

Black house chapter fifteen

Life



15

BY EVENING, the temperature has dropped fifteen degrees as a minor cold front pushes through our little patch of the Coulee Country. There are no thunderstorms, but as the sky tinges toward violet, the fog arrives. It's born out of the river and rises up the inclined ramp of Chase Street, first obscuring the gutters, then the sidewalks, then blurring the buildings themselves. It cannot completely hide them, as the fogs of spring and winter sometimes do, but the blurring is somehow worse: it steals colors and softens shapes. The fog makes the ordinary look alien. And there's the smell, the ancient, seagully odor that works deep into your nose and awakens the back part of your brain, the part that is perfectly capable of believing in monsters when the sight lines shorten and the heart is uneasy.

On Sumner Street, Debbi Anderson is still working dispatch. Arnold "the Mad Hungarian" Hrabowski has been sent home without his badge ?? in fact, suspended ?? and feels he must ask his wife a few pointed questions (his belief that he already knows the answers makes him even more heartsick). Debbi is now standing at the window, a cup of coffee in her hand and a puckery little frown on her face.

"Don't like this," she says to Bobby Dulac, who is glumly and silently writing reports. "It reminds me of the Hammer pictures I used to watch on TV back when I was in junior high."

"Hammer pictures?" Bobby asks, looking up.

" Horror pictures," she says, looking out into the deepening fog. " A lot of them were about Dracula. Also Jack the Ripper."

" I don't want to hear nothing about Jack the Ripper," Bobby says. " You mind me, Debster." And resumes writing.

In the parking lot of the 7-Eleven, Mr. Rajan Patel stands beside his telephone (still crisscrossed by yellow police tape, and when it will be all right again for using, this Mr. Patel could not be telling us). He looks toward downtown, which now seems to rise from a vast bowl of cream. The buildings on Chase Street descend into this bowl. Those at Chase's lowest point are visible only from the second story up.

" If he is down there," Mr. Patel says softly, and to no one but himself, " tonight he will be doing whatever he wants."

He crosses his arms over his chest and shivers.

Dale Gilbertson is at home, for a wonder. He plans to have a sit-down dinner with his wife and child even if the world ends because of it. He comes out of his den (where he has spent twenty minutes talking with WSP officer Jeff Black, a conversation in which he has had to exercise all his discipline to keep from shouting), and sees his wife standing at the window and looking out. Her posture is almost exactly the same as Debbi Anderson's, only she's got a glass of wine in her hand instead of a cup of coffee. The puckery little frown is identical.

" River fog," Sarah says dismally. " Isn't that ducky. If he's out there ?? "

Dale points at her. " Don't say it. Don't even think it."

But he knows that neither of them can help thinking about it. The streets of French Landing ?? the foggy streets of French Landing ?? will be deserted right now: no one shopping in the stores, no one idling along the sidewalks, no one in the parks. Especially no children. The parents will be keeping them in. Even on Nailhouse Row, where good parenting is the exception rather than the rule, the parents will be keeping their kids inside.

" I won't say it," she allows. " That much I can do."

" What's for dinner?"

" How does chicken pot pie sound?"

Ordinarily such a hot dish on a July evening would strike him as an awful choice, but tonight, with the fog coming in, it sounds like just the thing. He steps up behind her, gives her a brief squeeze, and says, " Great. And earlier would be better."

She turns, disappointed. " Going back in?"

" I shouldn't have to, not with Brown and Black rolling the ball ?? "

" Those pricks," she says. " I never liked them."

Dale smiles. He knows that the former Sarah Asbury has never cared much for the way he earns his living, and this makes her furiousloyaltyall the more touching. And tonight it feels vital, as well. It's been the most painful day of hiscareerin law enforcement, ending with the suspension of Arnold

Hrabowski. Arnie, Dale knows, believes he will be back on duty before long. And the shitty truth is that Arnie may be right. Based on the way things are going, Dale may need even such an exquisite example of ineptitude as the Mad Hungarian.

" Anyway, I shouldn't have to go back in, but . . ."

" You have a feeling."

" I do."

" Good or bad?" She has come to respect her husband's intuitions, not in the least because of Dale's intense desire to see Jack Sawyer settled close enough to reach with seven keystrokes instead of eleven. Tonight that looks to her like ?? pardon the pun ?? a pretty good call.

" Both," Dale says, and then, without explaining or giving Sarah a chance to question further: " Where's Dave?"

" At the kitchen table with his crayons."

At six, young David Gilbertson is enjoying a violent love affair with Crayolas, has gone through two boxes since school let out. Dale and Sarah's strong hope, expressed even to each other only at night, lying side by side before sleep, is that they may be raising a real artist. The next Norman Rockwell, Sarah said once. Dale ?? who helped Jack Sawyer hang his strange and wonderful pictures ?? has higher hopes for the boy. Too high to express, really, even in the marriage bed after the lights are out.

With his own glass of wine in hand, Dale ambles out to the kitchen. " What you drawing, Dave? What ?? "

He stops. The crayons have been abandoned. The picture ?? a half-finished drawing of what might be either a flying saucer or perhaps just a round coffee table ?? has also been abandoned.

The back door is open.

Looking out at the whiteness that hides David's swing and jungle gym, Dale feels a terrible fear leap up his throat, choking him. All at once he can smell Irma Freneau again, that terrible smell of raw spoiled meat. Any sense that his family lives in a protected, magic circle ?? it may happen to others, but it can never, never happen to us ?? is gone now. What has replaced it is stark certainty: David is gone. The Fisherman has enticed him out of the house and spirited him away into the fog. Dale can see the grin on the Fisherman's face. He can see the gloved hand ?? it's yellow ?? covering his son's mouth but not the bulging, terrified child's eyes.

Into the fog and out of the known world.

David.

He moves forward across the kitchen on legs that feel boneless as well as nerveless. He puts his wineglass down on the table, the stem landing a-tilt on a crayon, not noticing when it spills and covers David's half-finished drawing with something that looks horribly like venous blood. He's out the door, and although he means to yell, his voice comes out in a weak and almost strengthless sigh: " David? . . . Dave?"

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For a moment that seems to last a thousand years, there is nothing. Then he hears the soft thud of running feet on damp grass. Blue jeans and a red-striped rugby shirt materialize out of the thickening soup. A moment later he sees his son's dear, grinning face and mop of yellow hair.

"Dad! Daddy! I was swinging in the fog! It was like being in a cloud!" Dale snatches him up. There is a bad, blinding impulse to slap the kid across the face, to hurt him for scaring his father so. It passes as quickly as it came. He kisses David instead.

"I know," he says. "That must have been fun, but it's time to come in now."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because sometimes little boys get lost in the fog," he says, looking out into the white yard. He can see the patio table, but it is only a ghost; he wouldn't know what he was looking at if he hadn't seen it a thousand times. He kisses his son again. "Sometimes little boys get lost," he repeats.

Oh, we could check in with any number of friends, both old and new. Jack and Fred Marshall have returned from Arden (neither suggested stopping at Gertie's Kitchen in Centralia when they passed it), and both are now in their otherwise deserted houses. For the balance of the ride back to French Landing, Fred never once let go of his son's baseball cap, and he has a hand on it even now, as he eats a microwaved TV dinner in his too empty living room and watches Action News Five.

Tonight's news is mostly about Irma Freneau, of course. Fred picks up the remote when they switch from shaky-cam footage of Ed's Eats to a taped

report from the Holiday Trailer Park. The cameraman has focused on one shabby trailer in particular. A few flowers, brave but doomed, straggle in the dust by the stoop, which consists of three boards laid across two cement blocks. " Here, on the outskirts of French Landing, Irma Freneau's grieving mother is in seclusion," says the on-scene correspondent. " One can only imagine this single mother's feelings tonight." The reporter is prettier than Wendell Green but exudes much the same aura of glittering, unhealthy excitement.

Fred hits the OFF button on the remote and growls, " Why can't you leave the poor woman alone?" He looks down at his chipped beef on toast, but he has lost his appetite.

Slowly, he raises Tyler's hat and puts it on his own head. It doesn't fit, and Fred for a moment thinks of letting out the plastic band at the back. The idea shocks him. Suppose that was all it took to kill his son? That one simple, deadly modification? The idea strikes him as both ridiculous and utterly inarguable. He supposes that if this keeps up, he'll soon be as mad as his wife . . . or Sawyer. Trusting Sawyer is as crazy as thinking he might kill his son by changing the size of the boy's hat . . . and yet he believes in both things. He picks up his fork and begins to eat again, Ty's Brewers cap sitting on his head like Spanky's beanie in an old Our Gang one-reeler.

Beezer St. Pierre is sitting on his sofa in his underwear, a book open on his lap (it is, in fact, a book of William Blake's poems) but unread. Bear Girl's asleep in the other room, and he's fighting the urge to bop on down to the Sand Bar and score some crank, his old vice, untouched for going on five

years now. Since Amy died, he fights this urge every single day, and lately he wins only by reminding himself that he won't be able to find the Fisherman ?? and punish him as he deserves to be punished ?? if he's fucked up on devil dust.

Henry Leyden is in his studio with a huge pair of Akai headphones on his head, listening to Warren Vach?, John Bunch, and Phil Flanigan dreamboat their way through " I Remember April." He can smell the fog even through the walls, and to him it smells like the air at Ed's Eats. Like bad death, in other words. He's wondering how Jack made out in good old Ward D at French County Lutheran. And he's thinking about his wife, who lately (especially since the record hop at Maxton's, although he doesn't consciously realize this) seems closer than ever. And unquiet.

Yes indeed, all sorts of friends are available for our inspection, but at least one seems to have dropped out of sight. Charles Burnside isn't in the common room at Maxton's (where an old episode of Family Ties is currently running on the ancient color TV bolted to the wall), nor in the dining hall, where snacks are available in the early evening, nor in his own room, where the sheets are currently clean (but where the air still smells vaguely of old shit). What about the bathroom? Nope. Thorvald Thorvaldson has stopped in to have a pee and a handwash, but otherwise the place is empty. One oddity: there's a fuzzy slipper lying on its side in one of the stalls. With its bright black and yellow stripes, it looks like the corpse of a huge dead bumblebee. And yes, it's the stall second from the left. Burny's favorite.

Should we look for him? Maybe we should. Maybe not knowing exactly where that rascal is makes us uneasy. Let us slip through the fog, then, silent as a dream, down to lower Chase Street. Here is the Nelson Hotel, its ground floor now submerged in river fog, the ocher stripe marking high water of that ancient flood no more than a whisper of color in the fading light. On one side of it is Wisconsin Shoe, now closed for the day. On the other is Lucky's Tavern, where an old woman with bowlegs (her name is Bertha Van Dusen, if you care) is currently bent over with her hands planted on her large knees, yarking a bellyful of Kingsland Old-Time Lager into the gutter. She makes sounds like a bad driver grinding a manual transmission. In the doorway of the Nelson Hotel itself sits a patient old mongrel, who will wait until Bertha has gone back into the tavern, then slink over to eat the half-digested cocktail franks floating in the beer. From Lucky's comes the tired, twanging voice of the late Dick Curless, Ole Country One-Eye, singing about those Hainesville Woods, where there's a tombstone every mile.

The dog gives a single disinterested growl as we pass him and slip into the Nelson's lobby, where moth-eaten heads ?? a wolf, a bear, an elk, and an ancient half-bald bison with a single glass eye ?? look at empty sofas, empty chairs, the elevator that hasn't worked since 1994 or so, and the empty registration desk. (Morty Fine, the clerk, is in the office with his feet propped up on an empty file-cabinet drawer, reading People and picking his nose.)

The lobby of the Nelson Hotel always smells of the river ?? it's in the pores of the place ?? but this evening the smell is heavier than usual. It's a smell that makes us think of bad ideas, blown investments, forged checks, deteriorating health, stolen office supplies, unpaid alimony, empty promises,

skin tumors, lost ambition, abandoned sample cases filled with cheap novelties, dead hope, dead skin, and fallen arches. This is the kind of place you don't come to unless you've been here before and all your other options are pretty much foreclosed. It's a place where men who left their families two decades before now lie on narrow beds with pee-stained mattresses, coughing and smoking cigarettes. The scuzzy old lounge (where scuzzy old Hoover Dalrymple once held court and knocked heads most every Friday and Saturday night) has been closed by unanimous vote of the town council since early June, when Dale Gilbertson scandalized the local political elite by showing them a video of three traveling strippers who billed themselves as the Anal University Trio, performing a synchronized cucumber routine on the tiny stage (FLPD cameraman: Officer Tom Lund, let's give him a hand), but the Nelson's residents still have only to go next door to get a beer; it's convenient. You pay by the week at the Nelson. You can keep a hot plate in your room, but only by permission and after the cord has been inspected. You can die on a fixed income at the Nelson, and the last sound you hear could well be the creaking of bedsprings over your head as some other helpless old loser jacks off.

Let us rise up the first flight, past the old canvas firehose in its glass box. Turn right at the second-floor landing (past the pay phone with its yellowing OUT OF ORDER sign) and continue to rise. When we reach the third floor, the smell of river fog is joined by the smell of chicken soup warming on someone's hot plate (the cord duly approved either by Morty Fine or George Smith, the day manager).

The smell is coming from 307. If we slip through the keyhole (there have never been keycards at the Nelson and never will be), we'll be in the presence of Andrew Railsback, seventy, balding, scrawny, good-humored. He once sold vacuum cleaners for Electrolux and appliances for Sylvania, but those days are behind him now. These are his golden years.

A candidate for Maxton's, we might think, but Andy Railsback knows that place, and places like it. Not for him, thanks. He's sociable enough, but he doesn't want people telling him when to go to bed, when to get up, and when he can have a little nip of Early Times. He has friends in Maxton's, visits them often, and has from time to time met the sparkling, shallow, predatory eye of our pal Chipper. He has thought on more than one such occasion that Mr. Maxton looks like the sort of fellow who would happily turn the corpses of his graduates into soap if he thought he could turn a buck on it.

No, for Andy Railsback, the third floor of the Nelson Hotel is good enough. He has his hot plate; he has his bottle of hooch; he's got four packs of Bicycles and plays big-picture solitaire on nights when the sandman loses his way.

This evening he has made three Lipton Cup-A-Soups, thinking he'll invite Irving Throneberry in for a bowl and a chat. Maybe afterward they'll go next door to Lucky's and grab a beer. He checks the soup, sees it has attained a nice simmer, sniffs the fragrant steam, and nods. He also has saltines, which go well with soup. He leaves the room to make his way upstairs and knock on Irv's door, but what he sees in the hallway stops him cold.

It's an old man in a shapeless blue robe, walking away from him with suspicious quickness. Beneath the hem of the robe, the stranger's legs are

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as white as a carp's belly and marked with blue snarls of varicose veins. On his left foot is a fuzzy black-and-yellow slipper. His right foot is bare.

Although our new friend can't tell for sure ?? not with the guy's back to him ?? he doesn't look like anyone Andy knows.

Also, he's trying doorknobs as he wends his way along the main third-floor hall. He gives each one a single hard, quick shake. Like a turnkey. Or a thief. A fucking thief.

Yeah. Although the man is obviously old ?? older than Andy, it looks like ?? and dressed as if for bed, the idea of thievery resonates in Andy's mind with queer certainty. Even the one bare foot, arguing that the fellow probably didn't come in off the street, has no power over this strong intuition.

Andy opens his mouth to call out ?? something like Can I help you? or Looking for someone? ?? and then changes his mind. He just has this feeling about the guy. It has to do with the fleet way the stranger scurries along as he tries the knobs, but that's not all of it. Not all of it by any means. It's a feeling of darkness and danger. There are pockets in the geezer's robe, Andy can see them, and there might be a weapon in one of them. Thieves don't always have weapons, but . . .

The old guy turns the corner and is gone. Andy stands where he is, considering. If he had a phone in his room, he might call downstairs and alert Morty Fine, but he doesn't. So, what to do?

After a brief interior debate, he tiptoes down the hall to the corner and peeps around. Here is a cul-de-sac with three doors: 312, 313, and, at the very end,

314, the only room in that little appendix which is currently occupied. The man in 314 has been there since the spring, but almost all Andy knows about him is his name: George Potter. Andy has asked both Irv and Hoover Dalrymple about Potter, but Hoover doesn't know jack-shit and Irv has learned only a little more.

" You must," Andy objected ?? this conversation took place in late May or early June, around the time the Buckhead Lounge downstairs went dark. " I seen you in Lucky's with him, havin' a beer."

Irv had lifted one bushy eyebrow in that cynical way of his. " Seen me havin' a beer with him. What are you?" he'd rasped. " My fuckin' wife?"

" I'm just saying. You drink a beer with a man, you have a little conversation ?? "

" Usually, maybe. Not with him. I sat down, bought a pitcher, and mostly got the dubious pleasure of listenin' to myself think. I say, 'What do you think about the Brewers this year?' and he says, 'They'll suck, same as last year. I can get the Cubs at night on my rah-dio ?? ' "

" That the way he said it? Rah-dio?"

" Well, it ain't the way I say it, is it? You ever heard me say rah-dio? I say radio, same as any normal person. You want to hear this or not?"

" Don't sound like there's much to hear."

" You got that right, buddy. He says, 'I can get the Cubs at night on my rah-dio, and that's enough for me. I always went to Wrigley with my dad when I was a kid.' So I found out he was from Chi, but otherwise, bupkes."

The first thought to pop into Andy's mind upon glimpsing the fucking thief in the third-floor corridor had been Potter, but Mr. George I-Keep-to-Myself Potter is a tall drink of water, maybe six-four, still with a pretty good head of salt-and-pepper hair. Mr. One-Slipper was shorter than that, hunched over like a toad. (A poison toad, at that is the thought that immediately rises in Andy's mind.)

He's in there, Andy thinks. Fucking thief's in Potter's room, maybe going through Potter's drawers, looking for a little stash. Fifty or sixty rolled up in the toe of a sock, like I used to do. Or stealing Potter's radio. His fucking rah-dio.

Well, and what was that to him? You passed Potter in the hallway, gave him a civil good morning or good afternoon, and what you got back was an uncivil grunt. Bupkes, in other words. You saw him in Lucky's, he was drinking alone, far side of the jukebox. Andy guessed you could sit down with him and he'd split a pitcher with you ?? Irv's little t?? te-?x-t?? te with the man proved that much ?? but what good was that without a little chin-jaw to go along with it? Why should he, Andrew Railsback, risk the wrath of some poison toad in a bathrobe for the sake of an old grump who wouldn't give you a yes, no, or maybe?

Well . . .

Because this is his home, cheesy as it might be, that's why. Because when you saw some crazy old one-slipper fuck in search of loose cash or the easily lifted rah-dio, you didn't just turn your back and shuffle away. Because the bad feeling he got from the scurrying old elf (the bad vibe, his grandchildren would have said) was probably nothing but a case of the chickenshits.

Because ??

Suddenly Andy Railsback has an intuition that, while not a direct hit, is at least adjacent to the truth. Suppose it is a guy from off the street? Suppose it's one of the old guys from Maxton Elder Care? It's not that far away, and he knows for a fact that from time to time an old feller (or old gal) will get mixed up in his (or her) head and wander off the reservation. Under ordinary circumstances that person would be spotted and hauled back long before getting this far downtown ?? kind of hard to miss on the street in an institutional robe and single slipper ?? but this evening the fog has come in and the streets are all but deserted.

Look at you, Andy berates himself. Scared half to death of a feller that's probably got ten years on you and peanut butter for brains. Wandered in here past the empty desk ?? not a chance in the goddamn world Fine's out front; he'll be in back reading a magazine or a stroke book ?? and now he's looking for his room back at Maxton's, trying every knob on the goddamn corridor, no more idea of where he is than a squirrel on a freeway ramp. Potter's probably having a beer next door (this, at least, turns out to be true) and left his door unlocked (this, we may be assured, is not).

And although he's still frightened, Andy comes all the way around the corner and walks slowly toward the open door. His heart is beating fast, because half his mind is still convinced the old man is maybe dangerous. There was, after all, that bad feeling he got just from looking at the stranger's back ??

But he goes. God help him, he does.

" Mister?" he calls when he reaches the open door. " Hey, mister, I think you got the wrong room. That's Mr. Potter's room. Don't you ?? "

He stops. No sense talking, because the room is empty. How is that possible?

Andy steps back and tries the knobs of 312 and 313. Both locked up tight, as he knew they would be. With that ascertained, he steps into George Potter's room and has a good look around ?? curiosity killed the cat, satisfaction brought him back. Potter's digs are a little larger than his, but otherwise not much different: it's a box with a high ceiling (they made places a man could stand up in back in the old days, you had to say that much for them). The single bed is sagging in the middle but neatly made. On the night table is a bottle of pills (these turn out to be an anti-depressant called Zoloft) and a single framed picture of a woman. Andy thinks she took a pretty good whopping with the ugly stick, but Potter must see her differently. He has, after all, put the picture in a place where it's the first thing he looks at in the morning and the last thing he sees at night.

" Potter?" Andy asks. " Anyone? Hello?"

He is suddenly overcome with a sense of someone standing behind him and whirls around, lips drawn back from his dentures in a grinning snarl that is

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half a cringe. One hand comes up to shield his face from the blow he is suddenly certain will fall . . . only there's no one there. Is he lurking behind the corner at the end of this short addendum to the main corridor? No. Andy saw the stranger go scurrying around that corner. No way he could have gotten behind him again . . . unless he crawled along the ceiling like some kind of fly . . .

Andy looks up there, knowing he's being absurd, giving in to the whims big time, but there's no one here to see him, so what the hey? And nothing for him to see overhead, either. Just an ordinary tin ceiling, now yellowed by age and decades of cigar and cigarette smoke.

The radio ?? oh, excuse me all to hell, rah-dio ?? is sitting on the win-dowsill, unmolested. Damn fine one, too, a Bose, the kind Paul Harvey always talks about on his noon show.

Beyond it, on the other side of the dirty glass, is the fire escape.

Ah-hah! Andy thinks, and hurries across to the window. One look at the turned thumb lock and his triumphant expression fades. He peers out just the same, and sees a short stretch of wet black iron descending into the fog. No blue robe, no scaly bald pate. Of course not. The knob shaker didn't go out that way unless he had some magic trick to move the window's inside thumb lock back into place once he was on the fire escape landing.

Andy turns, stands where he is a moment, thinking, then drops to his knees and looks under the bed. What he sees is an old tin ashtray with an unopened pack of Pall Malls and a Kingsland Old-Time Lager disposable

lighter in it. Nothing else except dust kittens. He puts his hand on the coverlet preparatory to standing up, and his eyes fix on the closet door. It's standing ajar.

" There," Andy breathes, almost too low for his own ears to hear.

He gets up and crosses to the closet door. The fog may or may not come in on little cat feet, as Carl Sandburg said, but that is certainly how Andy Railsback moves across George Potter's room. His heart is beating hard again, hard enough to start the prominent vein in the center of his forehead pulsing. The man he saw is in the closet. Logic demands it. Intuition screams it. And if the doorknob shaker's just a confused old soul who wandered into the Nelson Hotel out of the fog, why hasn't he spoken to Andy? Why has he concealed himself ? Because he may be old but he's not confused, that's why. No more confused than Andy is himself. The doorknob shaker's a fucking thief, and he's in the closet. He's maybe holding a knife that he has taken from the pocket of his tatty old robe. Maybe a coat hanger that he's unwound and turned into a weapon. Maybe he's just standing there in the dark, eyes wide, fingers hooked into claws. Andy no longer cares. You can scare him, you bet ?? he's a retired salesman, not Superman ?? but if you load enough tension on top of fright you turn it into anger, same as enough pressure turns coal into a diamond. And right now Andy is more pissed off than scared. He closes his fingers around the cool glass knob of the closet door. He squeezes down on it. He takes one breath . . . a second . . . steeling himself, getting ready . . . psyching himself up, the grandkids would say . . . one more breath, just for good luck, and . . .

With a low, stressful sound ?? half growl and half howl ?? Andy yanks the closet door wide, setting off a chatter of hangers. He crouches, hands up in fists, looking like some ancient sparring partner from the Gym Time Forgot.

" Come outta there, you fucking ?? "

No one there. Four shirts, one jacket, two ties, and three pairs of pants hanging like dead skin. A battered old suitcase that looks as if it has been kicked through every Greyhound Bus terminal in North America. Nothing else. Not a goddamn th ??

But there is. There's something on the floor beneath the shirts. Several somethings. Almost half a dozen somethings. At first Andy Rails-back either doesn't understand what he's seeing or doesn't want to understand. Then it gets through to him, imprints itself on his mind and memory like a hoofprint, and he tries to scream. He can't. He tries again and nothing comes out but a rusty wheeze from lungs that feel no larger than old prune skins. He tries to turn around and can't do that, either. He is sure George Potter is coming, and if Potter finds him here, Andy's life will end. He has seen something George Potter can never allow him to talk about. But he can't turn. Can't scream. Can't take his eyes from the secret in George Potter's closet.

Can't move.

Because of the fog, nearly full dark has arrived in French Landing unnaturally early; it's barely six-thirty. The blurry yellow lights of Maxton Elder Care look like the lights of a cruise ship lying becalmed at sea. In Daisy wing, home of the wonderful Alice Weathers and the far less wonderful Charles Burnside,

Pete Wexler and Butch Yerxa have both gone home for the day. A broad-shouldered, peroxide blonde named Vera Hutchinson is now on the desk. In front of her is a book entitled E-Z Minute Crosswords. She is currently puzzling over 6 Across: Garfield, for example. Six letters, first is F, third is L, sixth is E. She hates these tricky ones.

There's the swoosh of a bathroom door opening. She looks up and sees Charles Burnside come shuffling out of the men's in his blue robe and a pair of yellow-and-black striped slippers that look like great fuzzy bumblebees. She recognizes them at once.

"Charlie?" she asks, putting her pencil in her crossword book and closing it.

Charlie just goes shuffling along, jaw hanging down, a long runner of drool also hanging down. But he has an unpleasant half grin on his face that Vera doesn't care for. This one may have lost most of his marbles, but the few left in his head are mean marbles. Sometimes she knows that Charlie Burnside genuinely doesn't hear her when she speaks (or doesn't understand her), but she's positive that sometimes he just pretends not to understand. She has an idea this is one of the latter times.

"Charlie, what are you doing wearing Elmer's bee slippers? You know his great-granddaughter gave those to him."

The old man ?? Burny to us, Charlie to Vera ?? just goes shuffling along, in a direction that will eventually take him back to D18. Assuming he stays on course, that is.

"Charlie, stop."

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Charlie stops. He stands at the head of Daisy's corridor like a machine that has been turned off. His jaw hangs. The string of drool snaps, and all at once there's a little wet spot on the linoleum beside one of those absurd but amusing slippers.

Vera gets up, goes to him, kneels down before him. If she knew what we know, she'd probably be a lot less willing to put her defenseless white neck within reach of those hanging hands, which are twisted by arthritis but still powerful. But of course she does not.

She grasps the left bee slipper. "Lift," she says.

Charles Burnside lifts his right foot.

"Oh, quit being such a turkey," she says. "Other one."

Burny lifts his left foot a little, just enough for her to get the slipper off.

"Now the right one."

Unseen by Vera, who is looking at his feet, Burny pulls his penis from the fly of his loose pajama pants and pretends to piss on Vera's bowed head. His grin widens. At the same time, he lifts his right foot and she removes the other slipper. When she looks back up, Burny's wrinkled old tool is back where it belongs. He considered baptizing her, he really did, but he has created almost enough mischief for one evening. One more little chore and he'll be off to the land of dreamy dreams. He's an old monster now. He needs his rest.

" All right," Vera says. " Want to tell me why one of these is dirtier than the other?" No answer. She hasn't really expected one. " Okay, beautiful. Back to your room or down to the common room, if you want. There's microwave popcorn and Jell-O pops tonight, I think. They're showing The Sound of Music. I'll see that these slippers get back to where they belong, and you taking them will be our little secret. Take them again and I'll have to report you, though. Capisce?"

Burny just stands there, vacant . . . but with that nasty little grin lifting his wrinkled old chops. And that light in his eyes. He capisces, all right.

" Go on," Vera says. " And you better not have dropped a load on the floor in there, you old buzzard."

Again she expects no reply, but this time she gets one. Burny's voice is low but perfectly clear. " Keep a civil tongue, you fat bitch, or I'll eat it right out of your head."

She recoils as if slapped. Burny stands there with his hands dangling and that little grin on his face.

" Get out of here," she says. " Or I really will report you." And a great lot of good that would do. Charlie is one of Maxton's cash cows, and Vera knows it.

Charlie recommences his slow walk (Pete Wexler has dubbed this particular gait the Old Fucks' Shuffle), now in his bare feet. Then he turns back. The bleary lamps of his eyes regard her. " The word you're looking for is feline. Garfield's a feline. Got it? Stupid cow."

With that he continues his trip down the corridor. Vera stands where she is, looking at him with her own jaw hanging. She has forgotten all about her crossword puzzle.

In his room, Burny lies down on his bed and slips his hands into the small of his back. From there down he aches like a bugger. Later he will buzz for the fat old bitch, get her to bring him an ibuprofen. For now, though, he has to stay sharp. One more little trick still to do.

" Found you, Potter," he murmurs. " Good . . . old . . . Potsie."

Burny hadn't been shaking doorknobs at all (not that Andy Railsback will ever know this). He had been feeling for the fellow who diddled him out of a sweet little Chicago housing deal back in the late seventies. South Side, home of the White Sox. Blacktown, in other words. Lots of federal money in that one, and several bushels of Illinois dough as well. Enough skim available to last for years, more angles than on a baseball field, but George " Go Fuck Your Mother" Potter had gotten there first, cash had changed hands beneath the proverbial table, and Charles Burn-side (or perhaps then he'd still been Carl Bierstone; it's hard to remember) had been out in the cold.

But Burny has kept track of the thief for lo these many years. (Well, not Burny himself, actually, but as we must by now have realized, this is a man with powerful friends.) Old Potsie ?? what his friends called him in the days when he still had a few ?? declared bankruptcy in La Riviere back in the nineties, and lost most of what he still had hidden away during the Great Dot-Com Wreck of Double Aught. But that's not good enough for Burny. Potsie requires further punishment, and the coincidence of that particular

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fuckhead washing up in this particular fuckhole of a town is just too good to pass up. Burny's principal motive ?? a brainless desire to keep stirring the pot, to make sure bad goes to worse ?? hasn't changed, but this will serve that purpose, too.

So he traveled to the Nelson, doing so in a way Jack understands and Judy Marshall has intuited, homing in on Potsie's room like some ancient bat. And when he sensed Andy Railsback behind him, he was of course delighted. Railsback will save him having to make another anonymous call, and Burny is, in truth, getting tired of doing all their work for them.

Now, back in his room, all comfy-cozy (except for the arthritis, that is), he turns his mind away from George Potter, and begins to Summon.

Looking up into the dark, Charles Burnside's eyes begin to glow in a distinctly unsettling way. " Gorg," he says. " Gorg t'eelee. Dinnit a abbalah. Samman Tansy. Samman a montah a Irma. Dinnit a abbalah, Gorg. Dinnit a Ram Abbalah."

Gorg. Gorg, come. Serve the abbalah. Find Tansy. Find the mother of Irma. Serve the abbalah, Gorg.

Serve the Crimson King.

Burny's eyes slip closed. He goes to sleep with a smile on his face. And beneath their wrinkled lids, his eyes continue to glow like hooded lamps.

Morty Fine, the night manager of the Nelson Hotel, is half-asleep over his magazine when Andy Railsback comes bursting in, startling him so badly

that Morty almost tumbles out of his chair. His magazine falls to the floor with a flat slap.

" Jesus Christ, Andy, you almost gave me a heart attack!" Morty cries. " You ever hear of knocking, or at least clearing your goddam throat?"

Andy takes no notice, and Morty realizes the old fella is as white as a sheet. Maybe he's the one having the heart attack. It wouldn't be the first time one occurred in the Nelson.

" You gotta call the police," Andy says. " They're horrible. Dear Jesus, Morty, they're the most horrible pictures I ever saw . . . Polaroids . . . and oh man, I thought he was going to come back in . . . come back in any second . . . but at first I was just froze, and I . . . I . . ."

" Slow down," Morty says, concerned. " What are you talking about?"

Andy takes a deep breath and makes a visible effort to get himself under control. " Have you seen Potter?" he asks. " The guy in 314?"

" Nope," Morty says, " but most nights he's in Lucky's around this time, having a few beers and maybe a hamburger. Although why anybody would eat anything in that place, I don't know." Then, perhaps associating one ptomaine palace with another: " Hey, have you heard what the cops found out at Ed's Eats? Trevor Gordon was by and he said ?? "

" Never mind." Andy sits in the chair on the other side of the desk and stares at Morty with wet, terrified eyes. " Call the police. Do it right now. Tell them that the Fisherman is a man named George Potter, and he lives on the third

floor of the Nelson Hotel." Andy's face tightens in a hard grimace, then relaxes again. " Right down the hall from yours truly."

" Potter? You're dreaming, Andy. That guy's nothing but a retired builder. Wouldn't hurt a fly."

" I don't know about flies, but he hurt the hell out of some little kids. I seen the Polaroids he took of them. They're in his closet. They're the worst things you ever saw."

Then Andy does something that amazes Morty and convinces him that this isn't a joke, and probably not just a mistake, either: Andy Railsback begins to cry.

Tansy Freneau, a. k. a. Irma Freneau's grieving mother, is not actually grieving yet. She knows she should be, but grief has been deferred. Right now she feels as if she is floating in a cloud of warm bright wool.

The doctor (Pat Skarda's associate, Norma Whitestone) gave her five milligrams of lorazepam four or five hours ago, but that's only the start. The Holiday Trailer Park, where Tansy and Irma have lived since Cubby Freneau took off for Green Bay in ninety-eight, is handy to the Sand Bar, and she has a part-time " thing" going with Lester Moon, one of the bartenders. The Thunder Five has dubbed Lester Moon " Stinky Cheese" for some reason, but Tansy unfailingly calls him Lester, which he appreciates almost as much as the occasional boozy grapple in Tansy's bedroom or out back of the Bar, where there's a mattress (and a black light) in the storeroom. Around five this evening, Lester ran over with a quart of coffee brandy and four hundred milligrams of OxyContin, all considerately crushed and ready for snorting.

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Tansy has done half a dozen lines already, and she is cruising. Looking over old pictures of Irma and just . . . you know . . . cruising.

What a pretty baby she was, Tansy thinks, unaware that not far away, a horrified hotel clerk is looking at a very different picture of her pretty baby, a nightmare Polaroid he will never be able to forget. It is a picture Tansy herself will never have to look at, suggesting that perhaps there is a God in heaven.

She turns a page (GOLDENMEMORIES has been stamped on the front of her scrapbook), and here are Tansy and Irma at the Mississippi Electrix company picnic, back when Irma was four and Mississippi Electrix was still a year away from bankruptcy and everything was more or less all right. In the photo, Irma is wading with a bunch of other tykes, her laughing face smeared with chocolate ice cream.

Looking fixedly at this snapshot, Tansy reaches for her glass of coffee brandy and takes a small sip. And suddenly, from nowhere (or the place from which all our more ominous and unconnected thoughts float out into the light of our regard), she finds herself remembering that stupid Edgar Allan Poe poem they had to memorize in the ninth grade. She hasn't thought of it in years and has no reason to now, but the words of the opening stanza rise effortlessly and perfectly in her mind. Looking at Irma, she recites them aloud in a toneless, pauseless voice that no doubt would have caused Mrs. Normandie to clutch her stringy white hair and groan. Tansy's recitation doesn't affect us that way; instead it gives us a deep and abiding chill. It is like listening to a poetry reading given by a corpse.

" Once upon a mih'nigh' dreary while I ponnered weak 'n' weary over many a quaint 'n' curris volume of forgotten lore while I nodded nearly nappin' sun'ly there came a tappin' as of someone gen'ly rappin' rappin' at my chamber door ?? "

At this precise moment there comes a soft rapping at the cheap fiber-board door of Tansy Freneau's Airstream. She looks up, eyes floating, lips pursed and glossed with coffee brandy.

" Les'ser? Is that you?"

It might be, she supposes. Not the TV people, at least she hopes not. She wouldn't talk to the TV people, sent them packing. She knows, in some deep and sadly cunning part of her mind, that they would lull her and comfort her only to make her look stupid in the glare of their lights, the way that the people on the Jerry Springer Show always end up looking stupid.

No answer . . . and then it comes again. Tap. Tap-tap.

"'Tis some visitor," she says, getting up. It's like getting up in a dream. "'Tis some visitor, I murmured, tappin' at my chamber door, only this 'n' nothin' more."

Tap. Tap-tap.

Not like curled knuckles. It's a thinner sound than that. A sound like a single fingernail.

Or a beak.

She crosses the room in her haze of drugs and brandy, bare feet whispering on carpet that was once nubby and is now balding: the ex-mother. She opens the door onto this foggy summer evening and sees nothing, because she's looking too high. Then something on the welcome mat rustles.

Something, some black thing, is looking up at her with bright, inquiring eyes. It's a raven, omigod it's Poe's raven, come to pay her a visit.

" Jesus, I'm trippin' ," Tansy says, and runs her hands through her thin hair.

" Jesus!" repeats the crow on the welcome mat. And then, chipper as a chickadee: " Gorg!"

If asked, Tansy would have said she was too stoned to be frightened, but this is apparently not so, because she gives out a disconcerted little cry and takes a step backward.

The crow hops briskly across the doorsill and strides onto the faded purple carpet, still looking up at her with its bright eyes. Its feathers glisten with condensed drops of mist. It bops on past her, then pauses to preen and fluff. It looks around as if to ask, How'm I doin', sweetheart?

" Go away," Tansy says. " I don't know what the fuck you are, or if you're here at all, but ?? "

" Gorg!" the crow insists, then spreads its wings and fleets across the trailer's living room, a charred fleck burnt off the back of the night. Tansy screams and cringes, instinctively shielding her face, but Gorg doesn't come

near her. It alights on the table beside her bottle, there not being any bust of Pallas handy.

Tansy thinks: It got disoriented in the fog, that's all. It could even be rabid, or have that Key Lime disease, whatever you call it. I ought to go in the kitchen and get the broom. Shoo it out before it shits around . . .

But the kitchen is too far. In her current state, the kitchen seems hundreds of miles away, somewhere in the vicinity of Colorado Springs. And there's probably no crow here at all. Thinking of that goddamn poem has caused her to hallucinate, that's all . . . that, and losing her daughter.

For the first time the pain gets through the haze, and Tansy winces from its cruel and wiry heat. She remembers the little hands that sometimes pressed so tidily against the sides of her neck. The cries in the night, summoning her from sleep. The smell of her, fresh from the bath.

" Her name was Irma!" she suddenly shouts at the figment standing so boldly beside the brandy bottle. " Irma, not fucking Lenore, what kind of stupid name is Lenore? Let's hear you say Irma!"

" Irma!" the visitor croaks obediently, stunning her to silence. And its eyes. Ah! Its glittering eyes draw her, like the eyes of the Ancient Mariner in that other poem she was supposed to learn but never did. " Irma-Irma-Irma-Irma ?? "

" Stop it!" She doesn't want to hear it after all. She was wrong. Her daughter's name out of that alien throat is foul, insupportable. She wants to put her hands over her ears and can't. They're too heavy. Her hands have
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joined the stove and the refrigerator (miserable half-busted thing) in Colorado Springs. All she can do is look into those glittering black eyes.

It preens for her, ruffling its ebony sateen feathers. They make a loathsome little scuttering noise all up and down its back and she thinks, " Prophet!" said I, " thing of evil! prophet still, if bird or devil!"

Certainty fills her heart like cold water. " What do you know?" she asks. " Why did you come?"

" Know!" croaks the Crow Gorg, nodding its beak briskly up and down. " Come!"

And does it wink? Good God, does it wink at her?

" Who killed her?" Tansy Freneau whispers. " Who killed my pretty baby?"

The crow's eyes fix her, turn her into a bug on a pin. Slowly, feeling more in a dream than ever (but this is happening, on some level she understands that perfectly), she crosses to the table. Still the crow watches her, still the crow draws her on. Night's Plutonian shore, she thinks.

Night's Plutonian fuckin' shore.

" Who? Tell me what you know!"

The crow looks up at her with its bright black eyes. Its beak opens and closes, revealing a wet red interior in tiny peeks.

" Tansy!" it croaks. " Come!"

The strength runs out of her legs, and she drops to her knees, biting her tongue and making it bleed. Crimson drops splatter her U of W sweatshirt. Now her face is on a level with the bird's face. She can see one of its wings brushing up and down, sensuously, on the glass side of the coffee-brandied bottle. The smell of Gorg is dust and heaped dead flies and ancient urns of buried spice. Its eyes are shining black portholes looking into some other world. Hell, perhaps. Or Sheol.

" Who?" she whispers.

Gorg stretches its black and rustling neck until its black beak is actually in the cup of her ear. It begins to whisper, and eventually Tansy Freneau begins to nod. The light of sanity has left her eyes. And when will it return? Oh, I think we all know the answer to that one.

Can you say " Nevermore"?