wouldn’t be able to take me to the moon every night.

“I’m going to stop the bus here,” the driver said. “I’m

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way too high to drive any more and I think I need to crawl in back and take a little rest. You folks enjoy your evening.”

The pneumatic doors hissed open and we walked out into the cool night, the moon shining down with bright familiarity.

I followed Gretel up a hill into what looked like a graveyard. We were no longer in town. I wasn't really sure where we were.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“This is the family cemetery.”

“Really? That sounds cheery.”

“Oh, it's not as grim as you think it would be.”

I followed her deeper into the cemetery.

“This is my mother's tombstone,” she said.

It looked like a perfectly ordinary, modest tombstone until Gretel reached out and pushed a button on the lower portion of it.

The tombstone came alive, glowing, images slowly forming.

“Is that a television?”

“Something like that. All of the tombstones in this graveyard... They all have complete documentaries of those who have died. I won't subject you to the whole thing. Some of them are rather long.” She reached down and touched another hidden button on the tombstone. The image skipped forward quickly. “The really interesting thing about it is that, not only did the graveyard capture her life through the documentary, but it also captured her dreams.”

“Wow,” I said. “Are all of the dreams captured?”

“From *all* the people?”

“Yeah.”

“Most of them. Some people never dreamt and those

are the only sad tombstones in here. The dreams are pretty various. Some people thought of grand things that could never have existed. Some people were just slightly ahead of their time, dreaming of inventions that wouldn't be invented for another ten years. Some were amazingly behind their times, dreaming of places that existed thousands of years ago. Some people dream about fishing. Some people dream about reading, of all things. Some people dream about music and some of the music is really quite beautiful even though I can't imagine what the instruments used to make it are."

"What did your mother dream about?"

Gretel continued, ignoring my question.

"And another thing about the dreams is that you would be surprised to find out how many people's dreams actually came true."

"Then it's not really a dream anymore, is it?"

"Of course it is."

She reached the end of her mother's documentary, how she met her death in a grisly car accident and then the picture became a more nebulous thing. These were her mother's dreams. I don't know how they were captured and I felt wrong for watching them.

"See," Gretel said, referring to her mother's dream.

"The only thing my mother dreamed was that I would be happy. And, amazingly, she dreamed that I would find you."

The image on the screen showed Gretel, wandering through a vast field of golden wheat. It was very bucolic and picturesque. In the distance, I could see myself, dressed like a Dutch boy and skipping along the field. I chuckled slightly at this image.

"Well, the dream isn't always *exactly* the way it is in reality but, see, she had the way you looked right and everything."

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“Is that why I was the only one you paid attention to during your running? The pirates told me about all the dirty old men and young boys who had taken to waiting for you on your runs but you were unfazed by all of them because you knew exactly what you were looking for.”

“Now you know.”

“I certainly feel enlightened.”

We wandered around the graveyard some more, hand in hand. We were both most interested in the dreams. Some of them really were quite fabulous. There were things I could never have thought of. Buildings that didn't look like any buildings I had seen, constructed with substances that existed only in the dreamer's mind. There were books, perfect books, meant only for the person who read them. Each dream embodied a sense of perfection. Some of the dreams may not have been spectacular or lofty but there was a sense of rightness with them. A sense that, for the person who dreamed this particular dream, this was their idea of some utopia. Maybe this was their afterlife, for all I knew.

We slipped out of the graveyard, behind the graveyard, under a large tree. We took off our clothes and laid them on the ground. For the rest of the evening, we explored each other's bodies and I saw my own dream landscape looming somewhere behind my eyes, taking shape with each inch of Gretel's flesh I ran my lips across or tasted with my tongue. Our lovemaking was not frantic this time but slow. Every second throbbed with some infinitesimal amount of pleasure and the pleasure grew as the seconds passed. By the time each of us reached a climax, I was unaware of time or place. It could have just been us, floating alone through space.

I don't know how I ended up back in Zerostrata. When I woke up, I was alone and it was late the next afternoon. At

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first, I felt like I had been cheated out of last night but, slowly, it came back to me and I was happy and the only thing that could have made me happier would have been to wake up with her lying there beside me.

Chapter Twenty

Piss

I decided there wasn't any reason to leave Zerostrata but my bladder throbbed. That didn't mean I had to leave. I stood up and crossed to the window. I unzipped and aimed high. As the urine fell from Zerostrata, my gaze wandered over the trees in the middle of the neighborhood.

I had to leave Zerostrata.

But first I had to wait for the piss to stop.

Chapter Twenty-one

Standing at the Gates of Hell

Gretel's house was burning. A bad feeling vomited down my spine. I knew I wouldn't be able to get to her house as quickly as I wanted to.

I ran as fast as I could, wishing I had spent all the years running Gretel had. Suddenly, all the doom I had ever felt in my life washed over me, threatening to slow my step and drag me down completely. I tried not to think about it. I tried not to think of any possible way this could turn out bad. The only thing I could do at the moment was run and that was exactly what I did.

Now in the center of the neighborhood, I charged through the empty playground. The smell of the burning house hung around me and it was only a matter of seconds before I reached it.

The fire had started down near the bottom, it looked like. The flames were raging. It was an old house, mostly made of wood. I knew it wouldn't take that long for the flames to consume it.

But I wasn't going to stand there and wait for that to happen.

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That was when I knew I had been to Hell before. That was exactly what the burning house reminded me of. The heat coming from it was tremendous but not nearly as tremendous as the heat I had felt while in Hell. The flames did not frighten me either. Somewhere along the line I was sure I had been charred badly. Whatever skin I had on my body was merely covering the burn scars below it.

I looked up toward the second story, where I was almost sure Gretel's bedroom would be. I even picked out a window I thought had to be hers.

I didn't think about who had started the fire. I simply took a deep breath and charged up the porch steps, erupting through the burning front door.

The smoke did not hurt my lungs. It felt refreshing. It was like remembering a summer day and there was something vaguely sinful about that lungful of smoke.

This was an old environment I knew very well. But I didn't think Gretel could handle the smoke and the fire in exactly the same way I could. Of course, it was entirely possible she had already imagined herself away, gone to the moon or somewhere even further into outer space.

I charged up the large spiral staircase, the railings burning around me. When I reached the top, the bottom of the staircase fell away from the wall and crumbled on the floor. I didn't have long until the whole first story of the house collapsed. I had to find her before that happened.

Once on the second floor I turned to my right, going toward the bedroom furthest down the hall.

An explosion came from somewhere below and the house shifted. For a moment, I thought it would topple. I ran harder, sucking the smoke like it was oxygen, feeling the outrageous heat claw at my skin. Fire had come up through the

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middle of the hallway and I leaped over it, continuing to charge.

I reached the end of the hallway and turned right.

It was Gretel's room, just like I knew it had to be. She was curled up under the window. At first I thought she was passed out but, as I drew closer, I realized she was sleeping. I picked her up. Her body was hot and sweaty. A wheezing came from deep within her smokefilled lungs.

I looked out the window and was not surprised to see the bright orange trampoline there. The same one that had saved me from the fall through Dr. Blast's office window. I took a very tight hold of Gretel and, together, we jumped out of the window. We landed on the trampoline and bounced very high up in the air. I wanted to get her away from the house before the whole thing toppled. I wanted to get her away from the house to get her out of the heat, if anything, but the trampoline wanted to keep us on. We bounced higher and higher.

That wasn't supposed to happen. The bounces were supposed to get smaller unless you were trying to make them larger by applying some kind of opposing force, bending your legs and then springing up again. But I wasn't doing that. I kept my legs stiff, hoping the energy of the trampoline would decrease, but it didn't.

Soon we were bouncing over the trees, over the neighborhood, over the whole town of Grayson.

Gretel was still asleep. I didn't know what it would take to wake her up.

We bounded up again and as soon as we shot off the trampoline, I heard the whole house crumble.

Well, I thought, that was it for the trampoline. I didn't know where we would descend.

I didn't really think we might not descend at all. But

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we didn't. On the final bounce, we just kept rising until we reached the clouds and, reaching the clouds, I clawed my hand out to try and grab hold of one of them.

It was like reaching into a pile of cool cotton. I pulled Gretel up onto the top of the thick, fluffy white cloud and laid her down.

There was a man up there. He kind of looked like the cloud, with his white hair and long beard and flowing robe.

He looked startled we had taken his cloud but, after he spoke, I got the feeling this kind of thing happened to him all the time. He seemed resigned to the fact.

"Pardon me," he said. "I'll just give you guys a little bit of privacy." And then he leapt off.

Maybe he landed on a cloud a little closer to the ground. Maybe he landed in a giant pond. Maybe he landed on a trampoline. Or maybe he just landed on the ground, turned into a watermelon, and got eaten by a pack of hungry wildebeests. Who could really say?

I nudged the sleeping girl beside me.

"Gretel, wake up."

"What?" she mumbled.

"Wake up."

"Tape."

"Wake... up."

"Where are we?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why are you here? Is it nighttime already?"

"No, it's the middle of the day."

"I don't understand."

"Your house, it was burning. I pulled you out of it. Don't you remember any of that?"

"No, I was still asleep."

Andersen Prunty

“What about your grandmother? Was she in the house?”

Then a look of realization cleared the fog from her eyes. She shook her head.

“She wasn’t in the house?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s good because, truthfully, I kind of forgot all about her. I would have felt really bad if I knew I just left her in there to burn.”

“No. You shouldn’t have felt bad at all. I’m pretty sure she was the one who started the fire.”

“Why would she do a thing like that?”

“Because she’s evil.”

Things had been going along so well in my own life I had forgotten all about the evil lurking out there in the world. It was easy to convince myself no one was truly evil but here now was a woman who had attempted to burn her own granddaughter alive in the house.

“She could have been more evil. I mean, I think she woke me up to tell me she was going to Texas and I should get out of the house, but I really can’t remember. I had already decided I was going to stop listening to her.”

“Why would she try to burn down the house?”

“To eliminate all traces, I guess. Maybe to collect on the insurance money. She’s probably left behind a legacy of evil and didn’t want anybody to be able to track her down.”

“Still doesn’t make any sense.”

“We’re on a cloud, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. What do we do now?”

Chapter Twenty-two

Raindrop Conversation

“What is that?”

“What?”

“I feel weird.”

“I think it’s starting to rain.”

“It feels like I’m disintegrating.”

“I think we have become the cloud and the cloud has become a raincloud.”

“What happens now?”

“I don’t know. I think we have to wait and find out.”

“I don’t like to wait for things.”

“Me either.”

“Maybe we’ll end up in a puddle somewhere.”

“I hope it’s not a mud puddle. Somebody might step on us.”

“That wouldn’t feel very good.”

“Definitely not.”

“Do you think we’re falling yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think a drop of rain feels itself fall?”

Andersen Prunty

“I don’t know.”

“You say that a lot.”

“I think it’s a good answer.”

“Yeah, it is a good answer.”

“You know, it was raining the first time I saw you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I hardly even knew what it was I saw but I knew I wanted it.”

“Really?”

“Definitely. And it was raining the first time we made love.”

“But was it really making love if I didn’t even know you.”

“It was if you felt the same way about me I felt about you.”

“Love at first sight.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just physical love. I loved the whole idea of you.”

“So I’m an idea?”

“No. Not at all. But I created this whole image of you in my head and every time we’re around each other, little bits and pieces of that image keep coming true.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“What about me? How did you feel about me?”

“I already told you. I knew you were the one.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I can’t believe you’re still asking that question after everything that has happened.”

“Yeah, I guess old habits are hard to break.”

“I guess so.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

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“That sounds very strange, coming from a raindrop.”

“Can you see?”

“No, not really.”

“How do you see yourself in the future?”

“I don’t know. The future is only a hope.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, the me of the future will probably depend on whether or not you’re there.”

“I think we both know I’ll be there.”

“You have to be there. That’s what I think.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you are a part of me. I think you have always been a part of me and I have just now absorbed you and you have absorbed me.”

“So how do you see yourself in the future? How do you see *us* in the future?”

“I don’t know. Any future with you is good.”

“Yeah, but everyone has some vision of themselves in the future. They have to. It gives them something to live for. Something to aspire to.”

“I aspire to you.”

“But you already have me.”

“Okay. So maybe someday we will have a house. It doesn’t have to be a huge house but I want it to be an airy house with a lot of windows and wood and plants everywhere. The main thing is that the house is filled with sunlight and happiness. Laughter. I couldn’t live in a house that didn’t have laughter.”

“But you don’t laugh.”

“I’m working on it. You’ll have to teach me how to laugh. I’m not very good at laughter. It makes my face hurt.”

“Okay. So what else?”

“And, I don’t know, I think I like routine. We will live together and we’ll find out this routine and it will be a perfect routine because it will ensure each of us feels nothing but bliss at all times. And you will always be there and I will always be there and even if we are not together we will still know the other one is right there. Maybe I will get back to writing and you can do whatever it is that makes you happy. We will have fabulous sex and even if we don’t have sex it will be okay because we can just lie in bed and I can hold you in my arms and feel your skin and smell your hair and look into your eyes and know this is just as good as sex. And on the weekends we can have family and friends over and there will be food and laughter and conversation. Oh, and music, there has to be music. Good music. The house has to be filled with music. I think all of those things would make me a very happy person.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll be happy just as long as I’m around you.”

“And you won’t grow to hate me?”

“That’s not possible.”

“But it happens.”

“It won’t happen. If I hated you then I would have to hate myself and I’m over that now.”

“Good.”

“I think we’re getting ready to hit the ground.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

“I hope it doesn’t hurt.”

“Wait, we just... Yeah, we’ve stopped.”

“Are we on the ground?”

“I think we’re on a leaf.”

“A leaf. Like in a tree or something?”

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“Oh, that could be kind of nice.”

“I feel strange again.”

“I think we’re returning to normal... or as normal as we were.”

“I wonder where we are.”

“I don’t know, clouds travel pretty fast.”

“We could be anywhere.”

“Anywhere at all.”

“Oh, look, it’s a forest. You know what that means?”

“What?”

“Now we just need to find the gingerbread house.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Hansel and Gretel in the Forest

I watched Gretel take form in front of me. I didn't think the sight of her would ever cease to amaze me. She had a presence and it was invigorating to watch that presence actually form itself from nothing, drawing me even further into it.

First, she was simply a raindrop and I watched her expand, her pale skin painted over the clear water, a simple t-shirt and loose blue jeans forming over her flesh. I didn't think it would be possible to look at her and not want her. There was something free and wild and absolutely stunning about her.

Her eyes sparkled and she smiled, two dimples forming below the corner of one side of her mouth. I went to her and kissed her because kissing her was breathing in life. It was something I had to have.

"We're in the forest," she said.

"That we are."

Simple observations. Inevitable observations.

We stood on a narrow dirt path in a dense forest. Overhead, what I could see of the sky was a deep and unreal blue.

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Immense trees towered around us. The trees were something that seemed more fitting in Grimm than in Grayson. The forest was thick with fragrance. It was an old fragrance, reaching back to the beginning of time. A dark woody smell. Maybe some ancient mold or mildew but not entirely displeasing.

“What do we do now?” Gretel asked.

“I guess we walk.”

“To the gingerbread house.”

“You don’t know there has to be a gingerbread house.”

“No, there has to be a gingerbread house and I bet there’s a witch in it too. Probably my grandmother. She’s going to fatten us up and coax us into the oven. Just you wait and see.”

“I don’t think anything like that is going to happen.”

“Which way do we go?”

I turned around and said, “I think we should go this way.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

So we started walking along the trail, getting lost in our conversations again. We walked side by side, holding hands. It was quite pleasant. I didn’t mind having no idea where we were or where we were going. The important thing was that we keep walking. I didn’t know whose dreamland we were in right now. I didn’t think it was mine and I didn’t think it was hers and that was why we kept walking, I think, to find out whose it was.

Eventually, painfully, we stumbled into a nest of bear traps. They snapped up around us, catching our legs and filling us with pain. Except it wasn’t really that painful. It was like dream pain. It was kind of there but it didn’t really hurt. It was more like it filled me with the idea of hurt. I looked down

at the two monstrous bear traps on my legs. Stunned. They hadn't even taken me down to the ground.

"Damn," I said. "Bear traps."

"This isn't good," Gretel winced, staring in wonder down her legs at the two gleaming steel traps that had seized them. "They're so heavy. I don't think I can walk with these things on my legs."

"Maybe I can get them off."

I crouched down in front of her and tried to pry the bear trap on her right leg off. It was grisly. The flesh was mangled, blood ran down her feet, but she didn't seem to be in any pain either, just the discomfort caused by the heaviness of the traps. I quickly realized getting the traps off would be impossible.

"This isn't working," I said. "Here, let me give you a piggyback ride."

"I don't think you can handle that and the bear traps."

"No, I'll be okay."

"All right." She hopped onto my back.

This created an unnecessary pall over our quiet day in the woods. This had, by far, been the most uncomfortable day I had spent since being back at home but, with Gretel there, on my back, it didn't seem that bad at all.

"I bet this is my grandmother's doing."

"Why do you think that?"

"*Evil*," she hissed. "I told you she was evil."

"But how would she have the foresight to set out these bear traps on this particular trail when neither you nor I knew we were going to be here? I don't even have any idea where we are. Do you?"

"No, but I'm thinking it's one of my grandmother's dreamlands. Or maybe more like a nightmare land. She was

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always threatening me with bear traps. She would tell me that, one day, while I was out running, I was going to step in a bear trap.”

“She never liked the running, huh?”

“No, not very much. It disturbed her. It embarrassed her, I think.”

“That’s silly.”

“She’s a silly person.”

I continued walking, carrying her on my back.

Eventually, we came to a house. It didn’t look like it was made of gingerbread but it was a creepy forest cottage, anyway. I knew we should go inside and ask for help but there was something else that scared me about the house. Like maybe there *was* a witch who lived inside. No, I knew that was ridiculous. Witches didn’t live in spooky cottages in the middle of the forest. That was too clichéd.

“Should we go in,” I asked Gretel.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice. If all else fails, I can summon the hot air balloon and it can take us somewhere else.”

“Really, you can just get the hot air balloon to come whenever you want to?”

“It’s just as easy as thinking about it coming and then there it is, floating along in the sky.”

“That’s amazing.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think it into existence.”

“Well, maybe we can go in and find some towels to stop the bleeding at least.”

“Or maybe there’s a magical bear trap remover.”

“Or maybe this is the house of the person who set the bear traps and they’re just waiting for us to stagger there for help?”

Andersen Prunty

“Maybe.”

“I hope not.”

“Me too.”

I approached the cottage and reached out a weary hand
to knock on the door.

Chapter Twenty-four

The Cottage

I knocked on the door and we stood together there on the gnarled stoop, waiting.

No one answered.

I knocked again.

I waited for the door to swing open. If this happened, I think I would have been somewhat disappointed to see anything other than a wrinkled old witch standing there.

But it didn't happen. No one was home.

I turned my head and whispered to Gretel, "Maybe we should just go in. Maybe they have a phone or something."

"Sounds like an okay idea."

I twisted the doorknob, expecting it to be locked. It wasn't. Anyone who lived this far out in the woods probably didn't feel any great need to keep their doors locked.

The cottage was very dark on the inside. It had windows but they were very small and the trees eliminated all but the most atmospheric of lighting. The cottage consisted mainly of a large living room that looked like it also served as the dining room. There didn't seem to be any modern amenities in

the cottage. I found a large couch and placed Gretel on it. The bear traps were getting quite heavy on my feet. I continued to wander around the small cottage, looking for a phone. It didn't take me long to realize they didn't have one. I didn't even see an electrical outlet and I didn't recall seeing any telephone or utility poles outside.

"I don't see a phone. What are we supposed to do? Couldn't you imagine a bear trap remover?"

"I don't know what we're supposed to do. I'm sure I could imagine something to remove them with but maybe they're here for a reason. Maybe you should just come over here and sit down. Those bear traps have to be hurting your legs."

"Yeah, they are. But I don't think we can just stay here."

"I think I could stay here forever."

"What about blood loss? We have to be losing a tremendous amount of blood."

"We've done all we can do. Come and sit down."

I went over to the couch and sat down.

It wasn't long before I forgot all about the bear traps. We engaged in lazy conversation. We sat on the couch, our heads resting together, and talked about what we had seen and all the things we wanted to see.

Eventually, someone came home. I was a bit alarmed and put off by the rattling of the front door. At first, I actually thought someone was invading our privacy until I remembered it wasn't our house and it was most likely the owner returning home from work or whatever. Then I wondered exactly what a person living in a place like this actually did. I imagined they would be like a lumberjack or something. That is, if they weren't a practicing witch or warlock.

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I was amazed to see Dr. Blast enter the cottage wearing a giant brown fur coat, brown fur boots, and nothing else. And there was somebody else I was equally surprised to see.

“Grandma!” Gretel cried. “How could you have burned down the house?”

Gretel’s grandmother wore a pair of leather chaps and was otherwise naked save for two smiley face stickers over her nipples. She was very thin and wrinkly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that, dear,” she said. “I was very confused. Thankfully, I’ve found help.”

“But it was just this morning,” Gretel said.

“Well, maybe, strictly speaking, it was this morning. But, really, it was the culmination of a lifetime. See, I have wrestled with the demons in my head all my life and didn’t think I would ever find a way to exorcise them. Luckily, I found Dr. Blast in a cardboard box as I was leaving Grayson. Now, not only have I found the answer to all of my mental health concerns, I think I have found the love of my lifetime. I understand much more now, that’s for sure.”

“Is this true, Dr. Blast?” I asked.

“I think you know it is.”

“Then I’m confused.”

“Why are you confused?”

“Why are you here?”

“Oh, yes, I was going to tell you about that...”

“Do you live here?”

“No, don’t be preposterous. A witch lives here, of course. A very mean, evil witch. I think she eats kids or something but, don’t worry, she’s away. Where was I? Oh, yes, I have come to find out if you have found happiness.”

“Yes, I have found unmatched happiness. The only things that now make me unhappy are these bear traps I have

on my ankles.”

“Yeah, sorry, there’s not really anything I can do about those. But, other than that, you’re good?”

“I’m good.”

“Great. And what about the cute little lady there? Do you need any therapy?”

“No, I think I’m good.”

“Well then, Hansel, I think I’ve done just about all I can for you. I just wanted to give you the bill for your therapy.”

“My mother’s paying for it.”

“Ah, then I might actually get it,” he said. “Well, you kids be happy. Take care. We’re going on a vacation. As you can see, you only have one more stumbling block. I will let you figure that out all by yourself.”

“Okay.”

Gretel said to her grandmother, “Bye Grandma.”

“Oh, I’ll be back, dear. And we’ll build a new house. I promise. A better house. In the new part of town.”

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary. I’m going to get out on my own.”

“Well, I admire your determination. Life is going to be hard with those bear traps on your ankles but, if anybody can do it, you can. I’ll see you later.”

They left with Dr. Blast pulling Gretel’s grandmother in some kind of cart waiting outside the door.

Gretel and I continued to sit on the couch, our heads together.

“Something is going to change soon,” she said. “More than it has ever changed for me in the past.”

“Is it a good change or a bad change?”

“It’s a good change,” she said. “The best change there has ever been, I think.”

Chapter Twenty-five

The Day is Saved

After a while we passed out due to all the blood loss. The walls went all swimmy and then there was nothing except for Gretel's constant and deep breathing and that, in its own way, seemed to be enough.

Later, I awoke to a loud clamor.

I had trouble focusing and was very confused. It sounded like someone had knocked over a stack of metal pots and pans.

I heard a voice say, "No, not that way, idiot!" The voice was whispered but it was still harsh. And vaguely familiar.

"Wake up!" the voice said.

I tried to wake up, I think I *was* awake, but my eyes didn't want to focus.

I muttered something, glanced over at Gretel to see if she was conscious. She was, staring forward with open-mouthed dismay. I was able to focus again and turned to look at what she saw.

Standing before us were The Commander and The Fixer.

Dad looked much as I remembered him; balding, with what hair he had a gleaming white. He had put on a little weight and was dressed in his superhero costume, consisting of black goggles and a skintight camouflage body suit with an obscene red codpiece. I didn't know why it was a prerequisite that all superheroes wear skintight clothing. I found the whole get-up disturbing. Next to him stood Zasper, dressed very much like Zorro, except his outfit was also skintight.

"We're here to save you," Dad said.

"Thanks," I said.

"But you can't tell anyone. We can't be accused of elitism or nepotism or whatever. Someone might be dying right now simply because we have chosen to save you."

"I understand. Oh, Gretel, this is my father and my brother, Zasper."

My father shushed me. "No, no, honey, we are The Commander and The Fixer."

"Okay," she mumbled.

My father bent down to her ankles and pried the bear traps off with ease and then did the same to me. Once the bear traps came off, it was obvious how violently mangled our legs actually were. But this was not a problem. Zasper, The Fixer, bent down and moved his hands over Gretel's legs. The blood withdrew back into her body. Even the blood that had run onto the floor quickly snaked back into the skin. And then the rips and tears in the flesh drew together and both of her ankles looked as good as new.

"Wow, that's pretty good," I said. "I'm glad you discovered your talent."

"It's been a big help to The Commander."

"I knew it would be."

Then he did the same thing to my ankles.

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“Well,” Father said. “You guys are free to go anywhere you want to now. I would leave soon though. This place gets kind of strange after dark.”

“Yes, we will.”

“I hope you have a good life, Hansel,” Father said. “It was nice to see you again.”

“It was nice to see you too. I can’t believe you actually became a superhero.”

He shook his head slowly. “Me either,” he said. “I guess it was a calling.”

“I guess so.”

I stood up to test my new ankles and give him a hug.

Gretel and I walked The Commander and The Fixer to the door where they got on giant black horses that flew into the sunset.

They left a pony behind. I assumed this was for us. It was probably something The Commander neglected to tell us about. His memory was never very good. Well, he had said we could go anywhere and I had something I wanted to show Gretel.

“Shall we go?” I asked.

“Anywhere you want,” she said, and smiled. I bent down to kiss her, pulling her close to me, happy to be rid of the bear traps.

We hopped on the pony and started to ride.

The Commander was right. The woods *were* strange after dark.

Chapter Twenty-six

A Good Fire

So we sat on ponyback, the two of us. I was in front, grabbing the pony by the mane, careful not to tug too hard on it. Gretel was behind me, her body pressed against mine. I heard her breathing as the pony trotted along. I enjoyed all of it, even the bizarre strangeness of the woods after dark.

Because, even though it was after dark, it didn't really feel that way. The sky swirled with all kinds of colors—orange and purple and black and white and red. It was snowing but the leaves were still on the trees and it didn't feel that cold. I had forgotten to ask where the woods were located. I didn't know if we were close to Grayson or if we were headed back into Grayson or, really, where the hell Grayson was.

I decided the best thing to do would be to let the horse run freely, going wherever it pleased. I was not at all disappointed at the speed with which the pony chose to travel. It raged along, going faster and faster, faster than any car I had ever been in. There was something terrifying and exhilarating about it.

Gretel gripped tighter, something I didn't mind at all,

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as the pony sped up, darting this way and that to avoid some mammoth tree, forging a path that was all its own. I knew it would take us to a safe place. I knew it would take us exactly where we wanted to be.

Within minutes we were out of the woods but things were not any less strange.

We were at the edge of Grayson.

The rain had returned, pouring down much like it was the first night I saw Gretel. And it was chilly.

The pony vanished. Our clothes vanished. And we ran along in the night. Just like before, except this time, Gretel followed me.

I felt the asphalt under my feet as I sped along the road and I didn't think it felt at all the way asphalt was supposed to feel.

Things disintegrated around us as we ran along. They were not disintegrating so much as they were melting. It was like watching everything I had known about Grayson, all the landmarks and buildings I was familiar with, being reduced to nothing. I knew it didn't mean anything. All this confusion. All this collapsing. It meant nothing because Gretel charged right along behind me and I felt this amazing warmth below my skin, spreading through my body, catching it on fire. But it was a good fire. It was something that raged within me. It felt like my soul was coming back to life and this fire was burning off some shell erected there to keep the whole sick world at bay.

Yes, things were going to be a lot better now. I knew they would be. Suddenly, running along the road, I had this feeling that I wanted everyone I had ever known to be running along right there with us. I wanted this because I wanted them to see how happy I was and I think I even wished that

some of that happiness would rub off on them.

But I lost something along that run, too. I lost my adulthood. That is, I lost all the bad feelings and hatred and bitterness I had accumulated since leaving childhood. I was back in that sunfilled Saturday morning, faced with a weekend of friends, school left behind and still an eternity away. And I wasn't alone in this feeling. I had someone to share it with because I knew that, even if I didn't say anything about this feeling, Gretel would know about it. She would know about all the things I was feeling whether I talked about them or not. I didn't even think we would need to talk. If we talked it would be to make conversation or maybe simply to hear the other person's voice.

I longed to hear that sweet little giggle for the rest of my life! I longed to feel her soft hand in mine as I looked at her smile and tried to follow the dancing green light of her eyes!

Yes! This was it!

And we charged on toward the house. It loomed in front of us but something else floated behind it. Some other place that had never felt any sadness. Something that had been built for a child.

Gretel followed me into the marshy backyard, sloshing over the wet ground and onto the elevator.

I pulled her close to me, the rain still beating down. I wrapped my arms around her and felt all of her warmth. I felt it on the inside as well as on my skin and I hit the 'up' button, wondering what would be at the top of the elevator as much as she probably was. I knew it would be different.

Everything would be different now.

Everything would be better.

Everything eternal.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andersen Prunty lives in Dayton, Ohio. His fiction has appeared in *Space and Time Magazine*, *The Dream People* and *Bust Down the Door and Eat All the Chickens*. He is also a recipient of The Harrow's Award for Short Fiction.

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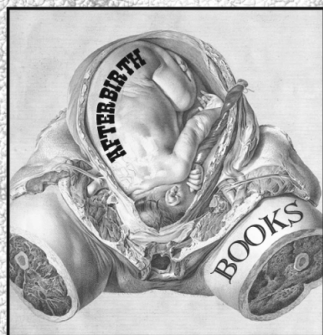
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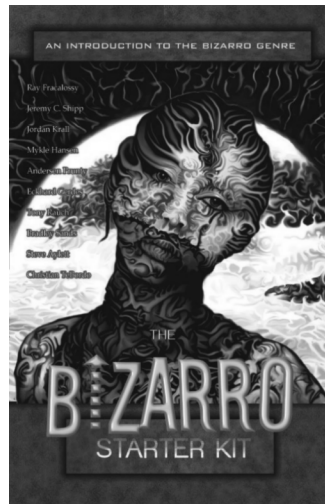


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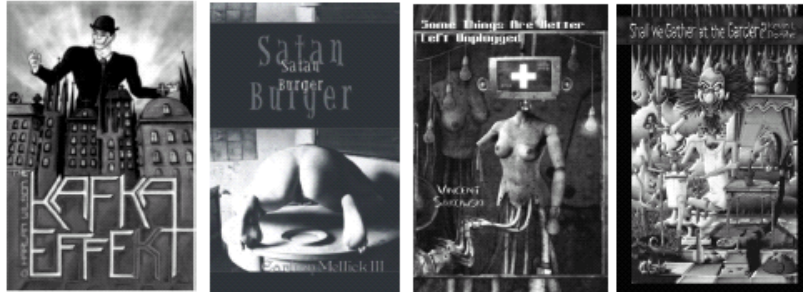
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BB-004 **“Shall We Gather At the Garden?”** Kevin L. Donihe - Donihe’s Debut novel. Midgets take over the world, The Church of Lionel Richie vs. The Church of the Byrds, plant porn and more! **244 pages \$14**



BB-005 **“Razor Wire Pubic Hair”** Carlton Mellick III - A genderless humandildo is purchased by a razor dominatrix and brought into her nightmarish world of bizarre sex and mutilation. **176 pages \$11**

BB-006 **“Stranger on the Loose”** D. Harlan Wilson - The fiction of Wilson’s 2nd collection is planted in the soil of normalcy, but what grows out of that soil is a dark, witty, otherworldly jungle... **228 pages \$14**

BB-007 **“The Baby Jesus Butt Plug”** Carlton Mellick III - Using clones of the Baby Jesus for anal sex will be the hip sex fetish of the future. **92 pages \$10**

BB-008 **“Fishyfleshed”** Carlton Mellick III - The world of the past is an illogical flatland lacking in dimension and color, a sick-scape of crispy squid people wandering the desert for no apparent reason. **260 pages \$14**

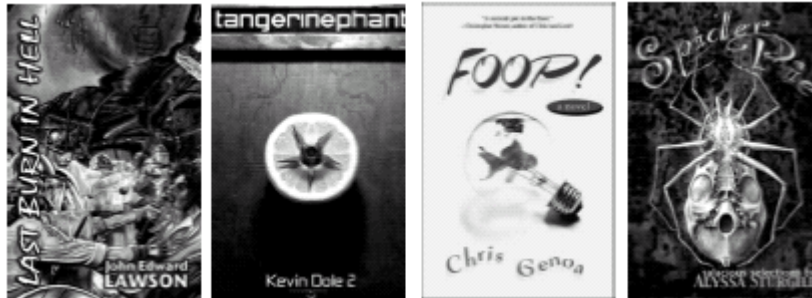


BB-009 **“Dead Bitch Army”** Andre Duza - Step into a world filled with racist teenagers, cannibals, 100 warped Uncle Sams, automobiles with razor-sharp teeth, living graffiti, and a pissed-off zombie bitch out for revenge. **344 pages \$16**

BB-010 **“The Menstruating Mall”** Carlton Mellick III *“The Breakfast Club meets Chopping Mall as directed by David Lynch.”* - Brian Keene **212 pages \$12**

BB-011 **“Angel Dust Apocalypse”** Jeremy Robert Johnson - Meth-heads, man-made monsters, and murderous Neo-Nazis. “Seriously amazing short stories...” - Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club* **184 pages \$11**

BB-012 **“Ocean of Lard”** Kevin L Donihe / Carlton Mellick III - A parody of those old Choose Your Own Adventure kid’s books about some very odd pirates sailing on a sea made of animal fat. **176 pages \$12**



BB-013 **“Last Burn in Hell”** John Edward Lawson - From his lurid angst-affair with a lesbian music diva to his ascendance as unlikely pop icon the one constant for Kenrick Brimley, official state prison gigolo, is he's got no clue what he's doing. **172 pages \$14**

BB-014 **“Tangerinephant”** Kevin Dole 2 - TV-obsessed aliens have abducted Michael Tangerinephant in this bizarro combination of science fiction, satire, and surrealism. **164 pages \$11**

BB-015 **“Foop!”** Chris Genoa - Strange happenings are going on at Dactyl, Inc, the world's first and only time travel tourism company. “A surreal pie in the face!” - Christopher Moore **300 pages \$14**

BB-016 **“Spider Pie”** Alyssa Sturgill - A one-way trip down a rabbit hole inhabited by sexual deviants and friendly monsters, fairytale beginnings and hideous endings. **104 pages \$11**



BB-017 **“The Unauthorized Woman” Efram Emerson** - Enter the world of the inner freak, a landscape populated by the pre-dead and morticians, by cockroaches and 300-lb robots. **104 pages \$11**

BB-018 **“Fugue XXIX” Forrest Aguirre** - Tales from the fringe of speculative literary fiction where innovative minds dream up the future's uncharted territories while mining forgotten treasures of the past. **220 pages \$16**

BB-019 **“Pocket Full of Loose Razorblades” John Edward Lawson** - A collection of dark bizarro stories. From a giant rectum to a foot-fungus factory to a girl with a biforked tongue. **190 pages \$13**

BB-020 **“Punk Land” Carlton Mellick III** - In the punk version of Heaven, the anarchist utopia is threatened by corporate fascism and only Goblin, Mortician's sperm, and a blue-mohawked female assassin named Shark Girl can stop them. **284 pages \$15**



BB-021 **“Pseudo-City” D. Harlan Wilson** - Pseudo-City exposes what waits in the bathroom stall, under the manhole cover and in the corporate boardroom, all in a way that can only be described as mind-bogglingly unreal. **220 pages \$16**

BB-022 **“Kafka’s Uncle and Other Strange Tales” Bruce Taylor** - Anslent and his giant tarantula (tormentor? fri-end?) wander a desecrated world in this novel and collection of stories from Mr. Magic Realism Himself. **348 pages \$17**

BB-023 **“Sex and Death In Television Town” Carlton Mellick III** - In the old west, a gang of hermaphrodite gunslingers take refuge from a demon plague in Telos: a town where its citizens have televisions instead of heads. **184 pages \$12**

BB-024 **“It Came From Below The Belt” Bradley Sands** - What can Grover Goldstein do when his severed, sentient penis forces him to return to high school and help it win the presidential election? **204 pages \$13**

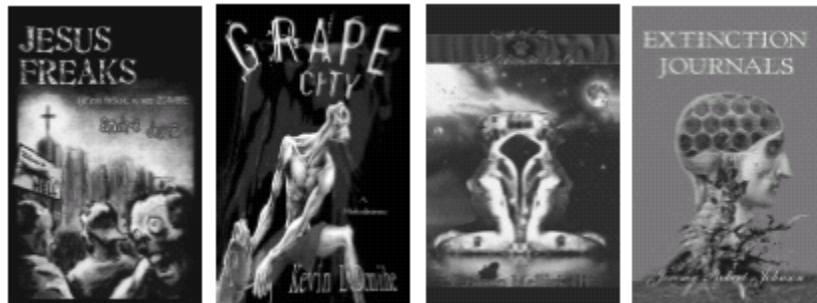


BB-025 **“Sick: An Anthology of Illness”** John Lawson, editor - These Sick stories are horrendous and hilarious dissections of creative minds on the scalpel's edge. **296 pages \$16**

BB-026 **“Tempting Disaster”** John Lawson, editor - A shocking and alluring anthology from the fringe that examines our culture's obsession with taboos. **260 pages \$16**

BB-027 **“Siren Promised”** Jeremy Robert Johnson - Nominated for the Bram Stoker Award. A potent mix of bad drugs, bad dreams, brutal bad guys, and surreal/incredible art by Alan M. Clark. **190 pages \$13**

BB-028 **“Chemical Gardens”** Gina Ranalli - Ro and punk band *Green is the Enemy* find Kreepkins, a surfer-dude warlock, a vengeful demon, and a Metal Priestess in their way as they try to escape an underground nightmare. **188 pages \$13**



BB-029 **“Jesus Freaks”** Andre Duza - For God so loved the world that he gave his only two begotten sons... and a few million zombies. **400 pages \$16**

BB-030 **“Grape City”** Kevin L. Donihe - More Donihe-style comedic bizarro about a demon named Charles who is forced to work a minimum wage job on Earth after Hell goes out of business. **108 pages \$10**

BB-031 **“Sea of the Patchwork Cats”** Carlton Mellick III - A quiet dreamlike tale set in the ashes of the human race. For Mellick enthusiasts who also adore *The Twilight Zone*. **112 pages \$10**

BB-032 **“Extinction Journals”** Jeremy Robert Johnson - An uncanny voyage across a newly nuclear America where one man must confront the problems associated with loneliness, insane diets, radiation, love, and an ever-evolving cockroach suit with a mind of its own. **104 pages \$10**



BB-033 **“Meat Puppet Cabaret”** Steve Beard At last! The secret connection between Jack the Ripper and Princess Diana's death revealed! **240 pages \$16 / \$30**

BB-034 **“The Greatest Fucking Moment in Sports”** Kevin L. Donihe - In the tradition of the surreal anti-sitcom *Get A Life* comes a tale of triumph and agape love from the master of comedic bizarre. **108 pages \$10**

BB-035 **“The Troublesome Amputee”** John Edward Lawson - Disturbing verse from a man who truly believes nothing is sacred and intends to prove it. **104 pages \$9**

BB-036 **“Deity”** Vic Mudd God (who doesn't like to be called “God”) comes down to a typical, suburban, Ohio family for a little vacation—but it doesn't turn out to be as relaxing as He had hoped it would be... **168 pages \$12**

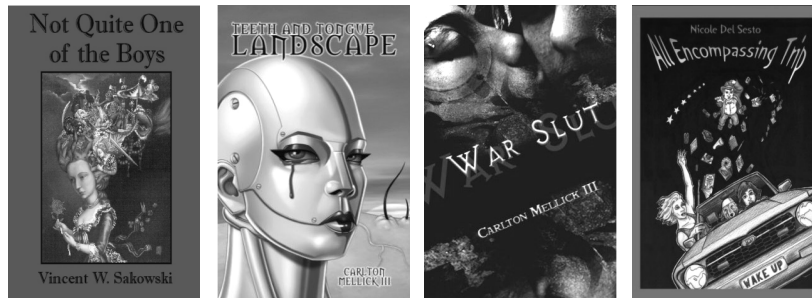


BB-037 **“The Haunted Vagina”** Carlton Mellick III - It's difficult to love a woman whose vagina is a gateway to the world of the dead. **132 pages \$10**

BB-038 **“Tales from the Vinegar Wasteland”** Ray Fracalossi - Witness: a man is slowly losing his face, a neighbor who periodically screams out for no apparent reason, and a house with a room that doesn't actually exist. **240 pages \$14**

BB-039 **“Suicide Girls in the Afterlife”** Gina Ranalli - After Pogue commits suicide, she unexpectedly finds herself an unwilling “guest” at a hotel in the Afterlife, where she meets a group of bizarre characters, including a goth Satan, a hippie Jesus, and an alien-human hybrid. **100 pages \$9**

BB-040 **“And Your Point Is?”** Steve Aylett - In this follow-up to LINT multiple authors provide critical commentary and essays about Jeff Lint's mind-bending literature. **104 pages \$11**

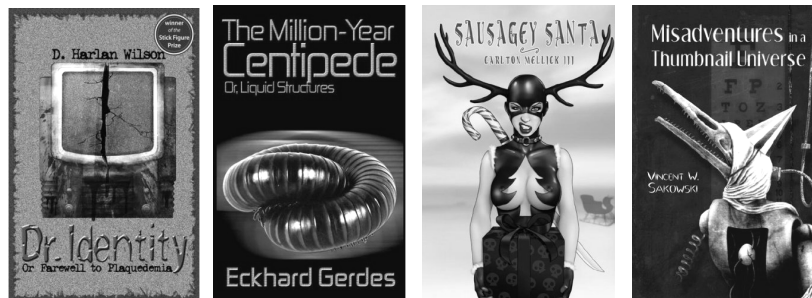


BB-041 **“Not Quite One of the Boys”** Vincent Sakowski -While drug-dealer Maxi drinks with Dante in purgatory, God and Satan play a little tri-level chess and do a little bargaining over his business partner, Vinnie, who is still left on earth. **220 pages \$14**

BB-042 **“Teeth and Tongue Landscape”** Carlton Mellick III - On a planet made out of meat, a socially-obsessive monophobic man tries to find his place amongst the strange creatures and communities that he comes across. **110 pages \$10**

BB-043 **“War Slut”** Carlton Mellick III - Part “1984,” part “Waiting for Godot,” and part action horror video game adaptation of John Carpenter’s “The Thing.” **116 pages \$10**

BB-044 **“All Encompassing Trip”** Nicole Del Sesto -In a world where coffee is no longer available, the only television shows are reality TV re-runs, and the animals are talking back, Nikki, Amber and a singing Coyote in a do-rag are out to restore the light **308 pages \$15**

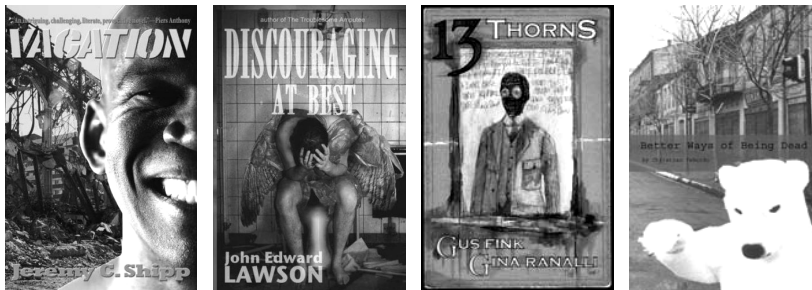


BB-045 **“Dr. Identity”** D. Harlan Wilson - Follow the Dystopian Duo on a killing spree of epic proportions through the irreal postcapitalist city of Bliptown where time ticks sideways, artificial Bug-Eyed Monsters punish citizens for consumer-capitalist lethargy, and ultraviolence is as essential as a daily multivitamin. **208 pages \$15**

BB-046 **“The Million-Year Centipede”** Eckhard Gerdes -Wakelin, frontman for ‘The Hinge,’ wrote a poem so prophetic that to ignore it dooms a person to drown in blood. **130 pages \$12**

BB-047 **“Sausagey Santa”** Carlton Mellick III - A bizarro Christmas tale featuring Santa as a piratey mutant with a body made of sausages. **124 pages \$10**

BB-048 **“Misadventures in a Thumbnail Universe”** Vincent Sakowski - Dive deep into the surreal and satirical realms of neo-classical Blender Fiction, filled with television shoes and flesh-filled skies. **120 pages \$10**



BB-049 **“Vacation”** **Jeremy C. Shipp** - Blueblood Bernard Johnson leaved his boring life behind to go on The Vacation, a year-long corporate sponsored odyssey. But instead of seeing the world, Bernard is captured by terrorists, becomes a key figure in secret drug wars, and, worse, doesn't once miss his secure American Dream. **160 pages \$14**

BB-050 **“Discouraging at Best”** **John Edward Lawson** - A collection where the absurdity of the mundane expands exponentially creating a tidal wave that sweeps reason away. For those who enjoy satire, bizarro, or a good old-fashioned slap to the senses. **208 pages \$15**

BB-051 **“13 Thorns”** **Gina Ranalli** - Thirteen tales of twisted, bizarro horror. **240 pages \$13**

BB-052 **“Better Ways of Being Dead”** **Christian TeBordo** - In this class, the students have to keep one palm down on the table at all times, and listen to lectures about a panda who speaks Chinese. **216 pages \$14**



BB-053 **“Ballad of a Slow Poisoner”** **Andrew Goldfarb** Millford Mutterwurst sat down on a Tuesday to take his afternoon tea, and made the unpleasant discovery that his elbows were becoming flatter. **128 pages \$10**

BB-054 **“Wall of Kiss”** **Gina Ranalli** A woman...A wall... Sometimes love blooms in the strangest of places. **108 pages \$9**

BB-055 **“HELP! A Bear is Eating Me”** **Mykle Hansen** The bizarro, heartwarming, magical tale of poor planning, hubris and severe blood loss... **150 pages \$11**

BB-056 **“Piecemeal June”** **Jordan Krall** A man falls in love with a living sex doll, but with love comes danger when her creator comes after her with crab-squid assassins. **90 pages \$9**



BB-057 **“Laredo”** Tony Rauch Dreamlike, surreal stories by Tony Rauch. **180 pages \$12**

BB-058 **“The Overwhelming Urge”** Andersen Prunty A collection of bizarro tales by Andersen Prunty. **150 pages \$11**

BB-059 **“Adolf in Wonderland”** Carlton Mellick III A dreamlike adventure that takes a young descendant of Adolf Hitler's design and sends him down the rabbit hole into a world of imperfection and disorder. **180 pages \$11**

BB-060 **“Super Cell Anemia”** Duncan B. Barlow "Unrelentingly bizarre and mysterious, unsettling in all the right ways..." - Brian Evenson. **180 pages \$12**



BB-061 **“Ultra Fuckers”** Carlton Mellick III Absurdist suburban horror about a couple who enter an upper middle class gated community but can't find their way out. **108 pages \$9**

BB-062 **“House of Houses”** Kevin L. Donihe An odd man wants to marry his house. Unfortunately, all of the houses in the world collapse at the same time in the Great House Holocaust. Now he must travel to House Heaven to find his departed fiancée. **172 pages \$11**

BB-063 **“Necro Sex Machine”** Andre Duza 400 pages he The Dead Bitch returns in this follow-up to the bizarro zombie epic Dead Bitch Army. **\$16**

BB-063 **“Squid Pulp Blues”** Jordan Krall 204 pages In these three bizarro-noir novellas, the reader is thrown into a world of murderers, drugs made from squid parts, deformed gun-toting veterans, and a mischievous apocalyptic donkey. **\$13**

COMING SOON

“Cocoon of Terror” by Jason Earls

“Jack and Mr. Grin” by Andersen Prunty

“Macho Poni” by Lotus Rose

“Shark Hunting in Paradise Garden” by Cameron Pierce

“The Rampaging Fuckers of Everything on the Shitting
Planet of the Vomit Atmosphere” by Mykle Hansen

“Apehit” by Carlton Mellick III

