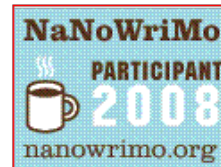


Unfinished, or, the Big Yard Sale

NaNoWriMo Project 08
by J. Reyome

Updated 26 November 08



By way of explanation: “NaNoWriMo” (pronounced NAA-NOH-RYE-MOH) is the rather awkward acronym of National Novel Writing Month. It takes place annually—this is the tenth year of its existence—and the challenge is pretty simple: to compose an original work of fiction with a minimum of fifty thousand words. Yes, that’s a 5 and a 0, a comma, and then three more 0s. There’s a lot of words, sportsfans!

I first learned of this lovely bit of madness from a fellow PC tech a couple of years ago and decided I’d give it a shot. I already had about a quarter million words of material (that’s literal, not an estimate!) written; 50K in 30 days ought to be a cinch, huh?

You’ve guessed the result of that first foray, I’m sure. I got to eight thousand words and “hit the wall”—and having run a marathon, I can attest that the feeling is very, very similar. Anyway, when November 2007 rolled around, I decided I would get serious, and boy, did I: ‘Til You See God is at 60K, which is pretty much what it was when NaNo ended last year. Maybe they need to have a National Novel Finishing Month in December...

*So. It is now November 2008, and I am again participating in NaNoWriMo. And I intend to “win” again. What’s more, I mean to actually finish this story. And here it is. Bear in mind that what you see here is an **extremely** rough draft; a frame on which to build. You can follow the progress here, along with my word counts from*

each day, and a running total. I hope you enjoy what you read! If you do, please feel free to drop me a line at him@justreyome.com; I welcome all comments, positive and negative and even ambivalent. And if you'd like to join in all the fun, click any of the NaNo icons above to find out how!

Write on...create or die!

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day one (Saturday, 1 November 08)
Total words: 0. To go: 50000...could not write, had to work...(sigh)

Something was wrong.

He wasn't sure what, but he knew *something* was wrong. He knew it.

He looked over his shoulder into the back seat, where blankets and pillows lay in disarray after his latest rummage, which was to make sure his laptop had been loaded and the backup drive was in the bag. It had all been in its correct spot, of course. Then he had to make sure he'd had his wallet. This ate up another five minutes, while he pulled the billfold from exactly where he knew it had been and placed it in the center console of the car, where he could see it. And get at it. That was important, not just being able to see it, but *get at it*.

Deb shook her graying head with a sadness that was only partially make-believe. "This O. C. D.," she asked, "how do you live with it?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You can laugh now," he replied. "See how much you laugh when we get a hundred miles down the road and I don't have my wallet. Or I lock the keys in the car and I don't have the spares..."

"Now *that* I honestly worry about," Deb snickered. "And I have the spares, believe me."

"...or we get checked into the motel and I don't have my laptop..."

"About the laptop. Exactly why are you taking that? We're only going to be gone three days. You could do without your toy for three days, surely."

"It's *not* a toy, it's a *tool*. And no, I can't do without it any more than you could do without the three extra books. You don't go through a book a day. Besides, we're going to a yard sale, you're going to buy books and you know it. Why bring more?"

She stuck out her tongue. "You have your eccentricities, I have mine. Anyway, I expect I'll be reading as much as you'll be writing." She leaned across the seat and kissed him fondly. "Now, tell me what's eating you. This time, I mean."

He shook his head. "There's something..." Another shake of the head. "Something's not right. I'm either forgetting something, or..."

She sighed. "The oven is off. The timers are set for the lights and the air conditioner. All the appliances are unplugged, all of them. We went through the pre-trip checklists, just like you insisted, and as silly as I thought they were, I have to admit they were a good idea, and pretty darned thorough. What is it we could possibly have forgotten?"

Jack Gilchrest closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and thought.

"Really, honey. We're wasting time. Anything you might have forgotten—if anything—we can get on the road. Why don't you..."

"CDs," he said, almost triumphantly. "My CDs, Where are they?"

"I'm sure I don't now," she said with suspicious innocence.

He shut the car off. "Not till I know."

"Yeesh."

He got out of the car and walked back down the hill to the house. Deb had opined years ago, correctly, that his incessant pacing to and from the carport would wear a path, and now that it

actually had, it was a little slick in the morning. He walked carefully so not to slip and fall. It wouldn't do to end up with a broken bone and scotch the trip completely.

The CDs were in their travel case, right where they belonged. The case, on the other hand, was on his dresser. Not at all where *it* was supposed to be. Funny, it had been on the checklist. How was it that he'd...

...he grinned. No, he hadn't missed it. That had been on Deb's list. She knew his tastes in music, and it was possible, likely even, that she'd intentionally left them behind. Kate Bush, the Ramones, Portishead and XTC were not exactly among her favorites. He took the case, looked the house over one last time, then he walked back outside, making sure the door was locked behind him and leaving a couple of bemused cats in his wake.

Returning to the car, he held up the case and smiled. Deb nodded and grimaced...just a little. "Okay, but I get to choose the first CD," she insisted.

"As long as it's not anything from Windham Hill, that's okay," he said with a grin. "I think I'm ready now."

"Are you sure? Sure you're not leaving a thumb drive behind with the fifth backup of your stories or something?"

He shifted into drive and pulled onto the street without another word.

They'd been planning this a long time. Everybody had heard about the Yard Sale, and that was *Yard Sale*, with a capital Y and a capital S. Not just any yard sale, mind you, but a yard sale of mammoth proportions, one that stretched from border to border, all the way through Tennessee along highway 41. It was an amazing thing, redneck paradise, as he referred to it for years till Deb finally convinced him there was something to this "Yard Sailing" when she brought home two memory cards for his digital camera for which she gave a dollar each. They ran about twenty dollars at Wally World. Books? You bet. CDs? Even the kind *he* would listen to. Computer hardware and software. Clothes he

would wear. Amazing, what people would throw away, or better, put a price tag on and lay on a table in their front yard.

Like most regional curiosities, the Yard Sale started small and just grew. At first it was a tri-county affair, spanning Scott, Fentress, and Putnam counties. As the thing caught fire, adjacent counties liked what they saw, especially the throngs of out-of-county shoppers, and glommed on. Why not? If three counties were good, well, five was so much better, right? Then it was ten, then it was a solid corridor of rummage stretching from the Kentucky line all the way to Alabama...and beyond. It was all over the news for at least the week leading up to it, not just in Tennessee, but nationwide, and the official Yard Sale web site went so far as to insist that at least one person from every continent had visited. They hemmed a bit when it came to Antarctica, but never mind.

Every year it got bigger. Thousands of people registered as sellers so that their addresses and wares offered could be listed in an official guide. Hundreds of thousands of people bought these guides, either online or on site. It was beyond huge, and in itself reportedly it saved dozens of homeowners (not to mention a couple of the counties in which they lived) from certain bankruptcy during the 2008 mortgage crisis. Other states tried to emulate the success and some came close, but all lacked the rural charm and enthusiasm the Great Tennessee North-South Sale (its official name, though most everybody visiting simply referred to it as The Yard Sale) consistently offered. Some folks came for the entertainment alone: country music singers from nearby Nashville did impromptu shows for local charities and brought in still more visitors. There were plays and dances and quilting bees and displays of local history. And food? Oh, there was food too. Anybody who had never had a Ramp before, or fried biscuits, or Poke Sallet, had never been to the Yard Sale. It was, at its core, not just a celebration of grassroots commerce, but of humanity.

Long before it was "big", the Yard Sale was mentioned on a Nashville Public TV program called *Tennessee Crossroads*.

Later on it made it on as a half-hour feature, which resulted in a whole lot more traffic along Highway 41 in June, and that was where Deb Gilchrest learned of it. She mentioned it to husband Jack, and when he saw the repeat of the program a few months later, even he had to admit it was a neat idea. Loathing crowds, he shook his head when she suggested they go as a second honeymoon, but she persisted. It took three years, but she finally wore him down. And now...

She had settled on John Mellencamp, a reasonable choice, he thought, and the gravelly Hoosier voice accompanied them as they beat their way east down I-40 toward Nashville.

"At least it's not a long drive," he mused. "Better than going back up to Indiana, even as much as I like the Kintner House."

"And the gas prices are a whole lot more reasonable than they were last year," she agreed. "Do you think we'll make it to Cookeville for lunch? I'd like to eat at that café down by the square, and I think they close at 2."

"We'll make it," he said.

They did.

"Now the way I see it," Deb said, peering down at a gazetteer with relish, "we could start up at Pickett and work our way south. At least we'd be coming from a place we know. You know the area pretty well, don't you?"

He nodded and smiled. It was just like her to suggest something she knew he'd like—the area around Pickett County and the Big South Fork was one of his favorite places to hike. "Oh yeah, I think I can find my way around up there."

"Well, we're not going to stay long, you know." Then she smiled too. "Maybe you can get a walk in."

"I might at that. So where do we go first?"

She pulled out a dog-eared guidebook. "Allardt, I think" she said. "A little town just east of Jamestown."

"I know it. So what's there?"

"Loads of glass, books, CDs. Sounds like it's just waiting for us."

"It should be so simple," he said. "Just mind we don't blow all our dough in the first town."

He considered that: it was the challenge, after all. Not to get what they wanted—that would be easy enough. With nearly 300 miles of vendors, surely one could find just about anything they might be looking for. The joy was the hunt; not just finding what you wanted, but to find it at as low a price as possible. And have a good time doing it, of course.

It was a lot like they had envisioned a trip to Vegas: they had set aside money over the course of the year for the trip which they then “divvied up”. It ended up being almost exactly a thousand dollars for each of them, and they were not to go over that amount. It was more than either ever would normally consider spending on a trip by a factor of at least three, but—and this was important—they expected to be coming home with treasures. They each had things they would be looking for; she was something of a connoisseur of antique glassware, while he collected brass carbide lamps, and both had long lists of books they were looking for. They expected they would find plenty of each along the route. They would be among the first to examine the sales, at least up north, and that meant they'd have first dibs on the good stuff, whatever that turned out to be. They were realistic enough to know that it also meant that they would probably pay premium prices for anything of real value along the way, but that was all right somehow, and they were prepared to dicker as needed. Deb in particular was pretty good at exacting a reasonable price from even the most flint-skinned seller. Conversely, Jack had tended in his limited experience with yard sailing to accept the first offer if it sounded anywhere close to what he expected he might have to pay.

It just so happened that as his mind wandered back to the topic at hand, it was pretty much along those lines. "Remember,

never, *ever* pay the first price. If you see one of those lamps you're looking for, an Otter Light..."

"Autolite," he corrected her absently. "Like the spark plug."

"Whatever. So, say you find one, and they're asking \$25 for it. What do you do?"

"Well, I'd have to look it over, see what kind of condition it's in. I mean, an unfired Autolite is worth way more than \$25. Might even go for a hundred if it's really clean."

"All right then, suppose it's in reasonable condition for twenty-five. Do you buy it?" She didn't wait for his answer. "No. They'll know you're a sucker the moment you reach for your wallet. They *expect* you to dicker. I bet they're disappointed if you don't. So you've got to bargain, Jack. If it was just a matter of finding what you wanted and buying it, you could do it just as easily on eBay, and that's not the point. You've got to get into the spirit of it."

"Well, I'm all for that."

"So, when they say twenty-five, you say..."

"I don't say anything, I put it down and walk away, laughing uproariously. When they ask me what I'm laughing at, I tell them anybody who'd pay so much for a lamp that cruddy would have to be a dolt. They immediately drop the price to twenty, I shake my head and offer ten, and following a pre-set amount of haggling only they know for certain, they settle for seventeen. How's that sound?"

She held her hands together and sighed. "My husband, the power shopper."

"Bet I end up the trip with more money than you."

"That's *not* the idea. You're supposed to spend it all, get it? It's all in the value. It's not how much you can spend, it's what you can get for it."

He nodded. "I think I get the idea. Don't worry about me, I can take care of myself. Just don't be asking me for any loans when you get to Sparta and find out you've run out."

She stuck out her tongue. "Let's go."

End of NaNoWriMi 08 day two (Sunday, 2 November 08) Total words: 2328. To go: 47672

The roads were familiar to him and he could have taken them at a much greater pace, but they were on the serpentine side and Deb was not exactly possessed of a strong stomach. That, and the onion soup had been particularly astonishing at the Corner Café, so he had indulged in a second bowl. Funny, how tastes changed...he remembered the days that he could not stomach onion soup, and now it was a delicacy, especially when it was really savory, and served with cheese and bread...

Wait. Was that nausea he was feeling?

Strange. He wasn't prone to car-sickness, especially when he was driving, yet there it was again, just a faint twinge of queasiness, almost at the back of his consciousness. Not enough to be overpowering, but at the same time enough to be impossible to ignore. He found a wayside, pulled over, and shut off the car.

Deb looked up from her book. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"*De nada*. Just want to stretch my legs."

It was a lie. She knew it, too. She got out and followed him across the clay verge to a road cut where he was examining tiny geodes in the rock wall. "Nice one there," she said, pointing out a nice example. "Looks like chunks of steel."

"That's galena," he muttered, the nausea taking serious hold now. "Pretty rare around these parts, but it does show up in...in..."

He held his hands out, turned, and expelled a great brown mass. There was a spasm, a quickly-gathered breath, and then another, larger gout. "Terrific," he gasped. "Just terrific. Whoever said it tastes better going down than up had it right, especially with onion soup."

"I thought it tasted a little funny," Deb commiserated.
"Look, if you're really feeling bad..."

"No, no, I'm fine," he insisted. "I probably just overdid it.
You think you can drive a while though? I'm all in."

"Sure." She took the wheel, and after a thorough rinse of
the mouth he joined her.

But it wasn't bad onion soup that had him sick. If it had
been, then he would've felt better, and he didn't. It was that same
gnawing feeling that he'd experienced at home, only trebled and
having manifested itself as a physical presence, no longer merely
a doubt. And again, even as he closed his eyes and drifted into a
troubled sleep, he couldn't help but wonder what it was that was
bothering him. If it wasn't the trip itself, what was it?

After a half hour or so she nudged him. "Here," she said
gently. "We're at the highway. Which way now?"

"North," he said, gesturing toward the GPS, which was
counting down the miles to his nearest point of reference, which
happened to be the motel he used as his base of operations
during his numerous hiking trips to the area. "When that gets to
zero, wake me up again, because we'll be there. Maybe we can
eat supper at that Chinese place down at the shopping center
after we come back from Allardt. If it's still daylight, maybe I'll
drive us over to Bandy Creek to the Visitor's Center and we can
see if Brenda or Howard are there."

"That would be nice." She always said that when she really
meant something along the lines of, *you just leave me at the
motel while you go visit your friends, just don't be out too late, and
bring me back a chocolate rock from Dairy Queen.* He understood
well enough, and it worked both ways. He preferred hot fudge
sundaes, himself.

He closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

He dreams:

It is a Yard Sale, certainly. The roads are jammed with cars trying to get from one end of the sale to the other, and that's a lot of cars when you're talking about a 300-plus-mile Yard Sale. Lots of cars, lots of people, more people than he is secure being around, to be sure. He is not comfortable around crowds, never has been, even though his job at a race track keeps him in front of them several hours a week.

The throngs are pretty much constant, as constant as the various individual sales themselves. Every house, it seems, has something to sell, even if it's just lemonade prepared (and sold by) the kiddies, or salvation as tendered by members of the congregations of the local churches. He is more apt to lean toward the lemonade than the Word, which puts him pretty much in the same boat as his wife. The Bible-thumpers seem awfully insistent though, especially toward him as he walks along, seemingly not walking on the ground at all, but perhaps slightly above it. He considers this for a moment, then decides it doesn't really matter: it is just a dream, after all.

The faces are everywhere, and they are as diverse as one might expect. Picture your average flea market crowd and multiply it by a factor of a hundred or so, and you'd have an idea. It is not a pleasant picture, at least from his point of view. He finds a tree and sits beneath it for a moment to collect his thoughts. Again, he notes that he is not so much sitting as he is hovering. Odd. But not at all uncomfortable, especially in that he has suffered for some time from a broken tailbone, and this is about as relaxed as he's been sitting since.

Only relaxed though, from a physical aspect. The nausea is gone now—which he does not find surprising, this is still a dream, after all, isn't it?—but the uneasiness...ah, that's still there, and it's magnified, in fact. And what is making it even more troubling is that as the sea of faces passes before him, he can recognize faces in the crowd...

Oh, not certain recognition by any means. It's more a gut instinct than anything else, not far removed from that initial unsteadiness

he felt this morning on preparing to leave the house. Nothing he can exactly pinpoint, no one person he can look at and think, there, I know that person. But enough to trouble him deeply. It is random, this odd recognition. It is sometimes a man, sometimes a woman. Some of them are even young, teens or children. There is no discernable reason or pattern, but even that isn't really so troubling in itself. No, what is so dawning is that without exception, every face bears a look of at least stern disapproval. Some frown, some are obviously angry; a couple look genuinely livid. And one...

He cannot help but stare. The visage is so completely loathsome, so horrifically ugly, that he can barely look, but he does anyway. It appears that half the man's face is melted away, rather like Vincent Price as Dr. Phibes. It borders on repulsive.

But...but...the look on the side that is not so twisted...it is gentle, perhaps; still, obviously disapproving.

Who are these people? And why do they look at him so?

"Are you going to sleep all day?" Deb said merrily, giving him a gentle push on the shoulder. "Boy, you were sawing some major lumber during that last stretch. I'm glad I wasn't in bed with you. Chances are you'd have put out one of my teeth, the way you were thrashing about."

He blinked at her. "Thrashing about? What do you mean?"

"Let me put it this way: if you hadn't been belted, I might've been concerned for our safety. I don't know what kind of dream you were having, but it must've been pretty intense."

The dream. Yes, the dream.

She shut off the car, and only now did he realize that they were parked. He had been so out of it that not even the absence of movement was enough to wake him. That usually woke him right up.

"Where are we?"

"Ummm..." She held up a motel key. "It's the Jordan. We're already checked in. I figured we could stay tonight here and kind

of jaunt up and down the first section. I know you like it here, I figured I'd see why. It doesn't look like anything special."

"It's nice enough inside," he said, "and it's always clean."

"Well, it's cheap enough. You need to shower or anything before we head out?"

He yawned and stretched as luxuriously as the confines of the Taurus would allow. "What time is it?"

"About 3, after you add on the extra hour for the time zone change."

"Wrong. Time zone changes about five miles to the east. We're still on Central."

She grinned. "Oh, goody! So we can go shopping now?"

"Yes sweetie, 'you can has shopping.'"

"That's all I needed to know." She started the car and pulled out of the lot with obvious pleasure.

They stopped briefly in Jamestown to top off with gas and get some drinks, then they headed roughly east-south-east toward the little hamlet that marked the unofficial start of the Yard Sale. There were still a lot of vendors crowded along the roads as far north as Albany, Kentucky, but the Gilchrests had decided to confine their expedition to Tennessee, so as to keep to the spirit of the thing. They were duly pleased, then, to see banners spanning the streets of the small town of Allardt happily welcoming them and their kind to the town. "How about that?" Deb shrieked. "It looks like Christmas!"

It did, too. The town could hardly have looked cheerier had there been holly and lights strung everywhere. There were even several sets of "Burma Shave"-type signs about, one of which Jack read aloud, "'The Big Yard Sale...is back again...pull on over...and shop awhile, friend!'" It wasn't exactly poetry, but it was at least welcoming. And the parking was free, and there was plenty of it. Better still, it wasn't at all what he'd imagined or even dreamed. Yes, there were lots of people, but it wasn't the zoo he'd expected it might be, and there wasn't a soul to be seen that he

could recognize. *That* certainly set his mind at ease. The entire drive from Jamestown his mind was occupied with what he would do if they arrived and he found himself confronted with the people from his dream. Instead, it all looked pretty normal—or as normal as a three-hundred mile long Yard Sale could be—and not nearly as bad as he feared it might be so far as crowds were concerned. And there wasn't a frowning face to be seen.

"So," Deb said, climbing from the car and grabbing a canvas bag, "where should we start?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jack replied. "You want that we should stay together, or split up?"

"Well, we could cover more ground if we split up. You could always call me if you saw something you think I'd like."

He nodded. "Makes sense to me."

"Here." She handed him a notebook. "So you can write down addresses and stuff. I don't expect the sales are going to be confined to the main road alone, so if you see anything really choice, make sure you write it down."

"Well now, I think I could remember..."

"Oh, puh-leez." She laughed. "How long have we been married?"

Long enough for her to know his memory was (at least) suspect. "I...uh, I'll write things down," he promised. "I'll head south then?"

"Sounds good. If we get that lost in a town this small, we deserve to stay lost, hmmm?"

"Don't talk like that." They kissed, and each went their own way.

It was a pleasant little town, barely big enough to be defined as a town even by comparison with Jamestown, but with perhaps a bit more sprawl to it. There was something of a business district of several small specialty shops, a food store, a community center, and a couple of convenience/gas stations

competing for what traffic there was, but they didn't seem to be hurting at all. Especially today.

He ignored the stores, as attractive as their outdoor displays may have been. He was used to that sort of thing; when he was young, the town in which he grew up had an annual "sidewalk sale" which was as eagerly anticipated as the Yard Sale was around here. His favorite places were the book store—naturally—and the Sport Shop, which always had four or five large tables of printed t-shirts for sale at four dollars each or three for ten dollars. Some came from businesses far away, and he never knew where the Shop got them, but there were usually half a dozen oddball designs that would catch his eye. An all-time favorite read, "House of Crabs: Home of the Super Jumbos" proudly emblazoned above and below a caricature of a smiling crustacean. It just didn't get much better than that.

So he stuck to the homes. Mostly he ignored the clothes that were laid out on tables or hung from lines strung from tree to tree. He didn't buy much in the way of clothes anymore; during the week he could wear pretty much anything he wanted at the track unless a sponsor happened to drop by, then he would slip into a polo shirt emblazoned with the name of the track. Race nights he either wore a shirt and tie, or another polo and dress slacks. At home, it was all t-shirts and jeans, mostly from that fine mens' clothier, Messrs Car and Hartt. And that was when he wore clothes at all. Unless he saw something really clever, he was more inclined to gravitate more toward any sign of music CDs, books, or that ever-elusive carbide lamp.

He actually held out some hope of finding some of the latter in this area. The Big South Fork region was once purely lousy with coal mines, and there just *had* to be carbide lamps and their various accoutrements still lying around in garages or attics, even after all these years and several Yard Sales. They would still be scarce, to be sure, but they would be around. They had to be.

And—wonder of wonders—there was one now! He tried, without much success, to hold back a pleased grin as he spotted

the "engineer's lamp", which was basically the same sort of lamp as you'd find on a helmet, just a little bigger and mounted with a handle for carrying. He looked it over curiously (not seriously, he wasn't exactly inclined to add this sort of piece to his collection) and found the price was surprisingly reasonable at—surprise, surprise!—twenty-five dollars.

"See somethin' you like there, young man?" a cheery voice said from over his shoulder.

"Oh, yes," Jack replied, turning to face the weathered face of a man who might well have been the original owner of the lamp. "I was looking over your engineer's lamp. That's a nice one, there."

"It is that," the old gent agreed. "I bought that new from the company store down along No Business Creek back about 52, I'd guess, and it had been on the shelf a while by then. Can't really guess how old it is. You know anything about 'em? You must, seein' as you know it's an Engineer's Lamp."

Jack winced. One thing Deb had cautioned him about was coming off as too much of an expert on anything he was looking at. "It's the kiss of death," she'd said. "They're looking for rubes, more often than not. Somebody who knows what they're looking at, that's just who they don't want, because they know a good price versus a bad price. Like you and carbide lamps."

Like me and carbide lamps, he thought. Well, if nothing else, I'll get a good story.

"I know a bit," he said. "I kinda collect the cap lamps. I've been a caver since I was about twelve years old, and my first cave light was a lamp by this same company." He pointed to the brand name: Justrite. "They were based in Chicago at the time, and I grew up not far away. They'd switched over to plastic lamps by then, but I managed to collect several of the old brass kind too. They last forever."

"They do, that," the man agreed with a smile. "Chester Akins. Call me Chet. Chet Akins. Like the guitar player, only without the T." He held out his hand, and Jack shook it warmly.

"Jack Gilchrest. I've done a lot of hiking out at the parks. My wife and I decided this year we'd do the sale."

"Have any luck so far?"

Jack grinned and nodded down at the lamp. "So far so good. Know anybody else who has one? I reckon you'd say I'm in the market."

He looked up thoughtfully. "Hard to tell round these. Still lots of minin' folk here and probably as far south as Monteagle. Don't reckon you'd be wastin' your time if you went all the way. Never know what you might find."

"Suppose you're right."

"Silly though, ain't it? I mean, here's this lump of metal I haven't thought about in years, mostly gatherin' dust. I wipe it down a bit—it never really got all that dirty, mind you, I took care of it—and here it is, right when you come lookin' for it. I 'spect it was meant for you to find it."

"May be." Jack reached for the lamp, then looked at Akins inquiringly. "You mind?"

"Not a bit. If there's anything you'd like to know about it, I'd be happy to help you. 'Course, I imagine you probably know as much as I do."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." He picked up the lamp and held it caressingly.

Carbide lamps are an odd obsession so far as cavers are concerned. People with interests in mines and mining in the past—there are some—and hobby collectors and antique fanatics will always be interested in old lamps, but cavers are almost as driven to collect the old lamps as they are to push virgin passage in their favorite caves. Jack's first was, indeed, one of the ill-fated plastic Justrite models that had an annoying habit of melting at inconvenient times. It didn't take him long to replace that with a British-made brass Premier which served him well for several years until he located a brass Justrite at a yard sale. He gave three dollars for that—a bargain!—and immediately the Premier joined the plastic Justrite on a shelf as the new-used brass

Justrite took over and stayed atop his helmet till he finally gave up carbide caving in favor of the finally practical electric units that eliminated the need to carry the extra weight of water and carbide for light. The new electric rigs didn't give off the same friendly yellowish light, and they sure couldn't be used to warm yourself up during a long, wet survey trip, but then they also didn't have the annoying tendency to clog, or blow out in windy crawls, or set your hair or beard ablaze. And you didn't have to carry the obligatory toolkit, or the tip reamer on a lanyard around your neck. Most of the old timers did anyway though, or the youngsters wanting to look savvy. And some folks just preferred carbide.

Jack Gilchrest wasn't one of those, but the practicality and availability of electric rigs didn't exactly squelch the urge to *collect* lamps. Of course. He'd since acquired another Justrite, newer and a lot cleaner, and a Guy's Dropper, another relatively rare piece. All he was really missing of the "big names" was an Autolite, which was possessed of a hexagonally-shaped carbide container that gave it its unique look. He wasn't sure if it made it any better, but he knew from experience that Autolites were easier to change while wearing gloves, which was probably as much a plus for miners as it was for cavers and accounted for its popularity. They also...well, they just *looked* prettier, especially with a little buffing. Yes, that took off the patina, and purist collectors would probably blanch at the thought, but Jack Gilchrest wasn't what anybody would call a purist collector. He just liked how they looked.

"So tell me what you're willin' to give me for my light," Akins prodded him.

"Well sir..."

"Chet."

"Chet. I'm not really so much of hand-held collector. It's a mighty fine light, but I'll be perfectly honest with you, you could probably get three times what you've got marked on here from a serious collector. It's not that I don't want it, it's more like I don't really *need* it."

"Well now, that's awful big of you to allow me that," Akins said with a smile. "I am obliged. But Jack, seems to me that's the whole *point* of the Yard Sale, ain't it?" He even seemed to use capital letters when he spoke the words. "It ain't about *need*. This is when *want* is okay. Know what I mean?"

Jack grinned. "I suppose you're right. And it is a mighty fine lamp, and yes, it would look pretty good on the shelf in my den. But..."

"Ah, there's always a 'but'."

"Well, I really am looking more for an Autolite than anything else, and I only have so much money to get me through the next three days. But I tell you what, if I come back after we're done and it's still here, why, I guarantee I'll take it off your hands."

"Price's liable to go up the in the next few days," Akins allowed.

"I could only expect that. It's your lamp. But if it's still around three days from now, then I'll be deserving whatever price you put on it."

"Young feller," Akins said, "do you know, I believe you. People come here every years and look at the things I put out here. Sometimes they even buy something. The sad ones though, they're the ones that come out here, see something they like and they can afford, and they set it down, figurin' they can come back later and it'll still be here. Most of the time, it ain't, know what I mean?"

"I do." He shook the old man's hand again. "I reckon I'll just have to take that risk. If it's not, well, then I've had the pleasure of meeting you, and that's as much as I could really ask from a trip like this."

Akins smiled and gripped his hand firmly. "That's a gratifyin' thought, Jack. Just you keep that in mind, and make sure you take the right deal when it comes along. You don't want to be found wantin' later, hmmm?"

Now that's a strange thing to say, Jack thought, but he smiled anyway. "I expect I'll see you again, Mr. Aik...Chet."

"I sure do hope so, Jack Gilchrest. I sure do hope so."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day three (Monday, 3 November 08)
Total words: 6152. To go: 43848

Following that somewhat surreal exchange, Jack continued to wander south till he figured he had gone about as far as Deb would want to walk, then he turned around and walked back along the other side of the road, looking things over. He found a hardcover copy of *The Great Escape*, one of his favorite books, but it was priced way too high for what was a library discard, and the seller refused to budge. His mouse-nibbled copy would have to do, unless he could talk Deb into coming back and doing the bargaining for him. That was sort of against the spirit of the rules—undefined though they might be—but he figured he might be able to return the favor somewhere along the line. He made a note of the house's address, then looked across the road to where Chet Akins was now lounging beneath a maple and took note of his house number. Deb was right, his memory wasn't so good that he could afford to just assume he'd remember the place later.

An hour or so later he still hadn't actually bought anything until he finally came across a home where there were boxes and boxes of used CDs for sale. His tastes were a bit on the peculiar side, but he liked orchestral and big band music and that he could usually find at bargain prices. Sure enough, he located a copy of Artie Shaw's *The Chant* for fifty cents, and a double CD collection of Beethoven for a quarter. He almost (almost, mind you) felt guilty about getting such deals, but he made up for it as best he could by buying a cup of warm soda from a rosy-cheeked girl at the house. He even tipped her a dollar and basked in the glow of the rapturous smile she gave him when she received the "golden dollar" he kept just for such occasions.

It had been a pleasant enough afternoon up till then. The sun was warm but not overly so, and he was dressed comfortably. The road was a little on the hilly side, but that was nothing he minded. He wondered, though, how Deb was taking it. That piqued his curiosity just enough to convince him it might be time to check in with her by phone, so he called her.

"Where are you at?" she asked when she answered. "I've been trying to call."

Huh. He looked at the handset and saw a full cadre of bars indicating reception. "Been right here," he said, "about a half mile from where we parked. What did you want?"

"Well, you called me. What did *you* want?"

He rolled his eyes. "I was just checking in. You find anything interesting?"

"There's a guy down here who has a beautiful cherry roll-top for sale..."

His ears perked up. He'd been wanting such a desk for a long time, and that it would be made of cherry would just be prime.

"...but he's asking an arm and a leg for it. I expect if we wait till the third day, we might get him to take an arm *or* a leg, if it's still around. You might want to come down and have a look at that. I got some nice crystal glasses, and four place settings of silverware we can use. You know how we're always losing forks."

He nodded. "You're doing better than I am then. Just got me a couple of CDs." He told her about the book, and she allowed as to how she might go and have a word with the owner as soon as she came to the end of the area she was in.

"I'd appreciate it," he said.

"Nothing else of interest?"

"Nah, nothing I'd considering spending money on right now." It didn't occur to him to even mention Chester Akins and his Justrite.

"Well, I'll walk back to the car and meet you. I think I'm up for some horse-trading. If he's asking twenty for that book, I bet I can get it for seven."

She was wrong, but only by a dollar. As they drove back to the motel, he shook his head and smiled. "How do you do that? I swear, it was as if he was speaking in a different language to you than he was to me."

"Well, he *was*," she said with a smile. "You're still a Yankee, Jack."

"I've lived down here over half my life!"

"Doesn't matter. The moment you open your mouth, people know, and if the voice wasn't already a dead giveaway, just the way you walk around would be. It's all attitude. You northerners strut about like you own the place, even when you don't. Down here we're more...casual, I guess."

"Casual. Huh. Is that it? I just need to mellow out?"

She pinched his nose fondly. "That, and blow out the goo that makes you sound so nasal."

"It's allergies." He pulled into the motel parking lot. "Not much I can do about that."

"Once a Yankee, forever a Yankee."

"And a Damned Yankee at that. What room are we in?"

She pointed to the northern (a bit of unnoted irony there, he thought) end of the building. "The lady said that was where you usually stayed. And she said to make sure you came over and said hello to the animals. That's a beautiful Spaniel she has. How old do you think she is?"

"Lady's been there since Dan and I started coming here. I expect she's getting on up there, just don't ask me to be exact. All she does is lie on the top of the sofa, until somebody she knows walks in the door, then she's all over them. How she remembers, I have no idea."

"You could take lessons from her."

"Ha. Ha. Ha."

They parked, got out, and walked to the room. The layout was familiar to Jack, as well it should; he had stayed in the same room in all but one of the times he'd been to Big South Fork. It was comfortably spacious and spotlessly clean, if perhaps dated. "Nice TV," Deb remark dryly. "Looks like it was brand new as of 1990."

"As long as it works, and it does," Jack noted. "I never come here to watch TV anyway. There's a pool out front too, but I've never seen it used. It's just a good, clean place to stay. Besides, it has a walk-in shower."

"And that matters...because?"

"Talk to me after a long day on the trail. You'll know. Besides," he said, taking her in his arms, "a walk-in means there's more room for splashy fun, if you know what I mean and I'm sure you do."

"Oooh. Tell me more, bay-bee."

"Wait till later. The beds are nice and firm, plenty of support for a spirited game of poke and tickle."

"Promises, promises. Listen, I'm going to go clean up. You need to get in the bathroom before we go to supper?"

He shook his head as he replaced the batteries in the TV remote, something he did every time he stayed in a hotel room. "I'm fine. And you look fine too."

"I need to brush this nasty hair."

"Hey, I *like* that nasty hair." She was very self-conscious of her thinning hair and probably always would be, despite his lack of concern. *I didn't marry your hair*, he said. *You'd feel different if it was yours*, she would reply. *I'd just shave it all off*, he would respond. *And that's the difference between men and women*, she would counter. About then he would usually concede her point, and they would let it be, and he would love her all the more for it.

They had met in rather a curious fashion: she had placed a personal ad in a Nashville newspaper. He was living in Kentucky at the time, but had been traveling to and from Tennessee to do

research for a story he was writing. He had a habit of always having something to read while he ate, and he'd picked up a newspaper on his way to dinner one night. The restaurant he'd intended to go to was closed, but he kept the newspaper and read it while he chewed on fast-food burgers. For some reason still unknown to him (Deb insisted it was predestined) he took the classified ads home to Kentucky with him, and it was there that he spotted her ad. He wrote her a letter, she sent a reply (after having it thoroughly screened by her best friend) and he received it the same day he was to return to Tennessee for a cave trip. He called her from on the road, they arranged a meeting, and they ended up spending much of the next three days together, a stay that was prolonged by an unseasonably late snowstorm. A little over a year later they were married, at the race track Jack was running at the time. Over nineteen years later they had been through poverty, unemployment, despair, and familial rifts, yet they not only stayed together, they had grown closer, more so than even the day they spoke their vows. Their one child, Peter, was off in college at Middle Tennessee State, in his first year. He planned to become a teacher, a decision that had pleased both of his parents, and his grades were quite good for a kid whose High School efforts were...well, less than exemplary. They were as happy a working class family as could be found in George Bush's America.

He watched the television absently while she primped. The local news was on, and his interest was briefly piqued by a story on a large cave near Fall Creek Falls that was threatened by drainage from a town's sewer treatment plant...and then something caught his attention. It was the message light on the phone, and it was lit.

He raised his eyebrows. No one he knew could be aware of the fact that they were staying at the Jordan, but he had known the owner of the motel, Nan, for several years. Perhaps she'd called.

He dialed the office number. The voice that answered wasn't Nan's, and no, he didn't have any messages. On the other hand, the light being on could also mean that he had a missed call. But again, no one knew they were there.

But it could just be a wrong number. He shrugged as Deb came out of the bathroom. "What's up?" she asked as she saw the puzzled look on his face.

He told her. "I'm sure it's nothing," he said, "but I wonder if maybe I should give the office my cell phone number. Just in case it's Petey."

"Petey doesn't know we're here," Deb scoffed. "I didn't know we'd be here myself till I paid the lady."

"Well."

"Well, let's eat."

China Garden was as splendid as ever, and Jack put a serious hurt on their buffet. They took away a pair of full stomachs, fortune cookies, and some treats from Dairy Queen for dessert. "I just cannot eat like that anymore," Jack said as he unlocked the door to their room. "Not like I used to. Danny and me, we used to terrify places like that. I remember this place in Louisville called Ming's Court that..."

He stopped. He'd been on his way into the room and had already spotted the light on the phone. It was illuminated again.

"Well, what do you suppose...?" he murmured.

"What's the matter?" Deb asked.

"I think there's something wrong with the phone," he replied. "The message light is on again."

She walked over to the nightstand and tapped the light a couple of times. It flickered and went out. "There," she said with a satisfied look. "There's your mystery, it's just a loose connection. You'll have to have your friend in the office have a look at it in the morning." She took her bag and walked toward the shower. "I think I'm going to have myself a nice long shower. Somebody can

join me if they'd like to wash my back...and if they can ignore the telephone long enough..."

"Oh, I think I can manage that," he said with a grin. "I'll be along presently."

He watched as she walked into the bathroom, blowing him a kiss as she went. He was about to stand up to head in that direction too, when two things distracted him.

The light was back on.

And the phone was moving.

No, wait, not moving. Vibrating. And it was making a noise too, like it was trying to ring but didn't have enough energy to complete the process. "Well, that's strange," he muttered. "I really am going to have to have Nan have a look at this thing." He picked up the receiver and held it to his ear.

There was no dial tone. Not surprising; the phone was broken, after all...

...or was it? Was that a voice?

"Hello?"

Yes, it was...faint, yes, but a voice, soft, feminine, not saying anything discernable, more a...a...moan, yes, that was it, a moan...

He put the phone down on the cradle as Deb poked her head out of the door, the look on her face a shade or two past annoyance. "You coming in here or not?" she called, irritated.

He sat there for a moment, his face turned away, jaw agape, startled beyond response.

"Jack? Are you playing with that phone again?"

He turned slowly to look at her, her hair sleeked against her pale pink skin. He suspected he looked just as pale, perhaps more so.

"Jack?" Her tone moderated. "Jack? Is something wrong?"

It wasn't anything he could put his finger on. If—if, mind you—what he'd heard was in fact a voice, and if it had been

someone trying to speak to him, then why didn't it say anything? Why just that weird, disembodied moaning?

But there was something...something...sad? Yes, sad, but not just sad, but unbearably sad, something perhaps that mere words couldn't convey...and he had heard it, heard it clearly, in that voice.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day four (Tuesday, 4 November 08)
Total words: 8505. To go: 41495

"Jack?" She walked over quickly and sat beside him.
"Jack? Are you all right? What is it?" She took the receiver from his hand and set it on the cradle. "Did somebody call?"
Oh yes, somebody called all right, he thought. But they didn't leave a message.

"S'nothing," he said. "Nothing at all."

He stood and walked across the room to where his laptop case sat on the small table opposite the door. He unzipped the top, unstrapped the machine, and pulled it out, setting it gently on the table.

"Just a damn minute," Deb said angrily. "No sir. You're not going to go all flaky on me again and not talk to me about it, do you hear?" She grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him toward her. "Now you spill what's going on, Jack, or...or..."

He didn't ask, *or what*. That would've entailed digging up some bodies.

"Look," he said, "it's nothing like that. I just don't feel good." A quick search of the mind for some kind of explanation, then, "I haven't felt right since I ate that soup. Maybe I got a bad bowl. Anyway, I'm feeling better now. I just think I need to rest, okay?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Jack, if you're..."

He held up his palms placatingly, then took her hands in his. "Really. I just got nauseous. I don't know what it is, but it seems to have passed. I'm going to skip the shower and just lie down, if that's okay with you." He motioned toward the bathroom, where the shower was still running. "Go on, you're getting the room all steamy."

"Are you sure?" Her voice was soft, as soft as her look had become, as soft as her skin, which was very soft, indeed.

"I'm sure. Go ahead. I'm fine."

"All right," she murmured, and she turned around and dripped her way back to the bathroom.

He sat still for a moment, looked over his shoulder at the phone, still and dark. He lifted the lid on his laptop and started to press the power button, then he changed his mind and lowered the lid, not enough to latch it, but enough to keep the dust off the screen. Suddenly he really was tired. *Maybe that's it*, he thought. *Maybe I just need a good night's sleep. Didn't get much last night.*

He moved to the bed, discarding clothes as he went, and with one final look at the phone, he lay down and fell asleep almost immediately.

And again he dreams.

A brief aside, by way of explanation: Jack has a past, something that predates Deb by quite a few years. Call it clinical depression, call it mental illness, call it some inexplicable infatuation with the idea of doing himself in, call it Ignatz. By any name it's just as aggravatingly unexplainable.

A few times it was probably just simple loneliness. That was understandable enough considering his solitary nature. A call to a suicide hotline, a talk with a counselor, a couple of months on antidepressants, or what passed for them in those days anyway. Maybe something to help him sleep. God knows he needed it

then. He still does, twenty years later. At times it probably really was depression as defined by all the doctors' manuals, major depression even. More counseling, more drugs. A hobby, an outlet. That was what the doctors suggested back then, and that is where racing comes in so handy now as then. During the season he is rarely without something to do. And when he is unoccupied, well, he flies hobby rockets, big and small; he hikes, he caves, and he writes.

This writing bug is something he picked up in High School. He had always had a creative outlet of some kind or another; he played in the band (clarinet) briefly, and he sung (well, he thought) in the choir. But he couldn't keep a reed intact on the horn, and singing...well, you can't exactly walk around all day singing, can you? Not unless you were living a Rogers and Hammerstein kind of life, which he most certainly was not, is not. No, he needed an extension into which he could plug as often as possible. And that came about when an English teacher suggested he try writing a story for the school paper on his "other" hobby, caving.

He wrote the story and it was well-received, and abruptly he had found something he really could do just about any time he wanted: create stories. Oh, there was something to writing news and features for a paper, to be sure, but it wasn't near so much fun to him as making something up from out of nowhere. There was something perversely God-like in the process, and often when he was deeply involved in his "work", he felt positively immersed in these worlds of his own creation. He might be good at it, too, for all he knows; no one else does. Rarely does he let anyone read his work, and most of the stories (not all, but most) remained unfinished, but he writes and writes. At first it is in notebooks, then for a time he hammered it all out on a typewriter, then in a dedicated word processor before finally getting a computer. Now there is the laptop, and a fairly late-model one at

that, to go along with the relatively dated desktop machines he keeps at home. They don't make crafting the story any easier, but they do make the recording process dead simple compared to hacking it together with paper, pen, ink, and correction fluid. And lots of that.

So he writes. Scribum ergo sum; I Write, therefore I Am.

Descartes would be satisfied. It is a simple enough philosophy, and it makes plenty of sense to him...as long as the imagination holds up, he is happy, and he requires little chemical assistance to remain that way. The occasional Leinenkugel, perhaps.

What then, explains what he is seeing now, in a troubled sleep that is violent enough to so nearly wake his wife, who is—fortunately for her—at that moment ensconced safely in the room's second bed? Why does he toss so? What are these voices he is hearing in these dreams, whose faces are these that pass before him, all looking so angry? Why can't he rest? Isn't that what he had claimed he was seeking all those years when he was bent on self-destruction? Rest?

That one awful face again, then: like a chocolate bunny left in the sun too long, like the ice sculpture he'd had made for the race track banquet last year, still intact but running and not long for this world...that face, not angry, not upset, but concerned, even worried. About what? About him? Why?

He awoke with a start, sat up. Looked at the phone.

No, the light was off, and it was still, not even a twitch of a vibration.

He turned his gaze to Deb. She was relatively disturbed, moaning, but not like the voice he had heard earlier. It was her customary sleep sound, a kind of a mid-pitched *hnnnnnn*, a sound he'd grown to love in nearly twenty years. It was a comfortable sound, one which grew more so as he grew still himself.

Jesus, he thought. What on earth is going on?

The look on Deb's face gradually slipped into relaxation, and she rolled over. He smiled sleepily; she was wearing one of his race track shirts, on the back of which was printed the legend, *One Hundred Laps Of Dynamite With A Thirty Car Fuse!* It was one of his better efforts, and they'd sold a thousand of them. *Should have made more*, he thought...

...and then he turned his head around curiously. It had suddenly occurred to him that if he was able to read the writing on her (his) shirt, then there was a light behind him...but from what? The windows were on *her* side, she should have been in shadow...

The glow was coming from his laptop, which was on. The lid was still mostly closed, just as he'd left it, but the machine was on.

He hadn't turned it on. His finger had never touched the power button. Oh, it had come close, yes, but it hadn't touched it.

Tentatively he stood and padded over to the table. Sitting, he reached out and lifted the lid slowly. Yes, it was on. But not just on; it was also logged in.

He wasn't exactly paranoid, but then again he wasn't keen on just anybody picking up his machine and reading his stuff, so there was a password lock on the OS. So providing that he really had pressed the power button, there was still the matter of him entering the password...which he knew he had definitely not done.

Somnambulism? It wasn't in his makeup. Yes, he had problems falling asleep; a Temezepam usually took care of that, but he didn't need to use it daily. Either he slept or he didn't, and if he didn't, he got out of bed and wrote, or he worked on a rocket, or he would just lie in the bed and...well, *consider* things. He'd done a lot of that when the money was really tight. It wasn't a big deal, and he would sleep like the innocent the next night. Sleepwalk? Never.

Which left the question unanswered, how the machine came to be not just on, but logged in.

He yawned. Well, stranger things had happened. His computers at the track had “spontaneously” turned themselves on before. The PC in scoring had been known to display random characters in the Notepad window some evenings, usually when he was somewhere in the vicinity. The scoring crew had gone so far as to ask him to stay away from their room when the races were ongoing. *Power surges*, the IT guy had said. *Bovine excrement*, Jack had replied, but in the nicest possible way.

He looked it over, shook his head and yawned. Well, there was no point worrying about it. Deb would have a fit if she woke and found him staring at his laptop. The phone would stay behind when they checked out, but the computer would be coming with them, and he didn't need her being paranoid about it. Or being paranoid about him being paranoid, for that matter. He shut the machine down and went back to bed.

Everything was quiet when he woke up again. There was a clock radio on top of the television, the same one Nan had loaned him (and left in the room after they departed) so many years ago so he and Dan could set an alarm to get up at 3 to go hiking. It read 5:25. The light was on in the bathroom, and the shower was on. *Gosh, I knew she wanted to get an early start*, he thought, *but 5:30? Nobody will...*

But Deb was still in bed.

He got up, looked at her sleeping form. She was wrapped up like a burrito, pretty much like always. If she'd turned on the shower and had left it running, it had been going a while.

Well, 5:30. Might just as well get up. The sun would be rising soon, and they could go to the West Side and have breakfast. Pancakes sounded good, unsettled stomach or not. And he needed a shower anyway. No sense wasting more water than was already streaming down the drain. He walked into the

bathroom, which was as much a steam bath by now. He couldn't even begin to wonder how long it had been running, and how high the water bill would be. Sorry Nan, he thought.

He stripped off his clothes and walked into the shower, and what a delight *that* was. No, the Jordan Motel wasn't the Waldorf, and it wasn't even a Holiday Inn, but it was clean, it was inexpensive, and the walk-in showers the rooms on this side possessed...well, they were the *best*. He'd gone to far as to have an estimate done on the bathroom attached to their bedroom, to see what it would cost to be redone with a walk-in, and it was this very shower that was the inspiration and the would-be model. He hung a towel on the door and walked in, sighing luxuriously.

There is no feeling on earth quite like a long, hot bath, and the Gilcrest home was equipped with a "garden" tub. It was an unneeded expense, yes, but he and Deb both loved their baths, and as often as not if you couldn't find one or the other, you might well begin your hunt in the bath. Still, there are just some times when only a shower will do, and immediately after an arduous hike is one of those times. It was after just such a hike that Jack had discovered the wonders of a walk-in, not the least of which was that he didn't need to step into a slippery tub with legs that were barely fit to move his bulk from the car to the bed, let alone from tile to tub. It had been a rugged walk he'd done along Honey Creek, more of a struggle than he'd figured on for a six-mile trail, and he'd gone from steamy heat to a riotous thunderstorm in the nearly twelve hours he spent there. By the time he was finished, he was almost sure he was through for the weekend, with another two days left in his trip.

But an hour in shower did wonders. He'd spent so much time sitting sprawled on the concrete floor atop a textured rubber shower mat that the skin on his dupah was left looking like a map of downtown New York, but he didn't care, not one bit. There was plenty of room (the shower was five feet square...glorious!) and the mat was soft, and the wall he lay against was warm with the water from the shower...he just let the water rain down on him,

easing away incipient hypothermia and the stress and anxiety of being in the middle of nowhere alone and hurting, and along with that, all sorts of real life's various unpleasanties were washed away like so much exfoliated skin. When he finally stood up, he felt like he'd been reborn. He was still nearly crippled by the blisters peppering his feet and toes, but that sort of thing never stopped him for very long, and following some early morning motel room surgery he was back on the trail the next day.

There was always so much on his mind, it didn't seem possible that it was so easy to switch it all off just by getting into running water, but it had always worked wonders. Since he was a child he had loved walking in the rain, even when it was cold. Caves with running streams were "pure-dee" delights to him. Showers were no different, and he had almost totally forgotten the strangeness of the day as he shut off the water, wrapped his towel over his shoulders, and stepped onto the bathroom rug. He was going to make faces in the mirror, as was his custom when getting out of the shower with wild hair, but the reflection he saw when he finally did manage to make it out was anything but amusing.

The mirror was fogged, of course. No surprise there. The word "HELP", in childish-looking block letters, fingered in the moisture on the glass, now *that* was a surprise.

He stepped back and just stood there for a full minute staring at it. He'd done this sort of thing when he was a kid. Everybody probably had, and why not? It's easy enough; you just smear a thin layer of soap on your finger and write the message, usually scatological, on the mirror and unless they looked extra-carefully, the intended victim, usually his younger sister, wouldn't see it till the bathroom steamed up, at which time the mirror would fog everywhere except where the soapy finger had touched. It was cool, it was a great prank, and it was kind of creepy too, the perfect thing for Halloween.

Only, this wasn't Halloween, and his sister was hundreds of miles away in Indiana. He supposed that Nan *could've* done it

as a joke—they knew each other well enough to prank one another, and she had once nailed him with a whoopee cushion—but somehow her reserved demeanor didn't seem in keeping with this sort of thing. That, and her hi-jinks were usually confined to the office area. He knew for a fact she had a squirting flower (in a pot!) on her desk. Knew, because she'd got him with *that* too.

Could it be whoever was doing the cleaning? Hard to say. He was around a couple of times a year, often enough for Nan to know him well, but no one else. During the summer she generally hired kids from the York Institute, or her kids or grandchildren when school was in session. She paid them pretty well, so she said, and it just didn't seem likely that somebody would risk a decent part time job over an ill-advised joke.

Which left two possibilities. Either it was Deb, or it wasn't.

He would rather it be Deb. But he knew it wasn't. Decidedly not her style.

HELP.

He opened the bathroom window and sat down on the commode, put his hands on his head, and looked up at the stucco ceiling. There were no answers there, and that was probably a good thing; had there been writing there, he likely would've dived right out the window. But it did allow him to collect himself a bit as the steam slowly cleared and the mirror de-fogged, taking the message with it.

HELP.

Help *who*? Help *how*?

Nan, he thought, *if this is your doing, you've succeeded in creeping me out. Utterly.*

It all added up to a completely inexplicable whole. The dream, the faces. The melted man. The phone, and the voice on it. His laptop. Who knows, maybe even his being sick had something to do with it all, and if it did, what did it all mean? Taken individually, they didn't seem like much, but together...

"Who are you, and how can I help you?" he murmured.

Then the door began to open.

Slowly, slowly.

He felt his skin crawl. He didn't breathe again till Deb poked her head in. "You're up early," she said sleepily. "Couldn't wait to sleep, and now you're up. What's wrong with you, Jack?"

He smiled, or as much as he could. "Just eager to get out, I guess."

"Yeah, surrrre. Want some coffee? There's a little pot in the closet."

"Love some." He got up and kissed her proffered lips. "Love *you*."

"You better."

He wouldn't drink the coffee. The pre-packed stuff in most motel percolators never ended up much more than brown water. Still, it would distract her while he finished gathering himself...and it would give him a chance to wipe down that mirror.

Breakfast at the West Side Café was as splendid as ever. "Best pancakes in Tennessee," he proclaimed as the waitress brought them. "Way better than the Pancake Pantry, or Der Pancake Haus, or that place in Gatlinburg."

"Don't forget cheaper," the waitress said cheerily, "which means more money to tip with..."

He grinned at her. "More coffee, then."

"At your service, yon Knight of the Deep Woods."

Deb shook her head as the woman left. "Have I commented yet on this trip about what an insufferable flirt you are?" she said dryly, with a tight smile. "It seems you have women scattered across Tennessee."

"Ready and waiting to do my bidding," he chuckled. "I love them and leave them, and still they want their ol' Jack back. Imagine that. No really, the secret is that I'm a big tipper, and they remember big tippers."

"And I remember the small tippers even better," Drea Walls (yes, he remembered her name too) asserted. "We sure did enjoy

the races, Jack. And the kids loved it when the jet car burned that ambulance up. Thanks for the tickets."

Jack Gilchrest, like just about every race promoter on the planet, carried a wad of "comps"—complimentary tickets—with him pretty much everywhere he went. They were cheap advertising, the best kind, and even free tickets usually ended up making him money in concessions. Besides, he enjoyed giving people a chance to see a free race, especially when it was at *his* track. It was a great way to grow the sport he loved. That, and they made a dandy extra add-on for a tip.

"You are more than welcome, Miss Drea. My wife and I are here for the Sale. You got any local scoop on where we might find some good deals?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, that all depends on what you're looking for. Allardt is a good place to start, but it's not the best. I think the closer you come to Cox's Crossroads, that's where the really cool stuff starts to come out. The people with the money, the immigrants, (by which she meant people like Jack, out-of-staters) they don't put out much. The older folks, that's who you're really looking for, especially if it's antiques you're into."

"We were in Allardt yesterday. I met an interesting character there, Chester Akins was his name. I guess he was a miner back in the day; he mentioned working somewhere down along No Business Creek. Know him?"

"Huh." She looked out the window thoughtfully. "Nope, don't know him. Funny, I know most everybody round these parts, Allardt included, and I know lots of old miners. Nobody named Chester Akins though."

She was right, that was funny. But not at all humorous. "How about Chet? Chet Akins?"

"What, kinda like the guitar player? Nope, don't know him. I surely know Chet *Atkins* though. Saw him at the Ryman in Nashville."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day five (Wednesday, 5 November 08)
Total words: 12165. To go: 37835

“Well.” There wasn’t much else to say.

They finished their breakfast, said their goodbyes, and departed. He left a ten dollar tip, and a sheaf of comps.

On then, to Cox’s Crossroads, as Drea had directed. Jack knew better than to ignore her; she’d laid some good hike locations on he and Dan once, and had even gave them the name of a landowner in the western part of the county who had a one hundred and fifty foot deep pit open on his property. They ended up being the first people to touch the bottom of it, and now it was a popular destination for area cavers.

The traffic on the road was considerably thicker today than it had been the day before, but with this being the first “full” day of the sale, that was only to be expected. As they passed through Allardt, Jack made a point to look for Chet Akins; he was there, or at least his house was, and the name on the mailbox out front definitely read, “C AKINS”. *Can’t be right all the time, Drea*, he thought.

“This is going to be an interesting trip,” Deb remarked as Jack steered around a family walking across the road, “especially if we go all the way from border to border. I can’t believe how these people are just letting their kids cross the street. They don’t even look!”

“Well, I guess we’re expected to look out for them,” Jack said, slowing for another pedestrian. They really *were* thick here, but then Drea had warned them of that much.

It was a pretty little hamlet, not big enough to be called a town, no business at all, or at least not 362 days a year. Today, and for the next couple of days, it would be thriving. They found a

convenient place to park—five dollars, another contribution to the local economy—and steeled themselves for the coming assault.

"I did good yesterday," Deb said, "but Jack, you were pretty disappointing. A CD and a book, and I ended up having to buy that for you because you were too timid to haggle."

"I was *not* too timid," Jack said. "Just...reluctant."

"Well, if you ask me to help you today, I might be just reluctant, know what I mean? Take your stones with you.

Mmmkay?"

He kissed her, figuring it was better to quit while she was ahead. "Call me if you need me," he said. "Have fun."

She turned and walked toward the edge of the road. Careful to look both ways—not everyone would be as careful a driver as Jack—she hesitated, took a step...*and vanished, completely and instantly.*

Jack blinked. Had he really seen what he thought he'd seen? He shook his head, wiped his eyes. Mouth open in shock and horror, he watched a car pass directly through the spot Deb would have been, *should* have been. But was not.

"*Deb!*" he screamed. "*Deb! Where are you?*"

He ran the few steps into the road, stopped, looked around. Nothing. People, yes, but not *the person*. It was as if she'd walked off the face of the earth, right there in plain sight. "Deb! Deb! *Deb!*" This last in a long, drawn-out wail of despair.

"Here now," a man's voice called from behind him. "Sir, you're going to have to get out of the middle of the road. You're liable to get somebody killed. Maybe yourself."

He turned around and saw a tall man with thick, gray-brown hair and a luxurious beard. He was holding a canvas book bag emblazoned with the legend, *Caution: This Bag Contains Banned Books*. Jack might've found it clever but for the horrific turn of events.

"Really," the man said. "I don't know what's wrong, but during Yard Sale, if you stand in the road long enough,

somebody's gonna run you down. Okay?" He offered Jack his hand. "That's it, come on. What's wrong?"

"Are you *deaf* as well as blind?" Jack shouted angrily. "My wife just disappeared! Right there!" He pointed to the spot in the road. "There, where I was standing! She stepped away from me—we were going to shop separately—and she just...vanished! *Vanished!*"

The man looked him over with a mixture of curiosity and pity. "Sir, just relax."

Jack thought his eyes would bulge from his head. "What?" he screamed. "What? Relax?"

The man nodded tentatively. "Relax. Losing your head right now won't help. I'm sorry, I know you're upset, but..."

"I think...I think I'm going to be sick."

"Here." He took Jack by the arm and led him off the road, and beneath the shelter of a pecan tree. "No sense you getting plowed under. Here, have a seat."

Sit. Yes. That might be good. Jack sat in the grass beneath the tree, his eyes still riveted to the spot he last saw Deb.

He wanted to run there, look around, do something, *anything*, but what? What *could* he do? She was gone, had dematerialized right there before his eyes, disintegrated, whatever it was that had happened, and he had been completely helpless to do anything. And he still was.

The man brought over a paper cup. "Here," he said. "Something to drink."

Jack took it, looked down at it. "What?" he asked. He could detect a faint odor of alcohol.

"Lemonade," the man said. "Plus. Looks like you could use it."

He could, but he didn't. "No. Don't want any liquor. Can I have some water?"

"Well, sure you can. Gae, can you get some water for this fella? He looks all in."

"Here," said a woman, handing Jack a cup of water. "Drew, what on earth were you thinking, giving the poor man something like that? You ought to be ashamed."

"He looked like he needed it," the man called Drew said. "Tell us your name, friend."

Jack continued to stare at the spot, as if hoping against hope Deb would come walking right back out of the air there and continue her interrupted walk across the road. *Come back, Sweetie, please come back, there's glass animals and ceramic plates...Tony Hillerman books...all kinds of Indian crafts, you can have all my money to spend too, if you'll just come back, please...*

There was a hand on his shoulder. It was the woman, Gae. She was extraordinarily good-looking, ethereally so, with red hair cascading down to her shoulders, a vibrant complexion and a spray of freckles over her nose. She was wearing an old-fashioned dress, a forest green with lace trim. "It will be all right," she said softly. "It will be all right."

He looked up into her rich green eyes. "No," he said haltingly, "no, it won't, not till she comes back."

"I can't know what you're going through," Gae whispered, "but you must believe me: it *will* be all right."

"She wouldn't lie to you," Drew said firmly. "She never has to me. If she told me the sun was going to rise colored purple tomorrow, I'd be repainting everything to match."

It was so ridiculous, he couldn't help but laugh, which elicited a chuckle from Gae. "There you are," she said. "There's a smile. See, it's going to be all right. Tell us your name."

"Jack," he managed. "Jack Gilchrest."

"And what's happened? Calmly, now, I'm listening to every word you say."

Her voice was so gently and composed, he couldn't help but reply in kind. "Just what I told him. I kissed my wife goodbye. She walked away from me. She stepped into the road, and she just disappeared. Vanished. One second she was there, the next she was gone."

"Jack Gilchrest," Drew said. "Well, Jack, if I had been anywhere but right next to you, I wouldn't believe you. But I was, and I do."

Jack looked at the man with eyes just as huge and shocked as they had been when Deb vanished. "You mean...you mean you saw it? You saw her disappear too?"

"Not saying that," Drew said cautiously. "What I *am* saying is that I believe what you say you saw. Strange things happen in the South Cumberland, Jack." He winked at Gae conspiratorially. "I think we of all people ought to know."

Jack took a deep breath and sighed. *Well, at least they don't think I'm crazy*, he thought.

Gae shook her head. "Oh, no Jack. We don't think you're crazy."

"Well, not *yet*, anyway," Drew added.

She slapped Drew's shoulder. "Listen to you. Where are Josh and Ellen? Never around when you need them, those two."

"Your kids?" Jack asked, drawing his knees up to his chest.

She laughed. "Of a sort. Of a sort. Ellen!" She called to a young woman who was cartwheeling through the yard. She changed direction in mid-rotation and ended up with a round-off almost at Gae's feet. "Show off," Gae scolded.

Ellen was built like a pixie, slim, short-haired, and bursting with energy. She put her hands on her hips, smiled prettily at Jack, and stuck out her tongue at Gae. "What's wrong?"

"This is Jack," Gae said, motioning toward Jack. "Jack Gilchrest. His wife just disappeared."

The woman looked shocked. "Oh no," she said softly. "I'm so sorry. Where did it happen?"

"In the road," Jack said quietly. "What did you say your name was?"

"Ellen. Ellen Crosby. I'm...a friend of Drew's. I'm, kind of like Gae's daughter, if you know what I mean."

No, Jack thought, *I don't know what you mean*.

"But Jack," Gae said in a voice that was just above a whisper, "you *do*."

And that was when he understood. Oh, it took another minute or so of staring into those crystalline green eyes for it all to sink in, but once it did, it made sense...or as much sense as it could, anyway.

I know these people!

And well he should. *He had created them.*

Name them, then: Drew Harden, a man who felt himself disenfranchised from his own family. He had left home one day for a hiking trip, and he had never returned. Instead he wandered the hills and hollows of the South Cumberland, having been slain by a trio of meth cooks. Gae—or was it Frieda Gae?—Owen, who had murdered her husband, but for all the right reasons, and who had brought Drew back to life. Ellen Crosby, shape-shifter, who had once been a deer, a copperhead, and a turkey vulture.

"You see, you *do* understand," Gae said with a nod.

And he did. These were all characters. Characters from stories, stories he himself had written!

He looked back toward that spot in the road. *My God*, he thought. *Can such things be?*

"Oh, they can, Mister Gilcrest," Ellen said. "Really. That's something you of all people ought to know better than anybody. Anything can happen."

"Anything," Gae agreed. "Anything at all. If it you can dream it, it can be."

Drew came back. "Couldn't find Josh," he said, "but I see my dearest has joined you. Ellen, does he know yet?"

"Oh, he knows," Ellen replied, "but I don't think he wants to believe it. Not yet anyway."

"Oh, I want to believe," Jack stammered, his eyes still straining in their orbits. "I want to believe. I'll believe anything if it brings Deb back."

"If it were but that simple," Gae said quietly.

It occurred to Jack just then that the world seemed deathly still, as if everything had come to a halt around them, perhaps so nothing would distract him from the purposed of this little...oh, call it a reunion.

"If it were but that simple," Gae repeated, her voice sad. "But I'm afraid it isn't, Jack."

"She's right, of course," said Drew, his voice at least somewhat more consoling than hers. "You know what's going on now, and that's good. We can't tell you a lot..."

"We're bound not to," Ellen added, by way of explanation.

"...but we can at least tell you something that might make you feel better: *she's not dead.*"

Jack looked up at Drew's eyes, the eyes of the man he had created, in his own idealized image and likeness. "You don't look at all like me," he murmured.

"Well, of course not," Gae laughed. "We are as you created us. You gave us life. Some more than others, obviously." She winked at Ellen. "At least *she* got to sleep with Drew. But I can see why you did what you did. I am a Goddess, after all."

Jack nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes you are." Gaea, that's who she was. Yes, she was a Goddess, *the* Goddess, if such things were to be believed.

"But I can't do what you wish most. I can't bring your Deb back. And I know it is killing you, and it might well finish you before it's over. But hear me, Jack Gilchrest, and listen well: if you keep your head, if you can collect your wits and follow the clues, I promise you, your wife will be restored to you before three moons rise. There's no reason that can't happen. But it will all be up to you."

Jack staggered to his feet. "I don't get it," he stammered. "I mean..."

She held up her hands. "I can tell you no more," she said. "You have some of the clues already. More will be provided you, when it's time. But I can say no more. Ellen spoke the truth; we

are bound by forces greater than all of us. Even you, Jack, and you *created* us."

"But, if I created you, then I should hold some dominion over you."

"Dominion!" Ellen laughed. "Dominion, the man says!" She leapt into the air, and came down as a red fox, which looked up at Jack with playful eyes, then it bounded away in a rough approximation of the direction from which it had come.

Jack shook his head. "This is just...well, it's bit much."

"Jack, I know where you're coming from," Drew said, slapping him on the back. "I do. But you're just going to have to take her word for it. Really, we can't tell you any more. Wish we could, but we can't. It's all yours now."

He looked at them wildly. They were starting to...well, fade away, he supposed later, their forms growing fainter till all he saw was a vague outline of their bodies, then nothing. He stood in place for just a moment, then he walked back across the road—hesitating for just an instant in the spot where Deb had so abruptly disappeared—and back to the car.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day six (Thursday, 6 November 08)

Total words: 14600. To go: 35400

Still later, he lay on her bed at the motel. *It still smells like her*, he thought sadly, trying desperately to decide what he should do. And it was a valid enough question. Under normal circumstances he would've called 9-1-1, had a Sheriff's Deputy come out and investigate, but how do you explain to Fentress County's finest that your wife had just evaporated? And, what's more, that the only clues he had as to where she'd gone had come from fictional characters? He knew how that sort of thing would go. He'd either get a field sobriety test, and when he

passed that (providing he *did*, he wasn't exactly stable on his feet right now) he'd be taken to County Memorial for observation.

Three days. Or three moons, as Frieda Gae Owen (Gaea, in his short story, *Lemon Drops for the Green One*) had told him. Was that a deadline of sorts, or was it her prediction of how long it would take for Deb to be restored to him?

He decided not to take a chance, and if that meant working around the law, well, he'd just have to do it.

Let's think about this, then, he thought. *First, I get sick. Very sick. Then the phone starts going flaky. Then I meet a guy who may or may not exist. Then the phone really wigs out, and my laptop starts up and logs on all by itself. Then the message on the mirror. And then...*

And then Deb disappears.

He rolled over, inhaled her delicate, powdery scent on the bedclothes. *Oh God, Deb, what's going on?*

In time he fell asleep. But it wasn't for a long, long time, and it was a troubled sleep.

It isn't real, he knows. Probably that knowing is a good thing. He can see Deb, just faintly. She is surrounded by a crowd of people though, a complete circle of them, several bodies deep. Their faces are turned away from him, so while he can tell that there are men, women, and children in the group, he can't identify any of them.

She holds her arms out to him. It isn't a plaintive gesture; she doesn't appear to be in any danger, at least not yet, nor does she look particularly troubled. That is at least something of a comfort. He tries to walk towards her. Never mind that this is a dream; he wants to get close to her. But as soon as he does, the crowd closes its ranks, draws in tighter. Now she does perhaps look a little frightened. "Leave her alone!" he shouts angrily. "Get away from her!"

There is a sound, then, faint, like the outlines of the bodies. Unidentifiable at first, as it rises in volume and tone it is obviously

laughter, the laughter of many voices, laughter that is nothing if not sinister. And now he is frightened, and any peace of mind Gaea's words had given him was gone just as completely as was Deb, gone without a trace.

He woke, sat up, looked around. No light on the phone, no active laptop, but there was something...wrong? He wasn't sure.

Unsteadily he climbed to his feet. The tile floor was cold and he was instantly awake, and an instant later he realized the room was frightfully cold too; in the faint light from the bathroom light he'd left on, he could see his breath. Whatever was going on, it wasn't faulty air conditioning.

The clock radio read 6:10 AM. Time to get up anyway. He was amazed that he'd slept the night through under the circumstances, but he wasn't about to complain. He walked to the door in bare feet, opened it, expecting to find the air outside warmer than the air in the room.

It wasn't. It was colder, much colder. In fact, it was *snowing*.

Snowing! In June!

Unseasonable snows aren't necessarily uncommon at high altitudes, but at 1800 feet above sea level, the South Cumberland isn't exactly alpine territory. On the other hand, weirder things had happened before...like his wife vanishing before his eyes. If that sort of thing could happen, well, he was prepared to accept snow in Jamestown in June. He closed the door, and went and started a shower.

He let the steam build up before he went in, purposely undressing slowly so as to allow time for...anyone, anyone at all, who wanted to, to write their message to him on the mirror. He was disappointed to find the glass well-steamed but otherwise unmarked when he finally did walk in.

In the shower, he planned his day. *If this has something to do with the Sale, he mused, then maybe I have to go back to it.*

She said I had some of the clues I needed, and that I could find the rest.

So, where to start? The beginning? Well, where was the beginning? On the road from Cookeville, where he'd first noticed he was getting sick? Here in the room, where he'd heard the weird voice (or voices, he'd wondered if perhaps there was more than one) on the phone? Or back at Cox's Crossroads, where Deb had disappeared and he had met Gaea, Ellen, and Drew? Or was the answer just that he needed to continue down the road and collect clues along the way?

That last made at least some sense. *I mean, it's why we came here in the first place*, he thought, *to go to the Sale. What if the clues are somewhere along the route? Is it something I have to hunt for, something maybe that she was looking for?* He decided immediately that if he did nothing else, he was going to stop at every display that looked like it had things that Deb would like. He didn't know if it was the right thing to do or not, but it *felt* right.

He shut off the shower, walked out, and immediately looked at the mirror. It was still unmarred. *Well, I didn't figure I was going to be getting any easy hints.*

Then the phone rang, and he almost wet himself. As it was, he slipped on the cold tile with his wet feet and nearly brained himself trying to get to the night stand where the phone rested, not still at all anymore. He hesitated just a second before picking it up, then decided that things could hardly get stranger that they already were. He'd already lost Deb, how could things be worse? But he didn't want to think about that either. He just picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Jack. Listen, I just wanted you to know why you were being such a stranger since you'd come in. Not a word, not a visit. Queenie is pretty upset."

Queenie was Nan's well-traveled orange tabby, and she was another one of Jack's "love slaves". She seemed extraordinarily drawn to him, in a way that Nan insisted did not

happen with any of her other guests. "It's uncanny," she'd told him on a previous visit. "Anybody else came in here and tried to sit on that sofa, she'd chase them away with her claws out and her back up, but you, she walks up to you like she's known you forever and plants herself on your lap." She had even visited his room on a couple of occasions, scratching at the door till he let her in.

Back then he'd thought maybe it was just his own two cats at home and their varied scents on his clothing. Now he wasn't so sure. "I'll be up there today sometime, Nan, maybe after dinner," he said. "I...I just have...some things I need to do." *Like track down my missing wife.* "I'm here for the Sale."

"Isn't everybody? I saw you head out yesterday. You find anything interesting?"

"Interesting. I guess you could say that. You wouldn't believe just *how* interesting."

"Are you here alone?"

Now that, *that* was an intriguing query. Nan knew good and well he wasn't alone, in fact, Deb had checked them in. He wasn't certain if she'd seen her, but he knew how Deb always signed the register cards: *Mr. and Mrs. Jack Gilcrest.* So Nan *had* to know Deb was here. So why would she even ask?

Unless...unless...

"Who is this?" he asked.

No answer.

"Are you still there?"

"You need to be careful with wet feet on tile floors, Jack. You might really hurt yourself the next time you fall, and that would be awful, just awful."

Now it was a demand. "Who is this?"

"Have you looked outside yet, Jack?" There was a faint giggle. "Maybe you'd better look again. Give the rest of the world that hasn't seen your little wang a chance to point and laugh."

"*Who is this?*"

The question was answered with the click of a disconnected line.

He put on enough clothes to be decent, if not warm, and walked across the snowy sidewalk to the office, which was—as he had expected—locked up tight and dark. Queenie stared through the window in his general direction, but (and he found this a little disconcerting) not *at* him.

He tapped the window. Still the cat didn't appear to react at all. *Has she gone deaf?* he wondered. She was pretty old; in cat years she would be in her mid-eighties now, if he recalled correctly, Nan had shown he and Dan (who was also a cat fancier) the complex equation vets used to apply human ages to cats. Dogs generally were seven human years to one dog year, but cats apparently had their own formula, which was just what one would expect from such a curious species.

Cold, very cold. It was still snowing, and the wind was downright raw, so he walked at a fast pace back to the room and put on warm clothes. Dress for the day, Deb had always told him, a simple rule that had always applied before. Still, things were so screwy now, he supposed it was just as likely that the sun would be out and it would be seventy degrees by lunchtime. So he dressed in layers he could easily remove should that happen.

Then he was ready to leave, and he came to another crossroads of sorts: should he be checking out? As far as he knew, Deb had only had the room for one day. They hadn't taken much stuff in, but should he leave the key behind? Had she even paid? Nan usually took a credit card number and charged it when he checked out. But should he?

He thought about it for a moment, then decided that no, he shouldn't. It made more sense to stay at the Jordan. *First of all*, he thought, *this is like a second home to me. Second, it's close to where Deb disappeared. Third, it sure seems to be a magnet for weirdness, and if anything's going to get us through this safely, it's sure gonna be weird.* No, he would stay where he was, at least for the time being. Again, he was going on instinct alone, but somehow that was okay. *I'll know if it isn't*, he thought. *If I come*

back and the door's locked and our stuff's in the office, well, that'll be a clue in itself...

First order of business was breakfast. There didn't seem to be any particular rush, and besides, he always thought better with a full stomach. He pulled on a fleece Big Dogs jacket (a gift from his father) and walked out the door to the car.

That was when he finally noticed the message on the windshield, drawn in the wet snow. Almost covered now, the snow was still falling fast and hard.

Four letters, again in that large, irregular block script: C A K I. Nothing more.

"CAKI?" he said aloud. "What's 'CAKI'?"

And *that* was when the snowball hit him, smack on the side of his head, just above the right ear. *Hard*.

"Mother..." He choked off the invective only with the greatest restraint.

Another, larger snowball impacted on his jacket, directly over his heart.

Time to bolt, he decided, and that wasn't any great leap of deduction either. He was under fire. Thank God for keyless remote entry; he had the door unlocked by the time he got to it and ducked in just as another "round" hit the front glass, obliterating what was left of the message. He started the car and carefully backed out—he was anxious, but not insane, he knew the drive would be slick as snot—and pulled out, but not before the car was pelted by an even half-dozen mushy missiles.

Somehow it didn't seem right to have breakfast at the West Side without Deb, so he kept going through town to where he knew there was a Hardees. That was one of those places where he had yet to have a bad meal, so walked in, ordered a couple of biscuits and coffee, and sat looking out the window at the amazed passers-by goggling at the snow.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day seven (Friday 7 November 08)
Total words: 16821. To go: 33179

***No writing on day eight, busy helping paint parents' house.
No, really, I did. Made up for it on day nine...***

It was funny, watching the reactions, especially believing—as he did—that the frosty precipitation had been produced for the sole purpose of communicating a message to him. An enigmatic message, to be sure, but a message of some sort.

'CAKI'. Well, he knew an actress he liked who went by that name, but it was spelled with a K, not a C. He supposed it could be an acronym, and he went through a litany of them, something he and Deb and Petey used to do as a travel game. You see a set of initials on a road sign, and you make up the words that go along with it. Deb's tended to be rather innocent; for example, she might come up with

Cats And Kitties, Incorporated

while his were somewhat more earthy or crude, like
Creepy And Kinky Indulgences

or

Cannibals And Killers, Institutionalized

which more than anything epitomized his attitude at the moment, except maybe for the *kinky*. Dark, foreboding, ominous, sinister even. A stark contrast to what was going on right outside his window, where kids were having a snowball fight and building snowmen in the grassy bit between the parking lot and the road, where cars were creeping by, barely moving. Occasionally a snowball would sail from the middle—never from anyone identifiable—of a group of kids, and impact with a satisfying 'thunk' on a quarter panel of a passing car, eliciting an angry honk of the horn. Windshields were strictly off-limits for obvious reasons, but everything else was considered fair game.

He couldn't help but grin. This had been an everyday thing in his hometown during the winter, as the kids would walk home from school, all cars were considered fair game, especially the ones shuttling children to and from classes. After all, the ones who lived too close to ride the bus but not so far that their parents would drive them had to trudge home along sidewalks that often were not shoveled, so they considered it almost an affront that someone else was being chauffeured. It got to the point where the local constabulary was called out once too often, and someone was hauled into court on a charge of malicious mischief. Jack couldn't recall anyone who was ever successfully prosecuted, but the point was made. Still, the more clandestine attacks continued to this day, usually much as they were here and now, kids in a large group surrounding one with a sharp eye and a strong arm.

What to do, what to do? He supposed he would retrace their steps, as much as possible, go to Allardt first and then south toward Cox's Crossroads. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but while he had been pretty sure it didn't involve shopping, now he wasn't so certain. Best to just approach the day with an open mind and see how things develop.

The biscuits safely tucked in, and an extra cup of coffee nestled in its cup holder, Jack pulled carefully out of the lot, waving at the bombardiers and expecting at least a couple of impacts. There was but one, on the trunk, and that was negligible. He eased toward the turn towards Allardt and headed west.

Should he stop at the gas station they'd visited before? He wondered. If he was going to follow the exact pattern he and Deb had the previous day, no, but then if that was the plan he should've eaten at the West Side. He passed both then and continued, eventually turning south and driving slowly through the little burg and towards the scene of Deb's disappearance.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, no one was out collecting money at the vacant lot they'd parked at yesterday. It was just too cold, even for commerce. As he climbed out of the car they had affectionately named "Lucy" upon purchase, Jack rubbed his

hands and wished he'd brought gloves and a proper hat. Both were items that weren't on either of their checklists. His breath was a cloud of steam and he wondered just how many people would be out selling, let alone buying, in conditions like these. But you can't keep a Yard Sale down, and he knew that monsoon-like rainstorms hadn't been enough to...um...*dampen* spirits. He didn't expect a snowstorm to chill things much.

First, he walked over to the spot—he knew where it was, for sure—where Deb had vanished...and he found something very curious. Despite the chill temperature, despite the heavy snow that was still falling, there was no snow on the ground here at all. It covered the road except where the car tires had passed, and the grass and gravel verges completely, but that spot, this place where something so awful had occurred...no snow.

He crouched, felt the ground. It didn't feel any different than anywhere else. Cold to the touch. The sign outside the bank in Jamestown had displayed 27 degrees, and he suspected it had been thus most of the night. So why was the ground bare here, in this spot of all spots? Why not anywhere else?

He turned his head, froze. He'd heard his name being called.

He was about to chalk it to wishful thinking when he heard it again. And not just his name.

I distinctly heard, "Jack, help me" and "I'm here", he thought numbly. And it was her voice.

He was very still for several minutes, even to the point of making a car drive around him as it tried to pass by on the road. He was desperate to hear the voice again, to confirm that which in his heart was already certain: that he had heard Deb's voice calling to him from...from somewhere. Where, exactly, he had no clue, but if he could hear her, he reasoned, it was still possible that he could get to her, or better still, get her back to *him*.

"Excuse me, sir?" a voice called from above and to his right. "Are you all right?"

Jack looked toward the voice. It was a small car, a Rabbit, he thought, though all of those 80s and 90s econo-boxes all looked the same to him. A woman's head was poking out of the passenger side window, a head adorned with a bright red Louisville Cardinals stocking cap and cheeks just as red. The eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, but the set of the jaw indicated a toughness that was equally evident in the rather husky voice. Behind the wheel was another woman, her head framed by hair that if it wasn't auburn, then that shade hadn't been properly defined. Even through the windshield glass her features were classic and gorgeous.

He stood and walked over to the car. "I'm okay," he said to the woman riding shotgun. "Sorry I was in the way. If you're looking for Cox's Crossroads, you're in the right place."

The woman took off her sunglasses to reveal deep brown eyes with a concerned look. "Not exactly," she said. "Not exactly, though I kind of figured this was where we'd find you today. Is over there okay to park?"

He nodded, puzzled, then he walked over to their car as it was shut off and the two occupants stepped out. "So *you're* Jack," the driver said with a satisfied smile. "I was afraid we might get here too late." She held up her hands. "All the snow, I mean. It was a long drive down from Louisville."

"It was kinda hairy at times," the passenger said with a grin at her companion. "You're a pretty fair driver, Stevie. I'd have never guessed. I don't think Jeb could've done it any better."

"I am what I am," Stevie allowed with a bow.

"Wait a minute," Jack interjected. "You...you came here...to see *me*?"

"All the way from Louisville," Stevie affirmed.

"You'll never know how hard it was," the other said. "That last bit, from just north of Albany down, that was pretty grim. I bet it's nice in the Autumn though."

"It's gorgeous," Jack said softly, things clicking in his head, ideas that, while they at first seemed inconceivable, were growing

in certainty. "It is gorgeous. You'll have to come down and see the colors sometime."

"Well then," Stevie said, "you'll just have to see to that, won't you?"

Jack looked at the passenger. "You're Gwen, aren't you? Gwen Chaney?"

"Guilty as charged. I'd have been pissed if you wrote me during the Bush Administration, though I figure the name might've been a holdover from when he was working for Nixon. You're old enough to remember, I suppose."

"I don't like to admit it, but yes." He looked at the driver. "That would make you Stephanie Harmon then. Stevie." He smiled. "I seem to recall describing you as the most beautiful woman on earth once."

"Once," Stevie pouted, "but then I was topped, not just once, but twice. First by Kate Bellamy, then by Elsbeth Wilder. Really, Jack. If women are supposed to be so fickle, what are you?"

"I think it was a man coined that phrase," Gwen chuckled throatily.

"Where's Kevin?" Jack asked, referring to Stevie's first child by her ex-husband. "And little Kate?"

"Oh, Katie's in the car," Gwen said softly. "It's too raw to have her outside. We're kind of protective of her. You can probably imagine. And Kevin, well, he's at a camp for overachievers. I expect you could've guessed that too."

"And Jeb?"

Stevie smiled mysteriously. "Oh, that *would* be telling."

Which meant that she could say no more. "Well," he said, "being as I'm beginning to understand some of the ground rules here, I don't suppose I can ask too much of you now, can I?"

Gwen shrugged. "I don't know, Jack. *You* created us. Why we're here now, that I can't tell you. But I think you're on the right track."

"Or the *write* track," Stevie added, the emphasis on the secondary meaning of a similar-sounding word. It was a wonderful clue, and one he couldn't help but catch.

"Will I meet all of you?" he asked.

Stevie laughed, and Gwen put her hands on her hips and looked cross. "Jack Gilchrest, is that all you can think about? Meeting all of us? Your wife is still... *wherever* she is."

"Oh, be still Gwen. How couldn't he be interested? Jack, I'm thrilled to meet you." She took his hand, and while it was chilly in the cold air, it was still extraordinarily soft. "That I still have something of a life, I owe that to you. Gwen does too, she just doesn't want to admit it." She stuck out her tongue at her long-time friend and companion. "But there's a reason you can see us, and you'll probably see us again."

"No guarantees," Gwen added. "We're still not sure of any of this stuff ourselves."

"I have seen others," Jack told them. "Yesterday, right here, not long after Deb vanished. Three people. But they didn't stay long."

"There's a reason for that, I'm sure," Gwen said, nodding. "So where do we go from here?"

"That was my next question," Stevie concurred.

He shrugged. "I was just wondering that myself. That's how little I was able to get from the people...errr, characters, I saw yesterday."

"Oh, call them people, Jack," Stevie said impatiently. "Are we less people-ly just because you wrote about us?"

"People-ly!" Gwen crowed. "You still crack me up, dear heart, after all these years."

"I just don't know how to take all this," Jack admitted. "I didn't mean to insult you or anything. As far as I know, you're my best hope for finding Deb."

"You're right about that much," Gwen said. "I think the first thing we ought to do is get ourselves settled. I'm guessing we're

going to be here a couple of days, maybe longer. Who knows how long this will take?"

Not me, Jack thought wonderingly, *but at least now I have friends on my side.*

Stevie favored him with a smile. "That's the spirit, Jack."

"And we are your friends," Gwen added. "Remember all those years ago? When it seemed like you didn't have a friend at all? Well you always had *us*, right?"

More gears began to mesh in his head. "Yes. Yes, that's right. That's exactly right. Look, I think you have the right idea: let's head back to Jamestown and sit down and talk about this. I'll tell you what's been going on, and maybe you'll have an idea where we should go."

"Not we, Jack," Stevie corrected him.

"She's right," Gwen said. "We can help you, and in fact I think we're kind of bound to you to some degree, but we can't physically help you. Stick around, talk to you, maybe be a sounding board, yes. But we're limited in what we can do. I don't know exactly how, but I do know."

"Me too," Stevie said in a hushed voice, leaning over to whisper, "Do you know, I've had thoughts in my head I wanted to say to you that just up and vanished just as I was getting ready to say them to you."

"As if that's anything unusual," Gwen laughed. "Jack, take us back to Jamestown. I've always wanted to go by the York place, maybe we can make time afterward."

They all got in their respective cars and Jack led them back north toward Allardt. He drove in something of a daze, still trying to sort out the fact—and it could not be denied, he kept looking back, and the VW was still there, Stevie's reddish-brown mane undeniable even in his mirror and through a windshield—that he had encountered more characters from a story he had written. Yesterday it was Gaea, Drew, and Ellen from *Lemon Drops for the Green One*; today it seemed he had crossed from short stories (or was *Lemon Drops* a novella? He never knew the

break-off point) into a novel, and it was Gwen and Stevie from *Meadows of Forever*. And little Kate, their shared daughter by the now-deceased Jeb Stuart, if they were to be believed, and he saw no reason not to. One thing was for certain: if he could've hand-chosen two people to be close to him under these kind of circumstances, he could hardly have picked better. Gwen was tough and smart; Stevie was sweet and steady and brilliant in her own understated way.

He found himself staring at them in the mirror, as if still trying to convince himself that they were *really* there. What was this he'd gotten himself into? And now, by extension, them? He shook his head, just as a sudden intuition reminded him that he was still behind the wheel of a car, on a road, moving forward, if slowly.

Turn signals, brake lights. Right in front of him. "Holy..."

Born and raised in northwest Indiana, where slick roads are the norm rather than the exception, he knew a violent control movement was counterproductive. He pressed gently on the brakes and steered in the opposite direction the turn signals indicated. All this was more instinctive than anything else, bred of years of broad-sliding cars through icy parking lots for practice...and just for the sheer joy of it, usually his father's car.

Wooo-eee!

The rear end of the Taurus slewed counter-clockwise. Abruptly he found himself with a much better view of Stevie and Gwen than he really wanted at that particular instant. Stevie's eyes looked like dinner plates. Specifically, Delft, with that amazing blue shade. It might've been fun but for the thought that he might be totally screwing himself and them all at once with this (hopefully not) critical lapse of attention. That, and the ditches present on either side of the road that threatened to swallow Lucy whole.

He steered into the slide, but the car was far past catching. For just a moment he thought he had it saved, but no, no, it bounced just a little, then it snapped again and settled into the

ditch on the west side of the road, safely off the surface, but still pointed in the wrong direction.

He sat for a minute to catch his breath, hands gripping the wheel like grim death. A honk from next to him got his attention, and he saw Stevie with her window. He lowered his. "I'm all right," he said.

"You asshole," Gwen sighed, "what were you thinking? No wait, that's stupid. You weren't thinking, I know. Now we're gonna have to contrive some way to get your car out of there."

"I know, I know." He looked around. "There's got to be somebody around here with a tractor. I kind of doubt you'll be able to help much."

"You're right about that," Stevie said. "Look, we're going to pull off over here. There's a man waving at us, maybe he can help." She pointed to her right, where—surprise!—Chet Akins stood, waving. "He looks like he knows you, Jack."

"He does. And I bet he can help."

More than she thought. Jack had climbed out of his car and was staring at the mailbox along the road. While the southbound side was neatly lettered, "C. Akins", the northbound side was missing a couple of letters and a period, and it read: C A K I.

Twenty minutes later Chet Akins had a heavy chair hooked to the frame of the Taurus and carefully pulled it out of the ditch while Gwen and Stevie stopped traffic on both ends of the road. Afterward, the tractor returned to its warm barn, and all of them inside Akin's garage, where he had moved his sale items, they were sharing cocoa kept warm on a camp stove. "I have one of those," Gwen said, pointing to the neat little burner. "I use it for backpacking. Those are really, really nice."

"Thank you for the cocoa, Mr. Chet," Stevie said, smiling winningly.

"Well Missy, if you're helping my friend here, I reckon you're my friend too." He looked at Jack. "And you *are* my friend, Jack Gilchrest, aren't you?"

"You definitely are," Jack assured him. "In fact, while I'm here, I hope I can talk with you about buying that carbide lamp."

Akins gave him a disappointed look. "I'm sorry, Jack, but I sold that lamp yesterday. Right about this time, as a matter of fact."

"Carbide lamp, you say?" Gwen asked. "You have one?"

"*Had*," Jack said sadly. "I had first shot at buying it. An engineer's Justrite. Nice, too."

"So why didn't you buy it when you had the chance?" Gwen quizzed him. "I sure would've."

"Well, he had his reasons, Miss Gwen," Akins said.

"Ms," she insisted, gently.

"Miz then. I'm sorry, it gets to the point where a fella doesn't hardly know what to call a lady and be respectful. No, Jack had his reasons for not buying it then. I expect he has reasons just as good for wishing he had it now." Then he smiled at Jack. "Guess it's a good thing I set it aside for you then."

His face broke into a huge smile. "Oh, you're *kidding* me!"

"Nope. I figured you'd be back." He walked to the back of the garage and took a box out of a cabinet. "Here. I kept the box it came in too, and I reckon there's some parts in it too. You probably ought to have all of it. Won't do me much good anymore." Then he nodded. "You understand the price has gone up, I'm sure."

"As long as I have it. I figure somehow I'm going to need it."

"Everybody needs a good light," Stevie said. "It's *Biblical*."

"Like you would know, sweetie," Gwen laughed.

"No, really. It's from Psalms." She said it like *p-salms*.

"'Your words are a lamp to my feet and a lamp to my path'," she quoted, then added to an astonished Gwen, "I went to Sunday School Gwen."

Akin clapped his hands and smiled joyously. "Right you are, Miss Stevie! Right you are! P-salms it is! And Jack, maybe

this is exactly what this lamp will be to you. A light to your feet and a lamp to your path."

"Can I see it?" Gwen asked.

Akin handed it to her. "All original," he said. "Used that thing for about five years. It was the first one I ever had to buy new. Last one, too."

"Look at the workmanship," she murmured admiringly. "What year is this?"

"Box says '36. I'm not sure though. Everybody wanted the cap lamps, which this isn't. I had one my Daddy gave me, and that one I had on a cap. That was when I was on the face. Later, when I came back from France—I was in the war—I was a gang boss, I didn't have to be under so often, so I got this. I could hold this in my hand and carry it when I went down to inspect. It served me well. I expect it will do the same for you, Jack."

Jack reached for his wallet. "Well, I believe I owe you some money, Chet."

He smiled. "Your money's no good here, Jack Gilchrest. You was supposed to come here, or haven't you figured that out by now?"

Jack stared at him silently. "Oh. But that's...that can't be." He looked at Gwen and Stevie, who was cradled little Kate. "I didn't...I mean, I never wrote a story..."

Akin nodded sagely. "Well now, maybe you did and maybe you didn't. I know what you're thinkin'."

Jack shook his head. "I'm not sure what I'm thinking myself."

Akin laughed and slapped his shoulder. "Jack Gilchrest, you're gonna be all right. And you'll find what you're lookin' for, and it's ain't just your wife, trust me. Just mind that you come back here and visit with me when you finally get it all sorted."

Back at the Jordan, after a sloppy run back over slushy roads, the three adults talked strategy. "So, the way I see it," Gwen said slowly, talking things through, "you got here, and stuff

was already happening. You'd been sick, and the phone was acting up."

"That's right," Jack nodded, smiling down at little Kate, who was gurgling in his arms happily.

"When you came back, the phone really weirded out, your laptop started up all by itself..."

"And logged itself on," Stevie added.

"And later you got the message in the mirror. And all this was *before* Deb disappeared?"

"That's right."

Gwen stood and walked toward the bathroom, then back to the front door, then back again. "And it was this morning that you got the strange phone call, and the message on the windshield."

"And the snowballs. Don't forget the snowballs."

"Yeah, Stevie, the snowballs." She turned and looked at Jack. "You've had a full day already, Jack. You think you could face much more today?" She nodded toward the baby, who was happily tugging on the jump drive Jack perpetually wore around his neck. "Seems you've got your hands full there."

"She really likes you," Stevie said with a smile. "But I guess that's only right. After all, she *is* your daughter."

Gwen nodded her approval. "I guess that's right, isn't. You made us, you made her too. So that kinda makes you her...grandfather?"

It suited him well enough, better than just father. "I think Jeb would approve," he said, tweaking Kate's nose playfully. "She is unbearably cute. I wonder if I'll get to meet her *other* mother."

"Kate's always around. You wrote that yourself," Stevie said.

It would be difficult in a short synopsis to encapsulate the relationships that Jack had created—and now, was stepping into—but such was *Meadows of Forever*. It was a tale based loosely on various ghost stories Jack had read as a child, and studied as an adult as part of a Parapsychology course he took through the University of Louisville. It spanned almost a hundred

and fifty years, had half a dozen primary characters and dozens of minor characters, and actual locations that were somewhat displaced from their original sites, but were still remarkably similar. While a lot of it was, admittedly, written under the influence of drugs, alcohol, and severe depression, it was still a cogent story, and a complete one at that. Deb, who he had known for about five months at the time was the first person to read it. He remembered the notes she wrote on paper that had obviously been moistened by tears: "You have done what I always knew you could do: you have written a beautiful, wonderful story." They meticulously printed and bound five copies to give to his friends and family, and as far as he knew, that was the last he would ever have to do with it.

Little did he know!

"This is what I'm trying to get my mind around," he said to them. "If this is all somehow about what I write, how is it that Deb is involved? Why is she being...I don't know, punished, for something I did? And what is it I'm doing?"

Stevie shook her head. "It doesn't make sense to us either, Jack," that marvelous hair shifting like surf as she shook her head. "But you shouldn't blame yourself. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not your fault, and I don't think she's hurt at all. In fact—I don't know how I know this, but I'm sure—I bet that once she *does* come back, she won't remember a thing."

"Yeah," Gwen said, "it'll be like she was never gone."

"And I'll have learned a lesson, I guess," Jack sighed. "A cautionary tale of some sort. So what do we do now?"

"Well, you're the writer, Jack," Gwen countered. "What do *you* think we should do?"

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He looked at his hands for a moment then said, "Well, I don't know, but I don't think we should be here. Not right now, anyway. We—I, anyway—need to be out doing something"

Gwen gave him a look. "If you go, we're going. Whether you like it or not."

"Then we go. Are you going to drive, or are you riding with me?"

"I'd sooner ride in your car," Stevie said. "It's bigger and nicer. But you have to let me drive! I don't want to end up in a ditch."

"Ouch."

So they left the Jordan and again headed out toward Cox's Crossroads, bypassing Allardt this time. "I just get the feeling that we've milked that one dry," he explained when the two others asked why. "I expect we'll see Chet again before this is over, but I think we're just spinning our wheels if we keep going there."

That said, he still requested a stop at The Spot, and if Yard Sale was to be capitalized, then so should *The Spot*. While the vendors were slowly emerging from their homes as the temperature crept back up into more reasonable realms (say, the low fifties) it was still mostly deserted there, with no sales to be had in the general vicinity, so the lot was still free.

"So this is it," Gwen said, crouching down next to Jack. "This spot, right here."

"This spot, right here," he affirmed, looking around. While the snow had mostly melted now, The Spot still had some distinction, namely, that it was perfectly dry, while just about every spot on the road was still at least dark with dampness. "Listen, maybe you'll hear her too."

Both Gwen and Stevie were perfectly still, and even little Kate seemed to hush as if listening intently. Strangely though, while Jack could still hear Deb's voice calling to him—fainter, he thought with no small amount of alarm—the two fictional characters could not. "Are you're really sure it's her?" Stevie

asked doubtfully. "I mean, I'm not saying you're crazy or anything, Jack, but I really can't hear anything. Maybe it's only the wind." It was a little breezy, and there was something of a sighing in the trees.

"No, he's not crazy," Gwen said, still trying to hear what Jack was. "He's just standing here talking with two people who don't exist. I can't even be sure everybody around here sees *us*."

"Well, Mister Akin did."

That was true, and it was something to consider: why *did* Chet Akin see them? How could he talk to people who were, basically, figments of Jack's imagination? It was yet another conundrum in a situation that was already jam-packed with them. *He must fit in here somewhere, Jack thought, but where?*

"That's another thing," Gwen mused. "The carbide lamp. Why is that important? I figure it has to have some significance, otherwise you wouldn't have been so drawn to it. But what is it for? I mean, it's nice and all, and it'll be a great addition to your collection, I'm sure, but then you said you weren't a collector."

"I'm not," Jack said. "I had an Autolite on my list of things to get if I found them, but only because it was the only brand of the four biggies that I didn't have yet. It's not as if I was starting a museum or something. There's enough of those already."

"I'm here, Jack...I'm here...find me, Jack..."

Yes, it was definitely softer than it had been earlier. Was it the volume that had decreased, or was it perhaps the intensity? Maybe somehow she knew he was looking for her, and she wasn't so scared now...

Never doubt me, Boo, he thought, I will look for you till I drop dead.

Amazingly, he heard a reply...or at least he thought he did: *"I know."*

Her voice was still echoing faintly when Gwen tugged him to his feet. He hadn't noticed her stand back up, lost as he had been in the unheard conversation. "It's okay," she said quietly. "I know what you're going through. I can't hear her, but I know."

Remember, I did a lot of talking with people nobody else could see, too." She took his hand and squeezed it. "And Jeb meant just as much to me as Deb does to you."

"To us," Stevie said firmly. "And we feel the same way about you, Jack."

Jack blushed, then said, "Thanks."

"Oh God, don't blush," Gwen laughed. "You know what that does to her."

He smiled. "I guess I do."

As he well knew, in *Meadows of Forever*, Stevie's character was sort of conditioned to respond to embarrassment, in rather a peculiar way, especially if she was attracted to someone. If she got a rise from them, made them blush, it usually sent her into something of a blind rut. It was intensely provocative, even sensual, but again, considering the circumstances, it was hardly appropriate.

"I guess we'd better go," he said finally. "I think maybe we should walk a bit, like Deb and I were about to do when..." He paused, stumbling on the description. "When it all happened, I guess. She was heading," and he looked across the road, "over there, toward that house. Maybe that's a good place to start."

"Huh," Gwen said. "Doesn't look like anything's going on there."

"No, there is," Stevie demurred. "Look out back. Somebody's in the garage, just like Mister Akin was. Let's go see who's there."

So the three of them walked across the road, Jack feeling a peculiar little tremor as he passed through The Spot. The house they were approaching wasn't anything very striking, at least so far as looks were concerned; it was pretty much your standard rural farmhouse on a piece of property that hadn't been used for farming in some time. It looked like it had been added on to three or four times, with an attached "basement" and an enclosed back porch, and even a screened-in veranda of sorts. It was sort of lumpy in appearance as a result, but Jack had an odd feeling of

warmth as they walked toward it. *Maybe that's a good thing*, he thought. *Good vibes and all that.*

He looked at Gwen, and she nodded. Yes, it seemed she agreed.

So they continued, not exactly shoulder to shoulder but not too far from it either. Looking out of the corners of his eyes he could see both of them, very much in character; Stevie, rosy-cheeked and gorgeous, hair flowing down her shoulders; Gwen, jaw set and determined, her hair (what there was of it) tucked beneath a Cubs cap. He hoped they offset the wild-eyed look he knew he still possessed.

As they approached, it was apparent the man was welding something. As they approached they saw it was a basketball hoop. "Howdy!" he called to them. "What can I do for you folks?"

"Good morning sir!" Stevie said, with a smile that had melted hearts throughout Kentuckiana. "We're here for the sale,"

Jack wasn't certain if the desired effect had been achieved, but it was a good enough opening.

The man extinguished his torch and set it down. "Not selling here. Sorry."

"Oh, that's too bad," Stevie continued. Jack knew she was in her element, so he didn't bother trying to stop her. "We're trying to hit as many places as we can between here and the state line."

The man looked amazed for a moment, as if he couldn't comprehend how an apparently rational group of people could so completely ignore a demand to get lost. A polite demand, but just as blunt. Still, Stevie's Chiclet smile was so radiant, he couldn't possibly be rude. Not to *her*, anyway. "I'm sorry," he said with a smile that was equal parts pleasant and puzzled. "I don't know anything about any sale, and I think the only reason I'm here is that we're only working four day weeks at the plant." He looked up, as if he was thinking deep thoughts. "Yeah. I'm sure that's it, in fact. Rough time, you know."

"I'm sure," Gwen said, with a smile of her own that completely melted the hardness from her features. She nodded toward the garage wall. "Are you a caver?"

The man's face lit up all the more now. "Yes ma'am, I sure am. My wife and I both. We were members of the Harrison County Grotto up in Indiana for a long time, now we're more or less independent."

"Well, neat! Do you know Chris Hobbs?"

His smile widened. "I know Hobbo. Little guy, helluva photographer. I've been on a trip or two or three with him."

Gwen grinned and stuck out her hand. "Well, if you're gutsy enough to admit to having been caving with that psycho, you're all right in my book. I'm Gwen Chaney."

He took her hand as a look of recognition passed across his features. "Gwen Chaney? Really? Son-of-a-gun." Then he took Stevie's hand. "That must make you Stevie Harmon, no? Wow, I didn't think I'd ever run into you guys." He looked at Jack, who was holding Kate. "What's your name, friend?"

"Jack. Jack Gilchrest. And you're..."

"Jon. Jon Beck. My wife's around her someplace, I suppose working on the 'honey-do' for today. Figures if we're going to be around a house we might as well make ourselves useful." He pointed to the basketball goal. "Kids around here seem to think they're LeBron and they try to stuff the ball, and this is what happens. Glad I let my Daddy teach me to weld. Useful skill."

Jack nodded, as his mind processed the name. "Jon Beck, huh? Bet you did a lot of caving in the State Forest up there. You finding it to your liking down here?"

Beck nodded. "Oh yeah. Mind you, I'm not sure how long we're going to be here. We kinda come and go like the breeze. We like it that way."

"We like it what way?" came a woman's voice from behind them. "Who's in there...oh, I didn't know you had friends coming over."

"I didn't. They're here for the sale. Whatever that is."

"We're not selling anything," the woman said brusquely. She was short, thin, and had long, straight hair that was as much silvery-gray as it was black.

"Be nice, Janey. This is Gwen Chaney and Stevie Harmon, and..."

"Jack Gilcrest," Jack said, as he waited for the woman to introduce herself, already knowing her name.

"Janey Beck," the woman said, a shade more politely. "I know about you guys. You're the Wilder Witch people, aren't you?"

"Well, they are," Jack said. "And she is." He nodded toward Kate. "This is little Kate."

"Named after the witch?"

"She *wasn't* a witch," Stevie with more than a little bit of annoyance, but then Jack knew they probably got that same question a lot. Or maybe not, they *were* fictional, after all. But then, so were Jonny and Janey Beck.

He'd written their story long before *Meadows*, almost ten years, in fact. The tale had gone through a couple of iterations and even a locale change, but the names stayed the same. Jon Beck was an itinerant worker of menial jobs, something of a closet intellectual but more a bookworm than anything else. He'd met Janey Morris at a caver's outing in southern Indiana, the two had hooked up, and ultimately they decided they couldn't imagine spending eternity with anybody else. For Jack's part, as their creator, he had known what their ending would be all along, but how it would come about changed pretty dramatically from one telling to another. It had ended up a pretty good campfire story after a while, and one he was inclined to tell even without the encouragement of alcohol, although a couple of brews never hurt.

"You guys were legendary," Gwen said to Janey. "I always hoped we'd get to meet you."

Janey looked a little nonplussed. "Never thought we'd be famous."

"Well, you are," Jack said. "Do you know who I am?"

Jon squinted at him for a moment, then shook his head. "Can't say I've ever set eyes on you," he said, "but I'd be lying if I said I didn't." He pointed at Jack. "You know who this is, don't you?"

"Well, I ought to," she snorted. "And I for one have to say I'm not impressed. I figured you'd be some supercaver or some such." She looked at his rounded frame. "Doesn't look like you go in for the rough stuff much anymore. If you ever did."

"Not for a long, long time," Jack admitted, "I don't even get underground much anymore. I do take my son from time to time. But I sure did admire you two."

Finally the woman smiled...sort of. Anyone seeing her from a distance might have seen it as a grimace. "Well, I would hope so, after what you put us through."

"You were the first person I ever killed in a story, and I'm glad I can tell you how sorry I was to do it."

"What you should *really* be glad for is that you're holding that baby so I can't...express myself better." Now she grinned. "I *am* happy to meet you, despite everything." She reached up and touched his cheek fondly. "You gave me this big turd," nodding toward Jon, "and I guess that was worth dying three times."

"Three times?" Stevie gasped. "Jack!"

He shrugged. "You'd have to know the whole story."

"Doesn't matter," Jon said firmly, putting his hands on Janey's shoulders. "We are as we should be, and that's all that matters. And here we are, and, more important, here *you* are." He nodded to Jack. "Which, unless I am gravely mistaken, means there's some serious shit going down here. Am I correct?"

"Have you got a few minutes to spare? We'll tell you all about it."

Sitting in the Becks' garage—or not, he never wrote them as homeowners, so how they ended up living in a house in Cox's Crossroads, Tennessee, he had no idea—he told the pair what

had happened so far and asked them for their opinion on what he should do next. He didn't expect any grand revelation, and he got pretty much what he'd figured. Blank looks. Understanding, caring faces, a bandana with which to wipe his teary eyes, but not a lot else. What *could* they do? Not much.

"If there was some way I thought we could help," Jon said after hearing the entire story, "I would. I'm sure Janey would too."

She shrugged. "We don't have a lot besides each other," she said softly, "but that's as much as I ever wanted. And we have that because of you. But I don't understand this any more than you do."

"I understand," Jack said. "I figured as much."

"Can you come with us?" Stevie asked. "Any help is better than no help. It would be great to have you."

"Sure," Gwen agreed. "Come on along! We'll have a blast. Hell, maybe afterward we can drag the fat old man underground again and remind him what a real cave is like."

"Well now," Jon said slowly, "that'd be great...but we can't."

"Well, why not?" Stevie said gaily. "It'd be fun! We have plenty of room. You could even come and stay with us up at the motel, we could order a couple of pizzas and we could talk about the things he had you guys do, and..."

The look on Janey Beck's face was nothing if not disapproving. "There's so much to do," she said, with barely disguised anger that seemed about to boil over. "You really don't have a clue, do you? You seem to think this is gonna be some merry kind of treasure hunt for the three of you. Oh, you," she looked at Jack, "this is all dead serious to you, I know, but look at you right now. Sitting here talking to us like it's the only thing on your mind. I know, I know, as soon as you walk out of here, you're all business again, but you're...wasting...*time!*" She slapped the table that sat next to her. "You need to get your shit together, and fast! Or else..."

"Oh, no you don't," Jon said quickly. "Don't you say another word, Janey. That's enough." He looked at Jack apologetically. "Jack, I'm so sorry. Sometimes she's..."

"No need," Jack reassured him. "I know exactly how she is, and I like her like that. She gives things perspective. And she's right."

"Damn right I am!" she snorted. "Besides, we *can't* leave here, Jack. If you didn't already know that, well, now you do."

Jon grimaced. "Jack, I know what you're going through. Remember, I lost *her* once. It wasn't any easier for me than it is for you, I'm sure. But we'll do everything we can possibly do...whatever that is." He looked firmly at Janey. "And I do mean *anything*. Because we owe you *everything*."

Janey nodded solemnly. "We do."

"Will you be here long?" Jack asked.

"Don't know. Don't know how we got here either, or where we'll go when it's all done. But I guess if you need us, we'd find some way to be here. That sound about right?"

"I couldn't ask for much more," Jack said, bouncing a fussy Kate till she gurgled happily. "Just getting to meet you once should be enough, but it's good to know you can be here, just in case."

Jon nodded and smiled. "Jack, I think I can promise you that much." He shook his hand. "And when it all works out right, if I don't get a chance to see you again, thanks. For everything."

Gwen and Stevie traded hugs with Jon and Janey, and they all walked back toward the car...then Janey stopped Jack. "Listen," she said, "I'm sorry. I mean, you know..."

He smiled. "Sure. I know."

"Good. So maybe, if you ever happen to...well, work us into something again...maybe you can see your way clear to..." She caressed Kate's cheek. "I never played with dolls. I was brought up in a house full of kids, so I always had the real thing, only it was always a brother, or a sister, or a cousin, or whatnot. You remember."

He understood. "Janey, I promise you I'll try. I don't know how I'll manage it, but I'll do my best."

She smiled up at him, then kissed *his* cheek. "You're a good man, Jack Gilchrest, and I know you're going to find your Deb."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day ten (Monday, 10 November 08)
Total words: 24832. To go: 25618

Later, the three of them sat in the motel room, cross-legged on opposite beds. Kate was contentedly asleep in her car seat, which sat on the table next to Jack's laptop. They were sharing a pizza (with extra cheese, per Stevie) and absently watching television.

"So, tomorrow I think we ought to head farther south," Jack said. "Maybe down in the direction of Obed. The main part of the sale, the Northern section, at least, is between there and Cookeville. I don't know that what I'm looking for might be there." He sighed. "Or somewhere else. Hell, it's only three hundred some-odd miles worth of sales we've got to hit."

"You sound discouraged, Jack," Stevie observed brightly. He looked at her. She was smiling.

"Didn't you say that Gaea told you that you'd see Deb in three days?" she asked.

"Well, three *moons* is what she said, whatever that means. If that means three *cycles* of the moon, why, we'll be here for weeks. And I still don't have really have a clue what I'm supposed to be looking for. Or doing. Or whatever."

"Cheer up, Jack," Gwen said around a mouthful of dough and cheese. "At least you're not alone, and chances are you're going to run into more characters you know."

"That's one of the things that worries me," he muttered. "Not all of my characters are good. What if we run into some of

the bad ones? I mean, I've seen Gaea and Drew and Ellen from *Lemon Drops*; who's to say we won't run into Beardman or Craterface or .45 too? They're from the same story, and they're not good people. Meth cookers. They'd kill you in a heartbeat on a whim."

Gwen nodded. "That's the thing about our story. If you think about it, there's really not a single evil character in it, unless you count John Wilder, and he was more of a disturbed schizophrenic than anything evil. So I guess our lives have been," and she searched for a word, "sheltered, I guess."

"But you're aware of the world and its capacity for evil?"

"I guess so," she admitted. "But it's a lot like living an overly-centered life, Jack. You—we—live in our own orbits, we don't get a lot of contact with people outside of our immediate families, right?" Jack nodded and she continued. "So you know how things go for us then. I go to work, I come home, we take care of the baby. The epilogue you wrote noted that Stevie's job ended when the foam plant closed, so now she's kind of a stay at home Mom, and I assume the 'father' role, I guess. We go to the movies, we go caving and hiking, we visit with people we're close to. Kevin stays with us when he's not with the Rat Bastard, and we all go riding together. Jeb and Kate..." She smiled. "They make their presence known. And that's life. That there's a world beyond that little universe, I know, but what lies there...I can't really guess, Jack."

"I'm tired," Stevie announced.

"Too much cheese will do that," Gwen said. "Jack, why did you give her such an appetite for cheese? You know how she fights with her weight."

"Yeah," he said. "Me too. Let's hit the rack. We'll decide what to do next come morning. Maybe I'll have a dream or something." *A nightmare, more likely*, he thought.

That decided, they turned off the TV, the lights, and closed their eyes, all three more or less with the intention of sleeping. But

the only person who got any rest was little Kate. Gwen, Stevie, and Jack were not to be so fortunate.

Jack shook himself awake at about 1 AM, per the clock which always seemed to be a little slow. How a digital clock could be anything but spot-on accurate was a mystery to Jack, and most of them were, but this one...

What had startled him from his slumber (such as it was) had been the unbearable weight of a stare. That had always worked for Deb; if she was asleep and wanted to wake him up, all she did was stare at him. It never took more than a few minutes. And as he was struggling to wake, he hoped that when he did open his eyes, he would see her...

...but instead it was Stevie lying there on her side, gazing intently at him. Her eyes were fixed on his and were wide open; their deep blue was visible even in what little light was coming in through the small windows. Her hair was spread on the sheets like a dark red tide. He'd often imagined what she would look like in just this sort of position, and now that he was viewing it firsthand, he realized that it simply defied adequate verbal description. Had he tried, he would've surely come off as a perverted voyeur.

"Hi," he whispered. "What's wrong?"

"I just woke up," she said softly, so as not to wake Gwen, who was still peacefully asleep, by all appearances, anyway.

"That happens to me sometimes. Remember?"

He did. She was something of an insomniac. Like him. He sat up, doing his best to be quiet. He'd gone to bed fully clothed—not that he was overly modest, but it just seemed, well, *wrong*, to undress in front of them.

"You look silly," she observed.

"Not any sillier than I feel," he admitted.

"Don't. You're not a silly person. You couldn't have wrote what you did if you were."

Now she sat up. "I think I need to walk a little," she said. "Do you think it might've warmed up at all?"

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, that doe-eyed sleepy smile he had so tried to capture.

"You are amazingly beautiful," he whispered.

"Thank you." She nodded toward the door. "Do you think, maybe...?"

"I suppose." He got up and slipped on his shoes; she pulled on a pair of sweat pants and donned a jacket, and they quietly walked out the door. It was rather mild, especially considering that it had been snowing less than fifteen hours previous.

It was cloudy, or at least that's how it looked, no stars or moon visible. It wouldn't have been easy to see them in the well-lit parking lot anyway, and neither really had that on their mind as they walked.

She slipped her hand in his. He gave a start, looked at her, saw her smile. It was okay.

"It means a lot to be able to get you alone," she said, her voice slow and deliberate. "I just wanted to ask you some questions. About us. Gwen and I, I mean, and Kevin, and Jeb. Everybody, I guess."

He nodded. "I reckon I'd have a lot of questions too. Shoot."

She led them across the damp grass to where the motel sign rested atop a stone foundation. She sat down on the uneven rock and patted a spot next to her. "You're not what I expected," she murmured. "But then I guess I didn't know *what* to expect."

"I know I'm not exactly the masculine ideal," he said with a wry grin.

"Am I the feminine ideal?"

"In ways you are. In ways you aren't."

"But it's not that I'm gay."

He gave her a little scowl. "Stevie, that doesn't matter. I'm disappointed you'd even mention it. I think Gwen's pretty hot too, you know."

"I always wondered," she thought aloud, "why some people are so judgmental about gay people. But you're not."

"Some people are judge-*mental* all right. For most of them, it's how they were raised. You just have to ignore that as best you can. Me, I was brought up during the late seventies, when things were becoming more and more open. Open, if not accepting. I remember when Harvey Milk—he was a gay politician and activist in San Francisco—was shot; that was thousands of miles away, but I had friends in High School who were deeply affected by it. You can't see something like that and not come away with some kind of influence."

"I guess. But you're not gay yourself."

"What, do you want me to say I look at guys and think, well, *he's* hot?"

She leaned toward him. "Do you?"

"I guess I do sometimes. I always thought Bowie was hot in a creepy kind of way, and Paul Newman. Sean Penn now that he's done some growing up. If I were gay, I'd be on them like white on rice. But I guess I'm just wired differently. And then there's Kate Bush." He smiled at her. "She was the basic model for our Kate, you know. She's a British singer and songwriter. I just made her a little taller, a lot more outgoing, *somewhat* plainer. And then I tried my best to make her into that 1800s woman we both know and love."

"You make it sound so simple, what you do."

"I guess it isn't. But that's what makes it so much fun to try."

She nodded, then she looked away, but not before he saw a tear going down her cheek.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Did I...?"

"I don't know," she replied, her voice choked. "I just wondered why you made me so...so *dumb*. Why, Jack?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "You're a hell of a lot smarter than me, Stevie. Really." He took her other hand, which had been resting on her lap. "Look at me. Why do you think you're here? Do you think it's just chance put you here?"

"But you're *smart*," she protested. "And I'm..."

"Beautiful, kind, gentle...and *wise*. In your own way. Different people define that differently. Don't let anyone, especially not me, force you into that kind of a trap, Stevie. Believe me, you're a lot smarter than even you know. Maybe even than I know. I mean, look at me. I'm a dolt."

"No you're not. You're being silly now, Jack."

"But I am! You think just because I speak in complete sentences—usually, anyway—that somehow I'm more intelligent than others. *I'm not*. I speak well because that's how I learned to speak. I read a lot. I like sounding educated, even if I'm not. And it does make writing dialogue so much easier." He smiled. "But say I go to the store in my home town here in Tennessee. They hear me speak, and they instantly think, *Uppity Yankee*. But it's not me trying to sound snooty, it just means I'm different." He touched her cheek gently. "You, Stephanie Harmon, are just as you should be, and you are spot-on perfect that way. Don't you ever think anything else. Okay?"

She smiled at him happily. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Purely my pleasure."

"So," she said after a moment or two of content silence, "do you love me?"

"Well, of course I do," he chuckled. "Of course I do. But I love Gwen too. I expect I've fallen in love with every woman I've ever written about. Kate. Elsbeth Wilder. Gaea. Ellen Crosby. Even Janey Beck, as abrasive as she is. And lots of others, Stevie."

"But not like *me*." She seemed eager to emphasize that point.

Now he laughed. "No, dear heart, not like *you*. You were the first, after all. Well, not exactly the first, there were a couple of

others who preceded you, but I think sometimes they were just incomplete models of what would become you. You, you're the new-and-improved model, top of the line. Often imitated, never duplicated, as seen on TV, or at least in the fertile imaginings of a lonely twenty-something wannabe writer."

"You're no wannabe," she said firmly.

"Well, thanks for the confidence. If I ever get anything printed, you'll get the first invitation to the party.

"It'll happen, Jack. Believe me like I believe in you."

He lay an arm around her shoulder. "Bless you."

They sat that way for some time in the chill early morning air, their forms illuminated by the pale pink and green neon that crackled softly behind them, and headlights of the rare passing car along the highway. It was the sort of moment he'd often imagined as happening to someone like Jeb Stuart, the hero of *Meadows*. But then Jeb was something of an amalgam of himself and perhaps a few people he considered more courageous.

The next question seemed to come from out of nowhere, and was asked in a kind of an absent tone: "Jack, what happens when you die?"

He shrugged. "Lots better men than me have tried to answer that question. I think the answer's more in your heart than anywhere else."

She nuzzled her head into his neck. "You don't understand, Jack." Her voice was choked. "What happens when *you* die? Do we die too? Or do we just kind of stop being?"

He didn't expect he'd ever have to answer a question like that, but then he never expected to be sitting on the sign outside the Jordan Motel at 1:30 AM, arms around a beautiful woman who was one of his creations, discussing the meaning of life and what came after, either.

"I wish I could tell you," he said after a few minutes' silent contemplation. "I would like to think that, like anything that was born of passion as great as mine was when I wrote that story, that sort of thing would go on and on, would long outlive me. But I

really don't know for sure. I would think that you would, especially if the story ever gets printed and people actually read it. There's some measure of immortality in that, if not for me, then surely for you. Is that good enough?"

He got his answer in a most unexpected way: a pair of hands gently turned his head to face her, and he felt a warm, moist, exceedingly pleasant pressure on his lips...then just the tip of a tongue. Then, just that quickly, it was gone.

He sat there silently for a moment, a little off balance. Finally, he asked, "Why did you do that?"

"Because I *wanted to*." Then: "And because I knew you wouldn't, and most importantly, because it might be the only chance I ever get." One more kiss, this one on the cheek. "There may be a lot of things you're not, Jack. And Deb may not be me. But she must see all the things I do, and you must see all the things you love in me, in her." Her eyes were shining. "And I am so happy for you, and so jealous of her."

Arm in arm, they walked back to the motel, got back in their respective beds, and promptly fell asleep.

He woke again just past three. It was a fussy Kate, who needed a change. Well, that was easy enough to take care of. He was years out of practice, but diapers were something you just didn't forget, and he had changed enough of Petey's to be an expert. The job was done in a few minutes, and then he put her back in her improvised bed.

But she didn't seem to want that. As soon he put her down, she was immediately holding her arms up to him imploringly, something he'd never been able to resist as a father. "All right sweetie," he whispered. "Come to Uncle Jack. I'll sit up with you for a while." And with her head contentedly sighing on his shoulder, he went back to bed and sat.

He didn't notice the light till it started to blink. At first he thought it was the clock radio, maybe there had been a brief

power outage and it was now needed to be reset. But no, it was the phone.

Again.

He closed his eyes, shook his head, looked back. It was blinking faster now, as if it were demanding his attention. And then it started to tremble again, at about the same time he started doing the same.

Slowly, carefully, he reached for the receiver, put it to his ear.

There was no sound, not at first. Then the weird moaning began.

"Go to hell," he muttered. "Whoever you are."

"You mean you don't know?" the woman's voice hissed at him. "You *still don't know?*"

"No. And I mean it, go back to wherever it is you came from. But give me back my wife first."

"I'll be happy to," the woman spat. "Deliriously happy. You don't *know* how happy that would make me. But I *can't*. I can't...till you finish me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Beg all you want, you dickless wonder. I saw you walking around outside with that...woman. I want what she has, and I don't her friend, and I sure don't mean that baby you're holding...but I swear, if you don't give me what I want, Jack Gilcrest, not only will you not get your wife back, I will take that child too. And then I will take *your* child, Jack. I know where he is right now, I know what he's doing, I know where he goes before he even knows. And I will do everything I can to make sure things happen to him, Jack, bad things, *very bad things*, Jack. And it will all be *your* doing. All yours."

***End of NaNoWriMo 08 day eleven (Tuesday, 11 November 08)
Total words: 27277. To go: 22723***

That, that was a bit much. "Oh, you're scaring me now," he sighed. "Listen, whoever you are, either tell me what I need to know or leave me alone. You said you want what Stevie has. Well, what is that, and how can I give it to you?"

There was silence on the other end of the line...but no click. Not this time.

The best offense is a good defense? Perhaps the inverse could be equally true. "Please," he said softly, but with decided firmness. "Tell me what you need me to do for you. If I've somehow slighted you, or hurt you, then I *want* to make up for it, no matter what happens to me. But Deb shouldn't have to suffer for what I've done."

The response was just as soft...and imperative: "Or haven't done."

"Haven't done."

"That's right. I can't believe you, of all people, can't see where all this is going."

"Well, I don't."

"That's right. You don't. Well then, you should know that it doesn't matter what that Gaea person told you. She's no *goddess*, Jack, she's just somebody you created out of your mind, and that's exactly what *you* are if you take whatever she said to you as the absolute truth. Out of your mind."

"Then what are *you*?" he demanded. "*Who* are you? If I need to do something for you, why don't you just show yourself to me? Why can't you tell me what it is I need to do?"

"I've told you all I can," the voice sighed. "You don't understand, you don't know the pain you've caused, not just me but others as well. You don't know, don't know. But you will, Jack. You will, before this is over..."

He hung up the phone, a little more firmly than he intended.

"Jack?" Stevie murmured. "Jack? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, dear heart," he lied. "Everything is fine. Go back to sleep."

She did, and so did he.

There, there she was again, in the room, a white room, as it appeared now, everything was white. Standing opposite him, not in a corner nor against a wall...in fact, there didn't appear to be any clear definition to this place, whatever it was...but never mind, there she was, and there they were, all those people surrounding her, only this time the crowd appeared larger, perhaps four and five deep. And again, each time he tried to approach her, they would close ranks tightly and block her from him. She still didn't appear to be threatened; on the contrary, she looked to be quite well-protected. But from what? Him?

"I'm here," he said to them, "and I want to talk to whoever it is I've been speaking to on the phone."

The crowd spread, just a little. He hadn't stepped back, but they separated nonetheless. At least he could see Deb now, and she appeared to be all right. The look on her face was calm, at least. Maybe communication was the answer. If this was a dream, he certainly didn't have anything to lose.

"Anyone who has any grievance with me," he said, "show yourself and I will try my best to make redress."

Several of them turned to him. Like in dreams past, they had no clearly defined faces or forms, but they weren't mere wisps of vapor either, they were definitely human. They just weren't...all there.

One stepped forward. It seemed to be more fully manifested than the rest; it was a clearly a man, perhaps Jack's age or a few years younger, and the closer he got, the more Jack could see...and the more repulsed, the more fearful he became.

It was the melted man.

Jack was petrified. And yet, there was the look on the unmarred side of the man's face, still conveying a strange warmth, even

perhaps pity, especially from the eyes that Jack could just faintly see now.

"Why...why can't I talk to you?" Jack asked haltingly. "You seem to be the one with the power to answer my questions here...why can't you speak to me?"

And then, he did.

"I'm not the one you hurt, Jack," he said.

And he stepped back with the rest of the group and disappeared amongst them.

He woke suddenly, abruptly enough to startle Kate, who began to cry. That woke Stevie, whose jump from bed woke Gwen.

"Did you have a bad dream too?" Stevie said to Jack.

He blinked at her. "You had one too?"

"It was awful! There was a woman, and she was standing on the top of this high, high cliff. And she looked sad, Jack, so sad...then she looked right at me, and she *smiled*, it was so creepy."

"What's so creepy about that?" Gwen yawned.

Stevie shivered. "That after she smiled, her face changed into mine...and then she stepped off the cliff."

Gwen gasped. Jack stared in shock. Kate, fortunately, went back to sleep.

"Well, that puts a new spin on things," Jack muttered.

"I had a dream too," Gwen said, "and it was like yours, only in mine, it was a man, and he was shot with a flaming arrow. And when he was hit, he turned into Jeb."

"No!" Stevie cried.

Gwen nodded. "Jack, I think I have a better idea what's going on now."

"I think it's starting to come together for me too," he agreed.

"Let me hear your idea first. Because you won't like mine."

"I don't like mine either," he sighed. "But I can't deny what I'm seeing."

He stood up and paced a path across the room. "I'm being visited by all these characters I've written about all these years. You two, the Becks, Gaea and Drew and Ellen...I suspect if we go out tomorrow..."

"Today," Stevie pointed out. The sun was beginning to peep in through the eastward-facing windows.

"Today then. If we go, and I think we should, we're going to cross paths with more characters from my stories. And these people in my dreams—your dreams, all of our dreams—I can't prove it, but I think they're people from stories I've written too. The woman on the cliff...her I can't identify, but the place, that's almost certainly Top of the Rock, from a story I've been working on for about fifteen years now. It's called *River of Jordan*. It's meant to be a sort of a companion to your own story; in fact, you show up in it at one point."

Stevie cried out again, only this time it was in delight. "Oh Jack, that'll be so *neat!* That's kind of like living two lives, isn't it?"

"It might be, if I ever get around to finishing it. Gwen, yours is pretty obvious: the flaming arrow is a dead giveaway. That's from *Gypsies*, which is a third story that ties in with yours."

"Oh, will we be in that one too?" Stevie asked excitedly.

"I don't know. I'm about a hundred thousand words deep into it, and it looks like it's going to be a long one. Anything could happen."

"What about the other?" Gwen asked. "How much do you have there?"

"Not quite a quarter million. Your story ran a little over ninety thousand, by comparison."

"That's a lot of typing, Jack," Stevie said in an awed voice.

He smiled. "And I do it all mostly with three or four fingers and a couple of thumbs. But it beats the old spiral bound notebooks I used to use." He thought about that a moment,

considering the perils of system crashes and the reams of work he had lost, then added, "Or maybe not."

"Anyway," Gwen said, prodding them back to the topic at hand, "You and I are thinking along the same lines, that was pretty much my idea too." She looked at Kate, her face calm and thoughtful. "So we can pretty much bet on meeting some more of the people you wrote about. Maybe we ought to talk about the stories and who's in them, and who you might think would be the ones we really ought to be concerned about."

Jack nodded. "But does that mean *all* the stories? Novels, novellas, novelettes, novellinis? Short stories? Poems? Haiku? I dig Haiku, I've done a bunch of it."

"Haiku?" Stevie asked.

"A short poem," Gwen told her. "It's usually very rigidly structured, most commonly in syllables. Five syllables for the first line, then seven, then five again."

"Like this," Jack said, thinking for a moment while making counting motions with his fingers. Finally he recited:

*"auburn hair shining
pale blue eyes sparkle and dance
visual music"*

Stevie's eyes grew huge. "You just now made that up?" she exclaimed. "That's *pretty*. I want to try it!"

He shrugged. "Maybe later. It's just something I do on the fly when I get depressed or bored or anxious."

Gwen nodded. "We'll, you ought to have plenty of fodder for it when this is through. But I think we can probably leave out the poetry. Short stories and longer only." Then, under her breath, she added, "I hope so, anyway. We might end up having to take over this motel."

"All right then," Jack said, "where do I start?"

"I guess with us. Do you think we ought to keep a list? Stevie, can you keep a list?"

She got a notebook and a pen from her purse. "Once a secretary, always a secretary," she sighed with a smile. "All right, I'm ready."

"Okay. *Meadows*. We already have you two. To that we probably ought to add Elsbeth Wilder, John Wilder, Chris Hobbs, Marv Alexander, and George English." To Gwen he said, "The last three are minor characters, but if people from short stories are showing up, I don't figure I want to leave too many off."

"That's probably best," she agreed. "Stevie, those last three, list those as minor characters. Maybe we can pick up on some kind of pattern."

"I already did," Stevie said with a grin. "Like I said, once a secretary. Anyone else? I mean, besides Jeb and Kate. I already listed them under 'Major Characters'."

"Very good. There's Pip and Eliza. You ought to make them majors too. And Charles Jeffers too."

Gwen looked at him curiously. "Pip and Eliza are both..."

"Dead, I know," he nodded. "That was in the epilogue too. But the Becks are both dead too, and so are Drew and Ellen." Then he thought again and said, "Well, that's not strictly true. All of them did *die*, but they're not *dead*. You'd have to read the story to understand, I guess."

"I guess," Gwen said doubtfully. "What about the women 'Old Jack' killed? Should we list them?"

"Maybe Marta. She was fairly important, and I described her in pretty fair detail. And don't forget Garnet Gray and Mike Ridgely."

"Certainly," Stevie said. "Anybody else?"

"Apart from Dr. Singh, who was Jeb's oncologist, I can't think of anyone else that had more than a line or two of dialogue. You two?"

Gwen and Stevie looked at each other, and shook their heads. "All right then, on to *River*. Get ready, Stevie, with almost a quarter million words, 400 pages and counting, this is going to be a long one."

It was, too, as was *Gypsies*, Jack's burgeoning apocalyptic tale of a group of magically-touched nomads living in the desert of Southern California. They kept at it for hours, eventually taking the process to the West Side, where they ate breakfast and the list grew to over twenty pages, which was where Stevie finally called a halt.

"My arm is tired," she complained, "and I can't hold a fork and write at the same time. Jack, you're going to have to give it a rest for a little while, at least."

"Well, take a break then," Gwen laughed. "Eat your hotcakes before they get turn into coldcakes." She looked at Jack and shook her head admiringly. "I just don't see how you keep up with it all," she said. "All those characters."

"If I'd known it would all end up like this," he muttered, "I probably wouldn't have done it."

"Oh, don't say that!" Stevie said around a mouthful of pancakes and syrup. "We wouldn't be here if you hadn't!"

"Present company excluded, then."

"But really," Gwen continued, "how *do* you keep up with it all? It seems to me it would all run together like a watercolor in the rain after a while."

Jack shrugged. "It does, sometimes. That's when I have to stop, step back, do something else. I can't write all the time. I do that for a while every year, in November. There's this crazy thing called NaNoWriMo, which is short for National Novel Writing Month, though really it's worldwide now. The idea is to write fifty thousand words in thirty days."

"That's incredible. Have you ever done it?"

"Well, I've tried three times, and I actually hit the mark twice. The first year was the only time I didn't. I got to about eight thousand and just ran out of talent and imagination. But neither one of the two I did win with ever got finished. I get going on an idea, I zoom along for a while, then I put it aside and come back to it when I feel like it."

"Convenient," Gwen noted. "If only real life was like that."

"That's the seductive part of writing. You can be in multiple worlds at once, and all of them are worlds *you* created yourself. I can't tell you how fulfilling that is. It's better than reading." He smiled. "Most of the time I haven't the slightest idea where the story is going to go. I just sit down, start keying, and out it comes. A lot of times I'll read it over afterward and wonder where a particular plot twist or bit of dialogue came from...I don't remember writing it."

Stevie laughed and made a *wooooooing* noise, like some kind of B-movie ghost. "The Story From Beyond The Brain!"

"Couldn't this be just like that, though?" Gwen said with a serious look.

"I don't know that I'm that good," Jack said. "I'm just a hack."

"Nonsense!" the women said at once, though Gwen didn't say nonsense, she used a somewhat stronger adjective. "You made us," she added. "And I don't know about you, but I think we're pretty fine."

"At least," Stevie agreed, swirling the last bits of her pancakes in the dribblets of syrup still on the plate. "Gwen, we're going to have to come back here sometime. Jack, make sure you write a story about us coming down here for something."

"But not for a Yard Sale," Gwen said quickly. "Have us going hiking or caving or visiting relatives, or something. No Yard Sales. I'm done with them after this."

"I'll make a note of it."

"I already did," Stevie declared, showing him her notes. There, at the bottom of each page, were the words, *No More Yard Sales!* Each was underlined twice.

"I get the message," he grinned. "No more Yard Sales. I promise."

"But have us come back *here*," Stevie insisted. "Their pancakes are the *best*. And the coffee...ummm!"

Jack drank three cups himself, curious to find Drea Walls was not present to fill the cup, but—and this aroused no small measure of suspicion—he could swear he could see someone in the kitchen watching them, and it wasn't somebody checking out the women, either. No, whoever it was, they were watching *him*. And since nobody had given him the eye since the first year or two of his marriage, he could only presume that it was one of his characters making at least some small bit of contact. *Maybe if it's a minor character, he thought, maybe they have to kind of stay in the background. Only the big players get to step forward and introduce themselves.*

"I thought about that," Gwen said, nodding her agreement. "I wondered, too, why *we* can come and go places with you, but nobody else has so far. Why do you suppose that is? I'm sure it's not for a lack of want-to."

He'd wondered that himself, especially in the case of Gaea. Never mind what the woman on the phone had said about her; whether she was an actual Goddess or not was irrelevant. In the story, she *was*. So she should be *here*, too. That was all there was to it. If there was only one rule he was prepared to believe about this...this...world of his own imaginings in which he found himself entangled, that was it. Whatever the person was in the story that had been their genesis, that was what they were here. That Ellen had been able to change to a fox was more than enough proof for him.

"So," Stevie concluded, "of all the people in all these stories...who do we need to look out for the most?"

Jack bit his lip nervously. "I mentioned .45, Beardman, and Craterface from *Lemon Drops*. They would definitely have to be a threat, and I hope we don't run into them. Randy Sweet from *River*...yeah, he's a pretty wicked guy. And Bobby Richert and Digger Anderson from the same story. I had one or the other coming back in *Gypsies* to play a role as a pivotal kind of heavy about two-thirds of the way through, I wasn't sure which yet. I hadn't got that far. In *Gypsies*, there's Diosa, but then I'm still not

sure whether she's actually evil, or just playing a role." He gave them a sideways smile. "That's one of those stories that's sort of gotten away from me."

"Okay. We'll put her in the 'iffy' category," Stevie said, making a note.

"Who's in that right now?" Gwen asked, puzzled.

"John Wilder, Elsbeth—I'm still not sure about her—and Danny Wilson. We met him, remember? And whenever he looked at me, it was like he was able to look right through my clothes. It's *rude*."

"I don't blame him," Jack laughed. "He won't hurt us. He's a combination of several of my best caving and hiking friends. But if you're keeping a category like that, we'd better put Purdy from *Gypsies* in it too, and maybe Thomas Hawk." He folded his arms and sighed. "And I think that pretty much wraps it."

"Well then." Gwen pushed away from the table, then, waxing dramatic, she stated, "Forewarned and forearmed, we push boldly into the unknown."

Jack rolled his eyes. "That sounds like something I might've written the first couple of years I tried. But I suppose it's a start."

"Well, it sounded fine to me," said Stevie. "Let's go."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day twelve (Wednesday, 12 November 08) Total words: 30386. To go: 19614

They returned to Cox's Crossroads via the southern roads, not out of a desire to be different today, but because the route from Allardt was just lousy with traffic. The bad weather of day one of the Sale had kept most people away, and now they were making up for lost time. All of which was okay with Jack, but it did make it a little more than inconvenient for him to pay his expected visit to The Spot. Gwen and Stevie were impatient with him for

wanting to stop, but wisely they didn't say anything, and when he came back, the dismayed look on his face was enough to advise them that speaking about it was still not a good idea.

He had heard Deb's voice, yes, but it was fainter still, fainter even than it had been yesterday. He was more than concerned; he was frightened. And while they might have a better idea of what they might find along the road—or, rather, *who* they might find—he still really didn't know what he was looking for. But eventually he made up his mind, and he told them, "I think what I'm going to do is just do Deb's shopping for her."

Stevie gave him a curious look. "Why do you think you should do that?"

"I don't rightly know. It just seems like it's what I should do. I mean, if I were the one missing, I'm pretty sure she would set in a store of things I like to welcome me back. I've been in the hospital a few times, and every time I am, she and Petey always do something like that. They make a 'welcome home' sign, there's gifts, a special meal, you know, that sort of thing."

"They care a lot about you," Gwen said. "Guess I can understand why."

"Well, I'm no prize. But I sure did luck out in getting them. I'm not much of a father, and I'm no better as a husband, but they keep me around anyway." He smiled. "Go figure. How I ended up so well off still amazes me."

"You know," Stevie declared, "you need to see a shrink."

"That has been remarked. Why?"

"Self-esteem," Gwen agreed. "Jack, all I've heard you say about yourself throughout the time we've been here is how inadequate you are, that you're a hack writer, and now what an awful father and husband you are. I'm telling you, you're no worse than anybody I know, and you're better than most."

"Like Evan," Stevie said, easing to a stop in the front yard of a home. "What drew me to him, I still don't know."

"He was the first guy you ever slept with, Stevie," Gwen sighed. "That's why. Funny, that's how I've always heard it was

with guys, that they marry the first woman who'll sleep with them. How about you, Jack?"

He gave them a sideways smile. "Well, Deb was not the first woman I ever slept with, if that's what you mean."

"I got preggers," Stevie said. "I had to marry Evan. That's just what you did."

"Back then, anyway," Gwen countered. "If it happened today..."

"Which it *won't*."

"...of course. But if it did, you probably wouldn't make the same mistake."

Stevie got a faraway look. "Oh, I don't know. He was nice for a while. And he did have...he was..."

"I think I get it," Jack laughed, rolling down his window and giving the woman outside a five for the privilege of parking in her yard. "Let's get started. There's a lot to see."

There was. For all of the people who didn't put things out the day before, they were very definitely in business today, and they'd called friends who had themselves called friends. In some places the display tables went from yard to yard without a break, a solid wall of rummage. It was quite amazing to look at, and rather daunting to consider seeing it all. But they made their way along it anyway, stopping to look at things that intrigued them, and even buying a few things here and there. A beaded necklace for Gwen, a book for Stevie to give to her son Kevin, and a pair of extraordinarily gaudy sunglasses for herself, complete with a silver chain to keep them around her neck. A more rubenesque Shirley MacLaine, he thought, minus a few years, and with quite a bit more of the paranormal aspect...

For his part, he had found...nothing. And that wasn't for a lack of trying. He looked at every table, with a diligent scrutiny that would've startled Deb. But then she was the object of the scrutiny.

It saddened him to realize just how little he knew about his wife's likes and dislikes. Oh, sure, he knew what she liked to read,

what kind of music she listened to, what she watched on television. That she enjoyed painting and "cropping". Those were things that happened most every day, he couldn't possibly miss escape knowledge of these. But the more esoteric bits, the hidden joys of her life that required more than just a slight scraping of the surface veneer to discover...of those things, he had no clue. And yes, it depressed him to think that he might not. Ever.

He was well on his way down the road toward just this sort of emotional bender when a woman caught his eye. She was sitting behind a table on the front lawn of an impressively large, gabled house that perched atop a low hill about fifty yards off the highway. The woman looked vaguely familiar, even from this distance, and as he approached, he began to feel a chill. Not the warm, friendly feeling he'd had when he approached the home where they'd found the Becks, but instead something more ominous.

Trying to remain composed, he walked up to the table, scanned its contents. There was a lot of old-looking jewelry there, all surrounding a large, elaborately designed jewelry box made from what appeared to be mahogany. It was inlaid with what looked to be bronze, and the hinges and fittings were all bronze as well. "Nice, huh?" the woman said. "It was my mother's." She pointed to just above the latch. "Her initials. DG, Donna Gordon." She smiled, revealing a set of very bad teeth, so bad that they were almost painful to look at. He could only imagine how painful it had to be for her to have them in her mouth. "She was a wonderful lady. I don't know how I ended up like I did. Don't it just go to show, you never know."

"No," he said, trying to view her peripherally rather than stare. She was thin, painfully thin, and she had fresh, angry-looking sores sprouting on her arms. "I don't guess...I don't guess you do."

"You need to look after your precious things," the woman continued. "See, it's just too easy to lose them. Easier than you think. That was the way it was with me, I mean, and my mom.

She didn't keep very good track of me when I was young, and look at me." She paused, then said, "No, really. Look at me."

He did, reluctantly. It was not an altogether pleasant sight, but at the same time he couldn't help feeling intrigued, such was this first meeting with .45. Jack Gilcrest had always considered himself an open-minded sort of person. He'd said something to Stevie about that very thing just a few hours' previous, in fact. But he was finding it hard to maintain that objectivity when confronted with Brenda Lynn Gordon. She hadn't told him her name, and he'd never given her one, but he knew it anyway. He'd never referred to her as anything but .45 in the story in which he'd created her.

"Precious things," she was saying, "that's what this box held. Not much left in it now. A couple of pairs of earrings, and a necklace, I think is all that's in there anymore. Except memories." She sighed. "I don't even know why it's here. It's pretty and all, but..."

"No, I'm glad it is," Jack said quickly. "May I look at it?"

"Sure, Jack. Look all you want."

He locked eyes with her as he took the box from her trembling hands. He didn't see any threat there, real or perceived. They were a little cloudy, perhaps, but otherwise normal, not the blank, emotionless sort of eyes one would expect to see on a murderer. But that was exactly what she was.

Wasn't she?

"I'm what you made me, Jack," she said with a shrug. "That's all. Do you remember anything about me? That was an awful long time ago, as I recall."

"Almost five years."

"Seems a lot longer," she reflected, "but I guess everything seems that way for me. For us."

Us. Then, they were here somewhere too. Beardman and Craterface, her accomplices.

"That would be Wendell and Billy." She grinned. "They never were real happy with those names. Especially Billy. But it

guess it's true. He never was one for cleaning his face." She wrinkled her nose. "Or much of anything else either."

"I always wondered," he thought aloud, "why you hooked up with them. You're so much smarter. Why didn't you get a partner or two with something on the ball?"

"Because I didn't *want* a partner, Jack. I work best alone. Kinda like you. When you do what you do to make this," she swept her arms around her, "you're off by yourself, I guess? Well, I'm no different. In fact, we're probably more alike than you'd like to admit. That's why you're so ate up right now."

"I'm not ate up," he denied. "Why would I be?"

"How about that I'm not the prettiest thing this side of Cookeville? Not like those two you came here with. Even the dyke is good-looking, Jack. Hell, I'd do her. Wouldn't even think twice about it."

Do her, he wondered. *Does that mean sleep with her or kill her?*

She replied honestly. "Could be either way, I guess. But like I said, I am what you made me."

"Hey, don't blame me. It was a *story*. And in the end, you became a...sympathetic character."

"Uh huh. Wrapped up in thorns and shot to death, by somebody else in my body? Sounds somebody I'd feel sorry for. You bet."

"I did," he said quietly.

She looked at him carefully for a moment, then she nodded. "I know. I know you did. Don't think I don't know what's gone on with some of the others. How many have you killed? Compared to some of the crap I imagine gets written, probably not even close. And it probably hurts you to do it."

She walked from behind the table and motioned for him to follow her. She walked with a grace he could not have expected, poised and confident, a lot of attitude from a woman who probably didn't weigh much more than ninety pounds, and that after a hearty meal. It was probably just that attitude that enabled her to so easily persuade and control two men older and far stronger

than her. They were weak-willed though, and not very bright. Easily dominated by someone with force of spirit.

She led him toward the house and up the steps, where there was a porch swing. "Might as well relax a bit," she said, taking a seat. "You've got a long day ahead of you."

"You seem to know an awful lot about me."

"You made me," she repeated. "Did a good job of it, too. That's why I know how much I do, why I can talk to you like this. You made me. *Built* me. Like a carpenter, or maybe, more like a sculptor. I like to imagine myself doing stuff like that." She looked across the grass at the crowds flowing past. "Do you suppose I'd be good at it?"

"I don't see why not."

"Even a murderer?"

He shrugged. "You're human. You do have a heart in there. That's all you need to be an artist. A heart. I used to wonder if art was the end result of passion, or just a by-product. One of those silly metaphysical tangents I get off on sometimes."

"You ever figure it out?" She smiled. "Sounds like something people probably need to know."

"I decided it didn't matter, and that I was wasting time I'd spend better writing."

She nodded. "There's times for thinking about things like that." She turned to face him. "Like now, you should be thinking about just how little you know your Deb. And I know you have, Jack."

He bit his lip. "Just how much that I think do you hear?"

"I believe we're dealing with third person omniscient here. Kinda sorta. Or at least that's what I remember from ninth grade English. That's cool. I can hear *everything* that you think. Probably those women can too, so be careful how you undress them in your head."

"I don't..."

She put her hand on his arm. "I know you don't, and it's not important. What is important is you getting your wife back. There's

a lot more at stake here than just her, if you haven't figured *that* out yet."

"I guess I have," he acquiesced, "even if I'm not sure what it is."

"Jack, it's really pretty simple if you look at it the right way. All of us that you see, we have one thing in common. Once you figure out what that is..." She looked over his shoulder. "Hey, here comes Wendell and Billy."

He turned and saw them. Yes, the huge, bear-like man was Beardman—Wendell—and with him was the grotesquely pockmarked face of Billy.

There must have been some concern on his face; she quickly moved to soothe it. "Don't worry," she said, "they won't bother you. They couldn't even if they wanted to. Morning, boys," she said to them.

Beardman grunted something marginally intelligible and sat down on the top step. Craterface walked up to stand just opposite Jack. "Is this him?" he asked. "Guess it is. You don't look like much," he said to Jack. "Reckon I could take you."

"Reckon you'd get your ass kicked if you tried," Brenda snarled. "If he didn't do it, I would. You got anything?"

"No. Nothing to the north, nothing he don't already know about. South though, yeah, there's a bunch down there." He grinned, a mass of green-flecked enamel that would be a mammoth challenge for a Periodontist. "Some good lookin' women, there, Jack. And I ain't talkin' about what you come here with."

"See, we've been trying to help," Brenda said. "I want this to be as easy for you as it can be. I figure, maybe somewhere along the line we'll end up better off. Or is that maybe too much to hope for?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, Brenda. This is all new to me too."

"Well. Anyway, I sent Wendell and Billy up and down the highway today. What they were looking for is people, Jack, people like *us*."

"Found some too," Craterface—Billy—said with another rotten-teethed grin. "Boy, you is in for some surprises."

"That's what I was afraid of," Jack muttered. "But I sure do appreciate you going out and checking. All to the south, you say?"

"'Cept the ones you already seen. And old man Akin, but him I can't figure out."

"Me neither," Brenda agreed. "But never mind. You have a long way to go, Jack, and it's not going to get any easier carrying a load. And you *will* be carrying a load. You're not leaving here empty-handed, I'm guessing. You were eyeballing Mom's stuff."

"Was it really your mother's? Or..."

She looked indignant. "Jack, I'm surprised. All we did for you, and you're up here insulting me. Besides, I didn't steal but *half* of that stuff. The stuff on the table? Well, maybe that's stolen, maybe it's not. I'm not going to tell you either way, and it doesn't matter anyway, does it? Now, what's in the box already, where that came from...I don't know. Might've been Mom. Might've been somewhere else. I feel like it *does*, but I don't guess that matters either, huh?"

She sighed and pointed out toward the table. "You'd be surprised how people just...just...leave stuff on tables out here and don't bother to watch it. Talk about a harvest!" She sounded amazed. "This place is *great*. Why couldn't you have put us here instead of at Mansfield?" She saw the look on his face and put up her hands. "No, never mind. I reckon you don't have a whole lot of control over what you write."

He didn't say anything, he just nodded.

"But I guess we need to talk turkey on what you want to buy, and I know you do. There's the box, and the stuff on the table. Now, I know you're carrying cash, and *you* know that if I decided to turn these boys loose, they could take that cash and leave you in a ditch somewhere."

That got his undivided attention. "But you said...!"

"Since when do you take the word of a felon, let alone a murderous felon? Besides, I said *they* wouldn't bother you." She tucked her hand under blouse, where the swell of the fabric indicated something a little more than a breast, and withdrew her familiar .45 snubnose. "I didn't say a thing about *me*." She held his gaze for about thirty seconds, then she burst out laughing. "Oh, I do crack myself up sometime!" she managed. "I got you, Jack, I got you good!" She replaced the weapon in its holster and grinned at him. "I figure that's as much payback as I'm going to get. And about as much as I'm due. Tell you what, give me a hundred and we'll call it square. Just take what you want off that table, and I guarantee there's four or five pieces there worth a lot more than that all by themselves."

"Are you sure? I mean, I can afford more..."

"Don't tempt me. Besides, what good is going to do me? Here? Am I going to go 'yard sailing', like Deb? I'd sooner take what I want. It's a lot more...fulfilling."

"Fulfilling?"

"To each his own, Jack. To each his own. Like I said, you made me. Sure there's not just a *little* klepto in you?"

"I guess there is in all of us," he admitted grudgingly.

"And sometimes being bad is good, huh?" She didn't wait for a reply. "Well, that's as much as I could hope to hear you say." It wasn't what he had said at all, but he wasn't going to argue the point. She rose and he followed her back down the steps and across the lawn to the table. "Make sure you get these," she said, pointing to a pair of earrings studded with what looked like...

"Rubies?" he asked. "Are those real?"

"Oh yeah, they're real," she confirmed. "Rubies. Red is my favorite color. I know the real thing when I see it. She does too, Jack, and she'll love them. This, too." She patted the box. "D'ya suppose it was coincidence Mom had the same initials as Deb? Think about that, Jack. Think about it, and when you see her

again, try and remember me with a little fondness." She held out her hand.

He took it...then he drew her to him and kissed her gently but firmly on the mouth. When he was finished, he stroked her cheek and said, "Thank you, Brenda Lynn. For everything." She didn't have a reply to that. When he had finished picking out what he wanted to take with him, he left her there on the lawn behind the table, looking quite dazed. Behind her, Wendell and Billy were awash in gales of laughter. It sounded like the first time they had laughed in...well, five years.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day thirteen (Thursday, 13 November 08) Total words: 33739. To go: 16261

The jewelry box tucked under his arm, he walked south, following the omnipresent line of sale tables. Vaguely he kept his eye peeled for Gwen and Stevie, but mostly he was looking for the people Brenda Lynn and her goons had scouted for him, the "people like us" Billy had mentioned. His characters, in other words.

She was right about one thing, he thought, *this box is a load*. It was heavy, and as bulky as it was awkward. More, what was in it was constantly shifting, making it all the more difficult to tote. Yes, it was beautiful, but it was almost painful to carry. But he wondered if perhaps that wasn't the idea. A little penance, perhaps? A cross to bear, something to give him an object lesson on how painful re-learning lessons can be?

He laughed at himself...and almost dropped the box as a result. He managed to get hold of it just before it hit the ground.

"Here now," a voice said from beside him. "Let me give you a hand."

"Thanks," Jack said gratefully. "Guess my eyes were bigger than my arms."

"That happens. Set it here."

The man speaking to him was pushing what looked like a hopped-up stroller, with wheels like a bicycle and even a hand brake on the push bag. Jack set the box in the padded, hammock-like seat, then stood up and shook his arms in relief. He had seen women (and men) pushing things like this along the roads of the parks in Nashville. The babies always appeared to be having a grand time, and he had even seen knobby-tired versions on hiking trails. He imagined Petey would've loved to have a ride in such a rig. Nowadays he'd be just as likely to enjoy pushing it. *He sure does well with kids*, Jack thought. *He'll be a fine teacher.*

"He will," the man agreed. "He will at that." He held out his hand. "David Bennett. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Jack."

Jack looked at him curiously—and awkwardly. "David Bennett." He tried to remember the name, but it was difficult. Naturally, Stevie had the list, and just as naturally, she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Bennett smiled. "Don't worry about it. I know, it's got to be tough, after so many years and all those names and faces. Mine was...unremarkable, if I recall correctly. But then it wasn't my face that was important. It was the crosses."

Ah, crosses. Now he understood. David Bennett was the main character in another short story, of that title: *Crosses*, and it was about just that, the crosses that people place along the side of the road after a traffic accident in which someone (or *several* someones, perhaps) had been killed. Jack passed them on the road all the time and never gave them a second thought...till one day he passed one that he'd seen hundreds of times before. It was on the climb up a sizeable hill, at the apex of a turn, and it was clear that the victim had gone straight off the road and impacted the guardrail. It was rather an elaborate device, with ornamental ironwork and the person's name, but what caught his eye were the flowers and the teddy bear attached to the metal framework. As seemed to happen, he began to wonder about the story behind the display, and when he got home, it went into his

“Idea Book”, a spiral notebook he carried in his valise along with his laptop. Sometimes he would leaf through that notebook and pick out an idea and start a story, and sometimes he would just sit and think of things that might be neat to write about and jot those down. He had enough for several years’ worth of NaNoWriMos now.

But *Crosses*...when he finally did get around to writing that, a few months later, that just flew out of him in a great rush, rather like *Lemon Drops* had. He had put David Bennett in his position as a frustrated writer who passed the same roadside monument everyday. Like Jack, David Bennett was curious enough to speculate about its meaning. But Bennett did the legwork, learned its story, and that was the pivot on which the story turned, for as soon as he knew who the person was, he found he could see her, too. And that was where his curiosity got the better of him...

It was a splendid yarn. He'd even evoked the name of Jeb Stuart in it, a sort of a tribute to his first main character and still one of his favorites. And it was the first that friends had urged him to "shop around", as one had said. "This is *good*. As good as anything I've read lately. You could sell this."

But it was like anything else. A potential source of income, something he knew was worthy of praise and attention, and he sat on it. Why?

"That's a good question," David said to him. "Why *don't* you try to sell it? I'm sure you could use the money as much as I could've." That was true enough.

Jack held up his hands. "I guess I always think it's not good enough. Or that the market is already too full. Or that dark fantasy doesn't sell like it used too. I could go on, but I expect you know all the excuses already."

"Having used them repeatedly myself," Bennett said with a wry smile. "Jack, you'll just have to get over that. Never mind that you're not good enough. That's your opinion, and you know what they say about opinions. I think it's kinda selfish, myself. You've

got all this potential you could be sharing, and you choose to keep it bottled up."

"Now, wait just a minute," Jack protested. "It's not a *choice*."

"Uh huh. Then prove it. As soon as you get home, get out that Writers Market book Deb got you for Christmas, pick out a magazine, and send that story off. Myself, I'd recommend *Cemetery Dance*; it's their kind of thing."

"And how would you know this?"

Bennett grinned. "I read it at your place."

Aw, that's just fine, he thought. *Now I have people I wrote about telling me they hang around my house.*

"Well, where *should* we hang around?" This from a short, thin woman who had walked up to stand beside David.

"Let me guess," Jack said to her. "You're Micki."

"David's wife. That's right. So? Where better for us to hang around but your house? You created us, after all. That's where our..." She looked up thoughtfully, and then said, "Our life force, I guess. I've heard the word *ki* for it, but don't hold me to that. Whatever it is, that's where it's centered. So that's where we stay. All of us."

"Until now, anyway," David said. "And while it's nice to have a change in scenery, I can't help but think how awful this is to you, Jack."

"And Deb," Micki added. "Don't forget Deb."

"Oh, I haven't," both David and Jack said at once, David continuing, "We'd kind of like to get on with our existence, Jack, if you know what we mean. It's not much, but it's all we have. If you were to get printed somewhere, get into somebody's head, so to speak, why, who knows what'll happen to us? We might get to travel a lot more."

"I'd like that," Micki sighed. "There's lots of places I'd like to go."

"But wouldn't you still be in the same place in the end?" Jack asked, eyeing a youngster across the road who bore more

than a passing resemblance to Petey. "When the story ends, you're bound to the site where you were killed, and that's how the story ends, at least the way I wrote it."

"Maybe," Micki nodded. "Maybe that's how it ends *right now*. But that doesn't mean it can't change, right?"

"Actually, it does," Jack said firmly. "Of all the short stories I've ever done, that's the one I'm proudest of. It ends right where it should end. Never have I ever finished a story and been so sure it was *really finished*. So no, I can't revise it. If that's what you want, I can't do it."

"We're not asking you to revise it," David said calmly. "Just to revisit it."

"We've had a lot of time to think about it," said Micki, "since 2006, and we figure that if you were to, say, sit down and write a *short* short story, an add-on kind of thing, that might be enough."

"Nobody would ever have to see," David added. "A few sentences, paragraphs maybe. Something that explains what happens afterward, something that at least brings us together."

Micki nodded, her look now desperately longing. "That's the hardest part, Jack. You created us, you put us together, and you had us love each other. Well and good, but then you pulled us apart, and you *left* us that way."

"That's what we'd like you to fix," David said eagerly.

"If you can," said Micki with equal fervor.

It wasn't much to ask, really. A short addendum, something that no one ever need see...was that all they needed to be free? It was certainly an easier remedy than that he'd tasked to David in the story. A few minutes, a few lines, he wouldn't even need to turn on the laptop, but that would make it simpler. And the story wouldn't be compromised, not at all.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll do it. What have I got to lose?"

"Yes!" Micki exclaimed, hugging him fiercely. "See, David? I told you he'd do it. And you said he wouldn't."

"No, sweetie," David chuckled. "I said *I* wouldn't do it. The integrity of the story and all," he said to Jack. Then he pointed at

the baby jogger. "Jack, you keep that, okay? If you're going to have to lug that box around the rest of the day, you're going to need something to tote it around in. That's perfect." Then he winked and grinned. "Besides, you never can tell when it may come in handy."

Jack blinked. "Not for me," he said firmly, shaking his head.

"Oh, you might be surprised," Micki said with a warm smile. "That kind of thing tends to just sneak up on you, you know." She stretched up and kissed him. "Just be open to it if it does."

"Oh, all right," he growled reluctantly. "Just mind that you two do too."

He turned and walked away, smiling quietly to himself. As he did, Micki Bennett was leaping joyfully into her husband's arms, squealing something about finally getting to be a mother.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day fourteen (Friday, 14 November 08)
Total words: 35638. To go: 14362

It was just down the road where he saw the boy again. It was eerie, the resemblance to his son, and what was stranger still, the boy seemed to be *following* him.

They locked eyes. The boy froze.

Jack walked toward him. The boy made a move like he was about to run.

"Hello, Deuce," Jack said softly, stopping about five feet away.

"Hello, Da...Jack," the boy said, relaxing.

His name was Daryl Randle. Daryl Randle the Second, but he'd been called Deuce since the day he had been born. Or so went the story, which was probably the closest thing to a truly auto-biographical story Jack had ever written. It was called *The Peach Tree*, and it was based around the last minutes of a man being stalked by his estranged son, a son he had alienated

through his own ineptitude as a father. It actually started as a pure-out horror tale of a man hearing voices coming from the baby monitor in his son's room, but as events took place in the Gilcrest household, the story evolved into something much darker, more personal. The gist was, the father (Daryl Randle Senior, or Jack) was in his writing loft, listening to the sounds of his approaching son (Deuce, or Petey,) who, he knew, was coming to kill him, all the while recollecting the events of the past that had led to this seemingly inevitable conclusion.

It was a terrible story to write, and Jack knew it. No one but he had read it thus far, and as far as he was concerned, no one ever would. It was, in essence, an exposé of his perceived failure as a father, with his son serving as judge, jury, and executioner, by proxy. Jack could not deny that it was a powerful tale, and it was probably the most heartfelt thing he'd ever done. He'd certainly shed more tears during its creation than any other. But it was anything but pleasant, and he had only ever read it twice since he'd first sat and written it, in one awful sitting.

Jack looked at Deuce, who was so like Petey at age 12. Big for his age, chubby, darting eyes, gentle features but a sullen look, one beneath which could be hidden...well, anything. Petey had been so willful in those days, Jack had barely remembered ever being thus himself. If he'd spoken to his own father the way Petey had talked to him then, he'd probably have gotten a fat lip, or at least a serious whipping. But Jack and Deb didn't go for that sort of thing, and at Petey's size, it would have been damned near impossible to do anyway.

But years had passed, and Petey had changed. He'd grown too, and he was taller even than Jack now, but he had matured, or at least as much as a year can produce. Oh, he was still willful, to be sure, but his temperament had moderated. He would have his eruptions, but they were, like Jack's own, short-lived and mostly harmless. He would rebel if, to him, the circumstances warranted, but that rarely happened at home. So far, anyway. In other words, he was a pretty normal teenager.

"Why?" Deuce said softly, in that low, innocent voice he had assumed in the story.

"It wasn't your fault," Jack murmured apologetically. "A few minutes after I finished the story I wished I'd never written it. But you can't take something like that back, can you?"

Deuce shook his head. "Nope."

"Well, I want you to know that none of it was your fault. And in the end, things turned out all right between Petey and I. Like your father in the story, I never stopped loving my son. Never. Even when things were at their worst."

"So, why? Why write it at all?"

They were at that moment standing on the front lawn of an unusual trailer house, one with an attached room that appeared to have a second story. *A split-level trailer?* Jack wondered. *Never seen the likes.*

He sat down on the grass. The sun had been out long enough that it felt mostly dry.

"I guess," he said after some contemplation, "maybe I just need to purge something from me. I know things aren't very easy from your side, Deuce, but think about what it's like to be a parent."

"I can't. I'm a kid. Remember?"

Jack nodded as Deuce sat down beside him. That act alone tempered Jack's concern. Deuce had seemed impossibly tall, and, yes, threatening, towering above him.

"It's easy to forget. That sort of thing, I mean," Jack explained, or attempted to, anyway. "When you have so much to deal with everyday. Work, bills, traffic, all the things you find in real life. Then you come home and you get a ration from your son. That's not easy to handle sometimes."

"But it's your *job*."

"I know. Believe me, I know. And there's plenty of things I wish I hadn't done. Or had done. So much time I could've spent with you, times you asked me for attention and I didn't give it, times I should've listened to you and talked over you, instead.

Believe me, son, I know all those things, and I regret them, every one."

Deuce looked at him curiously. "But Jack, I'm not your son." He paused, then he said, so softly as to almost be inaudible: "Am I?"

Jack put his hand on Deuce's. The boy seemed to tense for a moment, then he relaxed. "Yes, you are," Jack whispered to him secretively. "As much my son as Petey. Fact is, in a way you *are* Petey." He smiled into the boy's eyes. "And do you know, that's not a bad thing. Petey is a good boy who's turning into a good young man. He's a little bigger than you, but then he's also a year or so older. He's struggling a little in school, but so did I at his age. He's going through the 'girl thing', getting his feet wet there." Now Jack grinned as he saw Deuce's face scrunch up in disgust. "You'll get there too, Deuce. Just you wait. Petey was the same way. The first time one of them starts to flirt with you, you'll remember this, and you'll think, *hey, he was right*. It'll hurt sometimes, but that's love."

"Love," Deuce said. "Do you love me?"

Jack smiled. "Yes, Deuce, I love you. No matter what."

Slowly, Deuce leaned against him. "I love you too." And though he didn't say it, Jack knew that at the end of that phrase was the word, *Daddy*.

Jack was still sitting on the grass next to the baby jogger after Deuce had walked away, heading roughly north, towards...Jack could only guess. But the boy had a spring to his step that he hadn't had before, a lilt that was evident even as he walked over the brow of a hill. He turned, gave Jack a wave, then he disappeared.

"Hey there," called Stevie, who was approaching from the opposite direction with Gwen and a couple of people Jack couldn't recognize immediately, though they both looked familiar. "Who was that? Another one of your characters?"

"More like family," he replied, rising as she brought the man and the woman nearer. "Who do we have here?"

"I'm surprised, Jack," Stevie exclaimed. "You don't recognize Charles Jeffers?"

Jack grinned. "My apologies, sir," he said, holding out his hand to the Breckinridge County librarian. "You were a lot of help in *Meadows*, and I sure do appreciate it."

"Well, maybe you can show your appreciation in the next revision," Jeffers grumbled good-naturedly. "You might start by describing me a little better. Tall, young, heavy, and prematurely gray doesn't sit very well with me, if you know what I mean."

"Sounds like I was describing myself. Who's your friend?"

Jeffers shook his head. "Can't say. You never really described her. Just that she was someone I met at a historical society luncheon." He smiled. "Mind you, I'm glad you did at least *that* much. But I'd be obliged..."

"I get it. In the next revision, I promise."

"That's all I could ask for. Thanks!" And he led his nameless friend away.

"If that doesn't beat all," Jack said.

"I don't know why you'd be surprised anymore," Stevie laughed. "Really, Jack. It's exactly as you made it, isn't it?"

"Maybe too much so," he admitted, thinking of Deuce. "But I guess it's okay, and nothing I can't fix. Where's Gwen?"

She nodded off toward a small house across the road where several tables were set up beneath a dwarf maple. "That lady's got a complete boxed set of the Horatio Hornblower videos, you know, the one that was on A & E. He wants twenty dollars for them, but she's trying to talk him down to ten. We loved that series." She sighed. "Oh, that loan Griffud. He is just *dreamy*."

They strolled across the street, Jack pushing the strolled to the place where Gwen was busily haggling with a woman who looked to be a few years younger than him. She was wearing faded Wranglers and a Kasey Kahne t-shirt.

"Look," Gwen said, pointing to a tear on the slipcover. "That rip ought to be worth at least five bucks."

"Can't say I've ever seen a rip that was worth five bucks," the woman said.

"At least three," Gwen persisted. "Come on. Twenty dollars for a set of VHS tapes over ten years old? I'm not even sure our VCR even works anymore. And then there's that tear. Really. Three dollars."

"It's the slipcover," the woman said patiently, "it doesn't affect the videos at all. Besides, you and I both know that the first thing you're going to do when you get them home is transfer them to DVD. Then you won't need them anymore and you'll turn around and sell them. You'll get that twenty dollars right back." *Jeez, she's good,* Jack thought. *Deb would have a problem with this one.*

"Thanks!" the woman said with a grin. "When you run a country store as long as I have, you kinda get used to the bartering."

Jack smiled with recognition. "That must make you Livvie Mansfield." She ran the General Store in the fictional town of Mansfield, Tennessee, the setting for *Lemon Drops for the Green One*, and she was the person who (if indirectly) pointed Drew Harden towards his meeting with Gaea.

She walked briskly from behind her table and gave him a hug. "Jack, it's so good to meet you finally. I didn't think you were ever going to get here. Frieda Gae said you were up there yesterday, I figured you would've been by quicker." She looked at him sympathetically. "But I guess it hasn't exactly been easy for you, has it?"

"It hasn't," he admitted. "But I think things are starting to come together now."

"Oooh," Stevie exclaimed. "Does that mean that you've figured out how to save Deb?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. But I have some clues now, more than I had yesterday, anyway."

"You hungry, Jack?" Livvie asked. "I bet I know what you'd like. I've got some fried bologna and cheese sandwiches with tomatoes melted on top..."

The thought set his stomach to grumbling. "I think you just read my mind, Miz Mansfield."

"So," she said to Gwen, "do you..."

"Oh, I suppose," Gwen sighed, holding out two tens.

"Tell you what," Livvie countered. "You've been a really good sport, and you did bring Jack my way." She looked at Jack. "Jack, you take those videos, and you do with 'em what you will. No charge."

"Now, wait just a damn minute!" Gwen protested violently. "I saw them first!"

"Hold short, hold short," Jack said quickly. "Livvie, are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that you're going to see Deb before this time tomorrow."

He stared at her, saw the look of complete confidence in her eyes. "Wow," he said. "I can't argue with that." He took the box from her and placed it in the seat of the baby jogger. "And I can do anything I want with this?"

"It's yours now."

"Well then." He handed it to Gwen, who grinned hugely. "Barter is fine. Free is better."

"That it is," Livvie laughed. "That it is."

While she was off preparing sandwiches, Jack looked over the tables she'd had out. There were a lot of things that Deb might like, but nothing that reached out and grabbed him, and as before, he believed that he would instinctively know when he saw what he needed.

But it wasn't Jack who saw it. It was Gwen. "Hey Jack, come and have a look at this," she called from another table, the only one he hadn't checked yet. "This is interesting."

She held it up as he walked over. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's kind of built like a brooch," she said, turning it over and pointing, "but see, it has a loop for hanging, like if you wanted to wear it as a necklace."

"Huh. That *is* interesting." What was more intriguing was the design on the front: it was an intricate painting of a striking red-haired woman in a green dress, a bird and a butterfly perching on raised hands. "Yes, I think you have something here, Gwen."

"That's nice," Stevie said, admiring it. "Who do you supposed that's supposed to be?"

Jack knew. He should, he'd written the story. It was Gaea, from *Lemon Drops*. Drew Harden found the piece—it was a brooch in the story—in Livvie's store in Mansfield, and he had bought it for his wife. Ultimately he gave it to Gaea (then Frieda Gae Owen) and eventually it returned to the store, where, as the story ended, it had found its way into the hands of the narrator, who presumably was on his way to Frieda Gae's home to, depending on how you interpreted the story, become Gaea's next mate, or perhaps just another child of nature.

"Ah, I see you found it," Livvie said as she approached them bearing plates laden with food. "Good for you. I wasn't supposed to help you, you know."

"Well, you sure didn't make it very easy," Gwen noted, telling Jack, "It was underneath a plate on that table. If you didn't pick the plate up, you'd never see it."

"Mmm. But what was on the plate?" Livvie asked playfully.

Now Gwen understood, and she smiled. "A scene from Carlsbad Caverns. Yeah, I reckon Jack would've picked that up."

"Deb too," Jack declared. "She collects those plates. She's got four or five, and she's got one from Mammoth. She'd like that, I bet."

"Now you're thinking. Now, dig in! Day's not got much left, I expect you'll be heading back soon. Better you bed down tonight with good food in you than some junk food from Jamestown."

Those needs fulfilled, and with a baby jogger loaded with treasures, they walked back to the car and headed back to the Jordan, where they examined each others' prizes. Along with the videos, Gwen had found several hoodies, a pair of jeans she thought might fit Stevie, and a book listing hikes of the Grand Canyon. Stevie had a pair of turquoise earrings, a bracelet made from chunks of amethyst, a shopping bag full of paperback books, and—inexplicably—a bowling trophy. When Gwen asked why she'd bought something like that, Stevie just shook her head and said, "I really don't know, but it'll look good next to all of yours."

"I didn't write you with any trophies," Jack noted.

"Just how minutely did you describe our apartment?" Gwen asked.

"Not very."

"Well, there you go, then. You made me an athlete, it shouldn't surprise you to find out I have a competitive streak." She smiled at Stevie. "Maybe we can get a plaque for it, 'World's Best Friend', and I can give it to you."

Stevie grinned. "I would take that award."

They relaxed for a while, winding down, trying not to think about what might happen tomorrow. No one was very sure what to expect, least of all Jack. All he was concerned about was getting Deb back, and while he was certainly enjoying the company of his characters, he could hardly bear being away from his wife.

They had never been separated for more than a couple of weeks before. That was when he'd had to go west to help settle his mother's estate when she succumbed to cancer. He had gotten sick himself while he was there, probably a combination of stress, altitude, and smog. It was a bad time made worse by being apart from the person who was, undeniably, his best friend.

Before meeting Deb, Jack had prided himself on his independence. Solitude was something to be cherished, not shunned, and he reveled in it. Oh, there was the occasional dalliance, and he'd even gotten fairly serious with a couple of

women over the years, but none had really made much of an impact on him. Not like Deb. She was more than just a friend or even a mate, she was more of an extension of himself. He did not feel complete, feel whole, when they were apart. Strictly speaking, he supposed he might be a classic codependent, but then he'd never liked categorizing people. What mattered was that it felt right.

Rather like Gwen and Stevie. Apart, yes, they were wonderful people, but they were letter-perfect as a couple. Never mind that they were gay; they were happy with one another, and that was what counted. *Someday we'll all realize that*, he thought as he watched them looking over Stevie's books together, *and we'll all be so much happier...*

Then there was a knock at the door.

They looked at him. "Who knows you're here?" Gwen asked him.

"Nobody," he replied warily. "Nobody at all."

"Stevie, the list."

She produced it and gave it a quick scan. "You said you saw .45 and Beardman, and Craterface. You even saw the boy, Deuce, and he wasn't on the list."

"Anybody else you forgot?" Gwen asked.

"Hey," a man's voice called through the door, "Let us in. It's getting chilly out here."

Gwen looked startled. "My god," she murmured, "that sounds just like..."

Jack opened the door. On the other side stood a man and a young woman. The man was in his late twenties, broad-shouldered and handsome in a rough-looking way, with the faint stubble of a beard on his cheeks. His eyes were gleaming in the light reflecting from inside the room.

Holding his hand and staring up at him with a look that was just shy of adoration was the prettiest girl Jack had ever seen. Had she been dressed in anything but period clothes she might've passed for a model. As it was, in the dress of a woman from the

early 1900s, she was amazingly lovely, exuding a sensuality and grace that put a lie to the prim look of the dress. Her hair was as gold as Gaea's had been red, and her eyes were more blue even than Stevie's. And that was quite blue, indeed. He caught himself staring at her for a several seconds before the man said, "You'll see her better in the light, Jack."

"*Jebby!*" Stevie shouted joyfully. "Jebby! You're here! Oh, I knew you'd come, I knew it!"

Of course, Jack thought, this would be Jeb Stuart, the central character of *Meadows of Forever*. Caver or fortune, saw operator by day, ghost hunter by night. Sort of. *Meadows* was not unlike what Jack had gone through the past few days. The action centered on Jeb, who had an unusual encounter with a paranormal entity during a Halloween trip to a "haunted" cave. The upshot was that the entity was the trapped soul of a woman, and the story involved his fight to free her. It was an adventure, yes, but at its core, *Meadows* was a love story, of Jeb's mostly solitary existence being entered, shaken, and ultimately enhanced by a series of people he either already knew and grew closer to, or complete strangers who became fast friends. The ending was bittersweet, bitter from Jeb losing the fight to the cancer that had been eating at him since before the story really began, sweet from the binding of his spirit to that of the lovely and mysterious Kate Bellamy.

He stepped aside and let them through the door, which was probably a good thing, because Stevie would've shoved him aside to get at Jeb otherwise. Now she was wrapped around him like a coat, and the pretty (*no*, Jack thought, *stunning*) girl—Elsbeth Wilder, another character from the same story—was looking at the pair with amusement. "It's funny," she said to him, "seeing you for the first time. I'm not sure whether I should kiss you or kick you."

"Whatever for?" Gwen asked, surprised.

"On one page," Elsbeth pouted, "he calls me the most beautiful woman alive. A few pages later, he makes me into a

murderer. And then, not content with this, he makes one more beautiful that I. It's not right, Gwen Chaney. Not right at all." Then she walked over to Jack and planted a firm kiss on his lips. "Still, it could have been worse," she allowed. "You could have left me in that awful fix. I probably *would* have kept a grudge over that."

"I don't blame you," he said, bowing to her. "Believe me, if I'd known..."

"But you couldn't," Jeb said, finally managing to mostly pry himself away from Stevie, only to be spun right into Gwen's arms. "Not anymore than I could've figured what was going to happen to me that day I went out to Wilder Witch Cave. But in the end, it all worked out, didn't it?"

"It did. It did at that." He held out his hand.

Jeb took it and shook it. "Funny," he said, "I think I'm looking at myself."

"God, you'd better hope not," Jack laughed. "Take better care of yourself and you needn't."

Jeb shrugged and chuckled. "I don't suppose it matters much, does it? We all know how it ends for me. Not that it's not a *good* ending, Jack, it is. But you always wish you had more time, don't you?"

"It looks as if *you* are the one who needs to take better care," Elsbeth said to Jack, prodding his belly. "If I'm going to have a life beyond this story, anyway. I can't very well do it unless somebody actually reads the thing, Jack, and nobody can see to that but you."

"Which brings us to the point," Jeb declared. "We're here to help. Others will be here soon. They've fulfilled their purpose out there..." He pointed outside, off in the general direction of where the sale was still going on, even into the night. "Everybody wants to help now, Jack. Of course, they all have their reasons."

"Some more selfish than others," Elsbeth added. "Myself, for example."

"Doesn't matter," Jeb said. "What matters now is we're here, we're all together. Between us, and those who will arrive

before the night's over, we'll figure out what's going on, and what you should expect tomorrow." He sat down against the wall, and was quickly book-ended by Gwen and Stevie.

"I'm spurned," Jack said wryly.

"Well, it's been so long," Stevie sighed contentedly, laying her head on Jeb's shoulder. "At least there's some meat there, Jebby. Not like at the end."

"So. Here we are," Elsbeth said. "Jack, I suppose it is all up to you now. Probably you have some idea what is happening now, and maybe we can help you get the rest of the way there before morning. Do you know what you have to do?"

Actually, as he looked at her, the notion began to form in his head. Obviously it had something to do with the stories; he wouldn't be surrounded by his own characters otherwise. But it wasn't necessarily the characters themselves that seemed to be the most concerned. A few had requested some favors, all of which involved a revision or an addendum to a story. That had to mean something. But it wasn't everything, nor did he believe it was the most important factor. For instance, what about the melted man? He hadn't put in an appearance today, as Jack had expected. He hadn't mentioned him to Gwen or Stevie, and for a couple of specific reasons: he didn't want to alarm them, and honestly, he wasn't sure how he fit in the scheme of things.

Jack had a pretty good idea *who* he was. It was Jordan Surrat, the central character in *River of Jordan*. About midway through that story, Jordan had a portion of his face blown off by a bomb sent to him by a union activist. It was a long, involved story, with many plot twists along the way, and dozens of characters, so many that he'd really expected to come across a few of them. He'd certainly hoped he might, anyway. But interestingly, and perhaps crucially, he had not. In fact, he hadn't seen anyone from either of his other two novels, *Gypsies* and *'Til You See God*.

Why, then? Why had he seen so many of his characters from his stories along the route of the Yard Sale, but not a single one from *River*? Why was he now hosting an apparently exclusive

cast party from *Meadows* in his motel room? Were none of the others invited? *What is it that's different about them?* he wondered. *Why can't they be here too?*

"And *that*, Jack," Jeb Stuart said encouragingly, "that's the real question, isn't it? The crux of the biscuit, if you will. Why us, and none of the others?"

And that was when the phone rang. Not just a light now, no mere trembling of the device, now it was ringing, good and proper, like a telephone should. Jack walked briskly (but carefully, Gwen's warning glance reminded him) to the bedside table and picked up the receiver.

"Hello," he said. "I'm here."

"So are they," the woman's voice said. "I sure would like to be there too."

"But you can't." He closed his eyes and tried to add it all up again. Each time he tried, the sum was the same. "That's what's at the root of this, isn't it? It has something to do with why they're here and you aren't. Am I at least close?"

"You're more than close," the voice sighed with what sounded like relief. "You're way more than close, Jack. You still don't have it all, but you're so close now, we can give you one more clue. Only one, but if you read it correctly, what that...goddess, whatever she is, told you, will be true, and tomorrow you'll be on your way home with your wife. But you have promises you must keep, and before we can give you the clue you need."

Promises? What promises?

Her voice had reclaimed its impatient tone. "Promises you made during your time here. One yesterday, others *today*, Jack. Think, man. *Think*. What did you promise, and to who?"

He thought, running back the events of the day back as best he could. And then, finally he understood. As the smile spread across his face, he said, "Do you think you could answer a question for me? Nothing specific, just a technicality. I hope, anyway."

"Ask me, and if I can answer, I will."

"These...promises. Do they need to be, ummm, very *long*? Or can they be more along the lines of summaries?"

There was a long, relieved sigh on the other end of the line. "The length," she said, "is not so important as the intent. Do what you do best, Jack. Write from your heart."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day fifteen (Saturday, 15 November 08)
Total words: 40201. To go: 9799

He laid the phone down on the cradle, looked at the expectant faces around him. "I'll need that table," he said, "and plenty of coffee. Stevie, I'll probably need that list of characters too."

"Red Bull is better than coffee," she suggested.

"Can't. Cardiologist doesn't like it." He sat at the table and opened his laptop, pressed the power button...and had an anxious moment when it didn't start. Probably it had run down when it had started on its own the other night. He had learned from sad experience that Power Save mode on that machine wasn't nearly as economical as it probably should be. He plugged it in, and tried again.

The power light came on, as if the machine was trying to boot.

And that's *all* it did.

He pressed the button again and held it. The light went off. Then he pressed it briefly again.

Nothing. Not even a light now.

"Not now," he muttered. "Not *now!* Not when I'm so *close!*"

"What's wrong?" Gwen asked worriedly.

"Laptop won't boot." He sighed. "That's just fine. *Fine!* Now that I know what to do, I can't do it!"

"What is it you must do?" Elsbeth asked, sitting down on the bed next to him.

"Finish them," he replied evenly, his voice moderating at the sight of the gentle look on her chiseled features. "All those characters. I have to *finish* them. I don't know why I didn't figure it out in the first place." He nodded toward the phone. "She told me, you know. As much as told me just this morning. She said she would be happy to give Deb back to me, but she wouldn't...no, she *couldn't*, not till I finished her."

"Finished her?" Gwen wondered.

Stevie cocked her head and looked annoyed. "Wait a minute, Jack. Are you telling me she told you this morning and you didn't tell us? I could've told you *right then* what she meant."

"What *does* it mean?" Gwen asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"Don't you remember? We're not the only characters Jack's written about." She held up the notes. "We went through them all this morning, or at least as many as he could remember. But we hadn't seen them all. We were wondering why. Well, here's why: she can't appear, because...she's not finished!"

Jack clarified it for those who didn't fully understand, which was pretty much everyone in the room save himself and Stevie. "She's part of an unfinished story. There's lots of those kind of characters." He shook his head. "If I have to write a conclusion of some sort for everybody I've ever created...that's going to take a while." He looked down at the still laptop. "It's going to take even longer if this thing won't light up."

"Time to go to work, Gwen," Jeb grinned.

"Step aside, rookies," she ordered. "I'll take care of the notebook. Stevie, how's your shorthand?"

"It's like riding a bicycle," she said with a smile. "You never forget."

"Good. Jack, you dictate to her then, till I get this thing running again. We'll deal with what happens next after you get things wrapped up on the fictional end of things."

"And if you can't get it running?"

"Yeah, right," she snorted with disdain. "You just write, Jack."

He nodded. "All right then. Stevie?"

She sat down at the table opposite him. "So where do we start?"

"At the beginning. With the Becks. That was the first really complete story I ever wrote."

"But if it's complete, why do you need to revisit it?" Elsbeth asked.

"It's a promise to keep," he replied with a smile. "Are you ready?"

Stevie licked the end of her pencil and nodded. "Go ahead and finish them, Jack."

"All right then. Here we go." He sat thoughtfully for a moment, trying to imagine how he could give Jon and Janey Beck what they wanted most.

So, he dictates:

It is paradise, this land they roam at will. Endless caves, wide rivers and tree-shaded brooks feeding them to lay beside, mountains to climb, sandy beaches on which to chase each other...and, naturally, ample time to do again and again what they have done so often as husband and wife, and for her to conceive and give birth to not just one child, but twins.

"So, what are their names?" Stevie asked. "Boys or girls, or one of each? Details, please."

He laughed. "Details, schmetails. If they want them named, they can come here and tell me. That way they get exactly what they want."

It was just then that there was a knock at the door.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Gwen said disbelievingly.

"All right Jack," Janey Beck's voice called from outside the door. "I know you're in there. Open the friggin' door. I have my hands full."

She did, too, as Jeb Stuart discovered when he opened the door for her. Janey Beck stood there beaming, with a baby in each arm. "Two of them, Jack," she cried happily. "Two beautiful..." and she looked at Jon for confirmation, "...girls?"

"Sounds right to me," he said with a smile, walking into the room. "Much obliged, Jack. I've never seen her so happy."

"But you should've waited and gotten us after you got the rest," Janey protested, if unconvincingly. "We could've waited." She looked down at her girls adoringly. "I'm glad we didn't have to, but we could've."

"I figured I owed it to you the most. Write it down, Stevie, two girls. Names..."

"Oh, do I have to tell you now?" Janey pleaded.

"Fair enough. Names to be determined."

"All right then," Stevie prompted, "who's next?"

The Bennetts, he decides. So:

In time, the red wooden cross Preston had nailed to the phone pole rots. Time weathers the wood; wind shakes it back and forth till it twists easily in each gentle breeze, even more so when a large vehicle goes by on the well-traveled road. The nails gradually pull from the pole till finally, with barely a sound, the entire construct falls to the ground, where it strikes a stone at the base of the pole and breaks into separate pieces. The hold on his soul broken, David Bennett blinks back into existence at the very moment his still-mourning wife is placing a bundle of flowers at the base of the pole. She is considering how to go about replacing the cross, in fact, when he reappears...

"...and they lived happily ever after," Stevie concluded with a smile.

"Yep. Stories *can* end that way every now and again. Not often, but sometimes. It couldn't happen to two nicer people, I think."

"You don't know good it is to be here to hear that," came a relieved voice from outside the room, and a moment later, David and Micki Bennett were introducing themselves and telling their story to their amazed counterparts.

Gwen finally felt inclined to point out that the room was getting rather crowded. "Is it going to be like this all night, Jack?" she asked. "I mean, it's not that I mind the company, but now we have three babies in here—not counting Jeb—and they'll have to have quiet eventually. I still need to get this machine working, and everybody will sooner or later need somewhere to sleep."

"Providing we get any," Jeb said. "Listen, why don't we just get our own rooms? How cool would *that* be? We could take over this place, as many of us as there's liable to be."

He had the right idea. "How do we go about doing it?" Jack wondered. "I haven't seen the manager since I've been here."

"All the better," Jeb declared. "We just move in, then."

And so they did. Gwen took Kate and Jeb and claimed the room immediately to the east; the Becks took their children (still to-be-named-later) to the one next to that, and the Bennetts the first room on the long leg of the L. They were not surprised to find the doors unlocked and the rooms quite comfortable, as if they'd been waiting specifically for them and heated and cooled to their liking. Elsbeth stayed with Jack and Stevie, at least for the moment. "I want to see how all this ends," she said with a shy smile.

"Me too." Her smile was nothing if not contagious. "All right Stevie, I think maybe we need to go to Mansfield now." He had been considering this since he'd run into Brenda Lynn Goggin and her two friends. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, things needn't end the way they did for them. Maybe they could have a happy ending of their own...or at least as happy as it could be. But how?

He gave it some thought, ran a few scenarios through his head. Nothing really fit the situation, at least not very well. Brenda had died, she'd been shot, and Wendell and Billy were eventually to die—horribly—in prison, which was pretty much as it should be, given their crimes.

Another knock at the door. Not surprisingly, it was the characters in question, and it was probably fortunate that the room had been cleared of children, because none of them smelled particularly good. "We are what you made us," Brenda Lynn said with a shrug as she saw Jack wrinkling his nose. "You probably know meth heads tend to smell pretty bad, even when they're clean. Which at least *one* of us here is," she said as an aside to her partners.

"It ain't exactly a priority," Billy admitted in a contrite tone. "Sorry, Jack."

"Screw you all," Wendell spat. "Just tell me what's gonna happen to us."

"How about 'go straight to hell', Wendell?" Brenda Lynn snapped, landing a well-aimed knee in his crotch. "Idiot. Here the man is, trying to help us, knowin' all he does about us, and you're disrespecting him." She looked at Jack. "He can't be anything but what he is, I guess."

"I understand...I suppose. So, what do *you* think I should do with you?"

"Jack!" Stevie protested. "Really! What..."

"No, no, you're right, missy," Brenda Lynn said. "You're wholly right. We don't deserve any better than what we got. But Jack here is a good man, and I believe he doesn't want anybody to suffer more than they have to. Even him." She nodded toward Wendell. "Mind you, I'm prepared for whatever. I got to die quick, and if that's it, I'm grateful enough. But these two...where they go and what happens to them...that's nasty business, that is. He didn't even describe it at all, but I know it." She looked at Jack. "And so do you, Jack. But it is what it is, and I'll live with whatever you decide."

He leaned back against the wall. "So it's back to me then."

"It don't need to be anywhere else." She looked over at the other two. "You guys go find some place to go where you're not stinking up the place."

"The room opposite the office is open," Stevie suggested, knowing that at the moment, there was no one staying anywhere close to it.

"Take a shower," Brenda Lynn called after them as they left. "And for god's sake, *use soap*."

Jack couldn't help but laugh. "That sounds like Deb talking to Petey. He just didn't..." He stopped. "Petey," he said thoughtfully. "Petey."

"What, Jack?" Stevie asked concernedly.

He sat looking silently at her for a moment, then he turned to Brenda Lynn. "We'll come back to you and your...friends," Jack said to her. "Give me a little while, I'll try and think of something. But I have somebody who needs my attention first."

"That's more than fine, Jack," she said. "Besides, I probably ought to be running herd in those two. God only knows what they could be up to here. You don't worry about us, do what you will. Like I said, I trust you to make sure we won't get any less than what we deserve."

Jack nodded. "I'll promise you that much."

She smiled at him. "And thanks for that kiss. It's the first one I've got in a while. Or at least, it's the first one that really meant something." She walked out, the door clicked shut behind her, and a barely a minute passed before those remaining in the room could hear the muffled sounds of a violent argument issuing from the room adjacent to the office.

"And you want to, what, show *mercy* to them?" Elsbeth asked. "You must be mad, Jack."

"That's me," he declared. "Mad Jack. Stevie, let's get on with it. A long way to go yet. A long, long way to go."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day sixteen (Sunday, 16 November 08)
Total words: 42276. To go: 7724

What to do with Deuce, then? he wonders. What could he do to— if indeed such a thing is possible—make it up to him?

He ponders this for a while, then decides, if this is in fact just a recreation of his feelings of failure with Petey, then why not treat it thus here? Pretend it's Petey, and do what needs to be done? Deciding this makes as much sense as anything else, he begins:

I lower my head, wait for what I know I will not feel, the bullet to come crashing through my skull.

Will not feel. Is that it, after all? Is that the answer to everything, now, at the last? Is this what I have failed so as a father, why my son would hate me so, to be standing here now, with a gun pointed to my head? Was I that numb to it, that I would just allow him to do it?

No. And yet...

Eyes close. Mine, and, I think, his too.

I hear an odd sound, a gentle plop...plop...plop...

Tears, I know, hitting the wood floor beneath our feet. But are they mine, or his? Does it matter?

"I don't want to," he says, his voice choked, sounding as if he were waking from a dream. "I don't want to. But it said..."

"I know," I tell him. "I heard it."

"It sounds like...like you, Daddy."

"I know. It's not."

His voice is slow, hesitant. "Do you...do you think..."

"You do what you think is right, Deuce. Not what some voice tells you. Even if it's mine." I open my eyes long enough to look into his, then I close them again.

Another sound. A soft click. Then a thud as the gun drops to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," he cries. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm sorry, Daddy." Over and over again till I rise and take him in my arms, hold him, press his damp face to my breast, over my heart, where it will dry. Tears will come and tears will go, but there will never be anymore like these. Ever. I pledge this.

Then I say, "I'm sorry, my son, my love." At least as many times. It is not too late. It is never too late, not while hearts beat, lips speak, while there is still breath to draw, it is not too late.

We walk down the stairs together, and into a new life. Will it be perfect? No. Will it be better? Maybe. Will it be different? Will I be different?

Oh yes. Most assuredly, yes.

As we pass over the Naughty Step, he picks up the phone which is still sitting there, near the door. He hands it to me. "I think we need a new phone, Daddy. This one's broke."

"Then let's go get one," I suggest. "Right now. And maybe a hot-fudge sundae along the way."

And we do, dropping the phones off at the dump as we go.

"I don't get it," Stevie said. "What does the phone have to do with anything, and why did the boy want to kill his Daddy?"

"You'd have to read the story to know for sure," Jack said, "but in brief, what happens is, the father tells the story of his disturbed son, who is growing distant and even hateful. The phone...that comes in because that's where the son gets the idea, and the plan, to kill his father, it comes from over a speaker phone...*in the father's own voice.*" He stopped, looked at the confused faces, then he continued. "I know, I'm not telling it very well. It's a tough thing to have to explain, very personal. As the father looks back, he sees so many reasons that it's all his fault that when his son comes to kill him, he lets him do it. Or rather, that was the inevitable conclusion, though it's not specifically stated in the story."

"That's awful!" Stevie exclaimed.

"I suppose I can understand," Elsbeth commiserated, "though I still can't condone it. Even me, and I really *did* kill my father, in a fashion."

"That's different," Stevie said. "Your father *raped* you."

"Mayhap. But he was well and truly insane when he did it. Who was I to assume the role of judge?" She sighed. "It is a vicious thing, isn't it, Jack, this guilt? Why did you ever write such a thing?"

He shrugged, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I guess I felt about as bad as your father did when he realized what he had done. The father in this story doesn't do anything physical, but the emotional damage, the psychic damage...it's just as bad, if not worse."

She nodded. "I know. And what ultimately happened to my father was the physical manifestation of my desire for vengeance. But this story...is it vengeance on *yourself* which you sought?"

"In a way," he admitted. "But Deuce didn't see it that way. Or at least that's how I read him today. He was hurt that I allowed him to do something like that to somebody he loved." His throat began to constrict. "That has to be the worst kind of hurt. What's worse, all of this was based on my own son going through a bad patch. I know it helped me purge some of my own ill feelings at the time, but now I wonder...did I cause him any harm, maybe something I couldn't see, he couldn't communicate, by writing that story?"

"Well, you're still alive," Elsbeth said with a smile. "Your son didn't kill you."

"Maybe you did your part to make up for it already," Stevie said hopefully. "It doesn't take a lot with a kid. I know how it is with Kevin. A little attention goes a long way."

Jack had been hoping he might hear a knock at the door, one that would announce the arrival of Deuce. Maybe the boy could answer his questions. But there had been nothing, not so far, anyway. *Maybe, he thought, if Deuce really is Petey, maybe he can tell me what I'm doing wrong, or maybe give me some*

idea what to do to make it right. It's not too late, he's not that far away...

"That's right, Jack," Elsbeth said, resting her hands on his. "Trust in what you've done so far, your desire to do what was right and best for him, and let that be enough. Your son, your *real* son, he will know."

"I'm sure he will," Stevie agreed. "Of course he will." Elsbeth squeezed his hands reassuringly, then said, "If he is to come, then he will come. Till then," she prompted, "I believe there are more stories to be finished, are there not, Jack?"

"There are," he said. "But now is where it really gets difficult. The short stories, the loose ends, they're mostly tied up, I think. But now I'll be moving into the novels, and there's loads and loads of characters there to get straightened out..."

"Then you'd best be started," she said.

And then, finally, there was a knock at the door. This time Elsbeth answered it.

"You must be Deuce," she said warmly. "Jack, he looks a lot like you."

Deuce walked past her and right to Jack, who he hugged tightly. "Thank you," he sighed. Then he whispered, "Who is the *babe*?"

My god, Jack thought with a grin, *he is Petey*.

"Deuce, why don't you and I take a walk while the adults keep working?" Elsbeth suggested. Needless to say, Deuce didn't even have to think about that, he just smiled shyly and took her hand as she led them outside. She gave Jack a conspiratorial wink as they passed through the door.

"If that doesn't top it all," he murmured. "Stevie, do you need a break, or can you keep going?"

"My arm hurts," she confessed, "but I could go on. I could sure use some coffee though."

"Tell you what, why don't you go into town and bring us back a couple of cups? It'll give me a chance to grab a few winks, and maybe by then Gwen will have the laptop finished."

She brightened. "Do you think I could get us some ice cream too?"

"Hell yeah. The sugar will be good for us." He gave her a twenty. "I'm going to lie down. If you can kinda pass the word to Gwen to give me a little break, I'd appreciate it."

Sleep comes quickly, and so does the Dream:

Back in the white room, looking at Deb, still surrounded by people...only, not so many of them now. He wonders where they have gone, and as he does he walks closer. They do not pack they way they did on previous visits; he can see Deb so clearly now, she is smiling and nodding, as if to acknowledge him, but not so much as to alarm those around her.

And the faces are clearer, so much clearer now. He sees Jordan Surrat, the haggard visage now not so threatening. A few more he can pick out: Tyler Maddox, Jordan's best friend. Rose Weyrick, first Tyler's wife, then Jordan's. Layla Weyrick and her daughter Honey. A shapely woman with a somewhat misshapen nose who had to be Emma Sanders. All those from River of Jordan, and a whole host from Gypsies; the one who looked suspiciously like him? Had to be Devin Surrat, Jordan's younger son. The short, slender woman with braids next to him was certainly Bitsy, called Brighteyes, and the willowy blonde on his other side was Little Heart, Cori. Others he probably knew but had never really put a face to before.

So many of them, he thinks. So many. How can I possibly take care of all of them tonight?

"You can't if you're here," that disdainful voice says.

"Who are you?" he asks. Not demanding, not now. He knows what he needs to know, he just wishes to expedite things.

"It's not that simple, Jack," she says. "All this time, I'm here, and I'm grieving. You had barely an hour before you'd gotten over Deb."

"That's not fair!" he shouts. "I've been doing all I can..."

"And mixing with your characters along the way. I know, I see it all. All the while, I wait. More importantly, Deb waits."

"I'm doing everything I know how to do. I could do more if you told me who you are."

"Just another character you created, used as you saw fit, and then forgot. One who's still grieving. And I can't tell you anything else."

"Can you at least tell me which story you're in?"

There is a moment of contemplative silence, then she says, "Both of them," very softly. "I would let you see my face, if I had one to show, but you never described me. You wrote me into the plot of both stories, but you never once mentioned anything about me. Oh, you briefly mentioned how I got involved, but it was all just outlining. I need more, Jack. And I need..."

Silence.

"What do you need?" he pleaded. "I'll make sure you get it."

"Not now, Jack. It's all up to you. You'll be back here before the sun rises, and maybe by then you're understand better. Now, go back and do what you need to do."

"I'll be back, Deb. I'll be back! And you'll be back with me before the end of the day, I promise!"

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Jack," the woman's voice intoned grimly.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day seventeen (Monday, 17 November 08) Total words: 44203. To go: 5797

He woke just as Stevie was walking through the door with a couple of runny sundaes and four very large cups of coffee.

"Two for a dollar," she said brightly. "I got six and drank two while I waited for the sundaes."

"You're going to be sick," he said gently.

She laughed. "I can drink amazing amounts of coffee. Ask Gwen, she'll tell you. Now let's get going! She's got your laptop going, but she's afraid to unplug it before the battery charges at least a little longer. We'll just go on like we have for another hour, let's say, then we'll try it out. If it works all right, we'll still have several hours before the sale starts up to get it typed. Then we'll put it on a thumb drive and go to town. There's one of those Quicky-Print places there and we can get it all down on paper, if we need it that way."

"And I can upload it to my web site too," he agreed. He'd had such a site for years, occasionally putting up stories and poems and the best of the pictures he'd taken at his various adventures. It was a vanity thing more than anything practical, and it was an extra expense they didn't need—Deb had her own website she maintained for the family—but Jack liked to entertain thoughts of someday becoming a published writer, if not famous, and maybe then people really *would* come to his site to read his stories and the latest news on what he was working on. "You have to have a dream," he told Deb when she asked why he kept the domain. "This, this is mine. Or part of it, anyway. It's not much, but it's *mine*."

And it would come in handy now. If life beyond a story really did mean making it available for others to read, well, the web was as good a medium as any, not to mention *quick*.

"So, where do we go next?" she asked.

"To a small town in Tennessee called Lennoxton," Jack replied. "Home of the Surrat family, and a very important locale in my universe." He smiled at her. "I would tell you all about it, but I think you all end up there eventually anyway."

"Oh, that's wonderful. I like what I see of Tennessee so far."

"All right then, let's continue. *River of Jordan* is next."

He tore into the story, trying to think of every loose end that might conceivably need tying. At times he would pace manically

back in forth, dictating as he walked, the scratch of Stevie's writing a strange rhythm to accompany the staccato beat of his footsteps. More often he was sitting, staring at a blank television, trying to imagine believable scenarios—he didn't want to cheapen any experiences for his characters, it wouldn't be fair—or lying down in the bed, his eyes fixed on a small spot on the ceiling directly above him pillow. After nearly two hours, and with barely half of the story covered, he began to despair. With a tale so complex, with so many important characters and subplots, he couldn't be totally sure if he was covering everything adequately.

And that was part of the problem. What, exactly, was *adequate*? What did he need to do for each character, and how many of them required recompense? What's more, he knew that *Gypsies* was even more complex, and as such, it would be *far* worse. He knew it the moment he started to review its characters. All those people, all those locations...he'd intended for it to be the climax of his "Breckinridge Books", and it was to have be the longest and most involved...

It was grueling, even with Stevie's notes. Without them his task would've been purely impossible, but even so, he honestly had no idea who he was leaving out. *It would be so much easier with the stories in front of me*, he thought, *why didn't I ever at least print out a copy of each...*

A good question! And one for which he knew he didn't really have a good answer. He didn't care for anyone to read his material till it was finished, a curious superstition of his made even more curious considering he'd never had any fiction published, ever, anywhere, save for some caving newsletters. He wrote press releases for the racetrack, sure, but that was hardly the same. So why not print them?

"Yes, Jack," said Stevie, "why not?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "Maybe I just didn't think it was good enough. It's a personal thing, Stevie."

She smiled. "Well, what am I, if not a personal thing? What is Gwen? You made us, right? And me, I think I'm a pretty

convincing character. Gwen certainly is, and Jebby...well, what else can I say?"

"I guess I never thought I was that good." He sighed. "Look, you're wonderful. Of course you are. And that's what made you the joy you were to create. The way you look, the way you speak, the way you carry yourself and interact with people...that was *fun*. I wish everything I did was so easy. But it's not, and that's part of what makes this sort of thing a challenge." He looked at her. "And why I was never able to think of it as anything but a hobby. I was always afraid...I guess, that people would laugh when they read me."

She sat down on the bed beside him. "Really Jack, listen to me. If I can't convince you that what you do is worth reading, who else could? Look at what's happened tonight. All these people, who depend on? Look at what's happened tonight. All these people, who depend on *you* for their very existence. I know, it's kind of scary to think of all that responsibility. If that's not enough reason to share all of it with people, well, I don't know what is." She leaned over and kissed him fondly on the forehead. "You take a break, Jack. You're wore out, I can tell."

"No," he said, "I'm wired from all the coffee."

"Uh huh. And that's why your eyes are so droopy. I'm going to go next door and check on Katie and Gwen. With any luck she'll be done with your machine, and I can come back in, say, half an hour and we can get back to it, only you'll have the stories in front of you. How's that?"

Jack couldn't answer. He was already asleep.

And again, he is back in the white room. And again, things have changed.

The room is almost empty now. Deb is still there, of course, but so few others! Progress, he thinks, but still, can I...

"You can," the woman's voice says. "You can. You must."

And as she turns he actually sees her now. Or rather, he sees as much as he can. She is standing directly in front of Deb, blocking

his view. She is only faintly delineated, but yes, she is there, she is solid, and what's more, he can now make out some of her features. She is tall and slender, with close-cropped hair. He's not sure how, but he believes he can tell that hers has been a rough existence; he wonders how much of that is his doing.

"All of it," she says angrily. "Every bit. Who else but you, Jack? I'm no different from any of the others, except that I'm forgotten. Forgotten! You've already been all the way through the first story, you're thinking of what you're going to do with everyone in the second, and yet here I am, the farthest thing from your mind. Everyone else," she waves around her, "they're all from the second book. I am in both! Am I so forgettable, Jack? Or was it just that...the, the person you created me for, didn't concern you that much?" She sniffs derisively. "He wasn't Jordan, was he? That person you so associated with yourself, but not so much that you imbued him with any of your traits?..."

"Wait a minute," he says. "Wait. Hold onto that. You know, that's the first really solid clue you've given me. What do you mean?" She hesitates. "I don't know that I need to say any more..."

"Oh no you don't," he said, his own voice rising in anger now. "Spill, lady. If you want me to help you, you give me something that lets me know who you are. Otherwise..."

"What will you do, Jack?" she says mockingly. "What can you do?" She whips back towards Deb, whirling her hand back as if to slap her.

But just as it looks as if things are about to take an awful turn, he abruptly realizes that he has the upper hand. Finally. Perhaps he had it all along.

Of course, he thinks. Of course. Yes, I do have something I can bargain with, or, now, threaten her with. The only thing I can possibly do that might scare her.

His eyes widened dangerously. "Hit her," he said softly, "and you'll find out."

She laughs. "What can you do to me, Jack?"

"Plenty. Whoever you are, whatever you are. I created you, I can un-create you."

Now he had her attention. "You're...you're bluffing," she says, her voice less sure now.

"Sure I am. I'm bluffing. I tell you what, lady, you lay a hand on her, as far as I'm concerned, the moment I figure out who are really are, and I will, I'll write you out of the story. Both stories. It's not that hard to do, especially with a character who's not fully developed. You wouldn't be the first and you sure as hell won't be the last. And if I put you there for a purpose, say, as support for another character, well, I'll make another one just like you." He pauses, looks straight at where he supposes her eyes are. "I can do that, you know. Only I'll make your replacement better. Not as interesting, probably, but better. So do what you will."

As vague as her face is, even now, he can still tell that her mouth is agape in shock. He has, in essence, just threatened to kill her. She could just as easily do the same to Deb now, and he can do absolutely nothing about it, and yet...he knows without a doubt that she won't. She can't. No one he has ever written, with the obvious exception of the three miscreants who currently are creating havoc in room 4, is anything close to what could be considered a "wicked" character. Even the cast of Gypsies, which is mostly outcasts and the dregs of society, only has a couple of true reprobates, and one of those is a holdover from River.

"So, tell me now," he says, his voice steady again, "who are you, what can I do to help you?"

There is a deathly silence.

"If you help, I promise, I will do anything, everything for you that I can. And that is a promise I can keep."

A pause, and then: "Come back when you're done with the rest," she says. "I want it to be just us three."

"And you won't harm her." It was not so much a question as it was a quiet demand.

"I won't harm her."

"All right then. Let me see her."

She steps aside.

Deb is positively radiant. There is an enormous smile on her face. He wonders for a moment whether she can see him or not, until she raises her hand, her fingers formed into an "I love you" sign. She sees him, all right, and she seems to be well enough. "Don't be long," the woman says, her voice contrite now. "Please, Jack. Do what you need to do, and come back quickly. It's...it's hell here, Jack..."

He sat up, blinking. The room was dark and still, so still.

"Hey," he said, looking around. "Hey, where is everybody? Stevie? Gwen?"

He got up and walked to the door. It was open, just a little, as if left that way by Stevie, not wanting to disturb him with the click of a door latch. Or was it something else, something more sinister? The three in room 4, could they be up to something? Could they have an existence beyond that he created for them?

Well, in their case, at least, he knew that was probably not true. He hadn't committed anything to paper for them yet. As far as he knew, they were still dead, Brenda Lynn in Mansfield, and Wendell and Billy at Brushy Mountain, or whatever stir they ended up in.

But there was still the matter of the dark parking lot. And it was dark, very dark. The lot lights weren't on, not a one, and even the motel's sign was off. As far as he knew, Nan never turned it off, or at least she never had as many times as he'd ever been there. And the lot lights were certainly never shut off. Clearly there was something wrong, and if it involved darkness, it couldn't be good. *That's how it works in my stories, at least,* he thought.

He went back into the room and slipped his shoes on, then he walked over to the door of the room Gwen, Stevie, and Jeb would be sharing, perhaps, raised his hands to knock...then he decided not to. If they were sleeping, then they needed it, and no less than he had. He hadn't taken the time to look at the clock, but

he was sure he hadn't slept more than an hour. And he sure didn't want to wake the baby.

What about the moon or stars? Usually he could get a pretty fair gauge on time based on their relative positions, but he couldn't tell a thing from them, not her, not now. What's more, the arrangement of the various stars didn't look like anything he'd ever seen before. *Weird*, he thought. *I know the skies well enough to know that this isn't right. Nothing is as it should be.*

He walked across the lot toward the sign, sat down on the stone foundation in almost the exact position he had the previous night when he and Stevie had had their heart-to-heart. Almost immediately he realized that there were no cars on the highway, none at all. And that was most definitely not right. Even in the middle of the night, this road carried traffic. Not so now.

"Did I do something wrong?" he wondered. "Did I piss off whatever God there is? Did I cross a line when I threatened to wipe that woman out of the stories?"

Would that it were so simple to get an answer as it were in his stories. There, if a character needed an answer, as often as not they could pose it to the wind—metaphorically speaking, of course—and in due course they would get an answer, usually quickly. Funny, how it didn't work the same way in real life.

Real life. He laughed. *Yeah, this is real life. Holed up in a hotel full of figments of my imagination. That's real life, all right.*

"It's not been so bad, has it?" came a musical feminine voice from behind him.

He jumped, slipped on the dewy grass, and fell...

...down, an amazing distance...

...and then he landed...somewhere...

...somewhere that was devastatingly familiar, even in the dim light of the canopy of stars.

Even in the darkness, the meadows were recognizable. Yes, *those meadows*, he thought, *the meadows of forever. I'm really here.*

They had been an allegory of sorts, a metaphysical metaphor, if you will, that he had created as a place where the living could consort with the dead...or, in the case of the woman who stood over at him, gazing at him with laughing eyes, those who were trapped in between.

"Well?" she said merrily. "Will you just lie there, or will you get up and show me you're as happy to meet me as you were Stephanie Harmon?"

"Oh yes," he murmured, "yes, yes. I will." He took her proffered hand and staggered to his feet, finally grasping the warm figure of Kate Bellamy in a mixture of amazement and awe. "Kate, my god, Kate. I didn't think...I mean, you never..."

"Why should I?" she asked. "I was there, Jack, and you never knew it. You saw me so many times, you just never realized it."

"But where? When?" He was crying now. "I knew, somehow, you would have the answer, Kate..."

"Now, Jack." She pushed him away from her with a startling firmness and strength. "Don't make me something I am not. I was never anything more than your ideal, Jack. Never more than that, do you hear? I won't allow you to place me above anything. It's not just wrong, it's also not true." She took his face in her hands. "Look at me, Jack. Look closely. Tell me, who am I?"

Now he was confused. "You're...you're Kate Bellamy," he stammered. "Kate Bellamy, the Wilder Witch. You're exactly as I created you."

"Yes, Jack," she said quietly. "But who else am I? Look again."

He did. And suddenly, she wasn't Kate.

"Janey Beck?" He goggled in astonishment. "But..."

And then, before he could react further, the face changed again, became that of Micki Bennett.

Then, in turns, Ellen Crosby. Then Cori, and then Bitsy from *Gypsies*. Rose Weyrick, Denise Wilkerson, Candace

("Candy Andy") Anderson, and Emma Sanders from *River*. And of course, Gwen Chaney and Stevie Harmon.

Then, finally...Deb.

"Oh my god," he whispered.

"Do you understand now?" Deb's mouth, but Kate's voice. "Your ideal, nothing more. I am as you made me all those years ago, when you had nothing and no one, no way to visualize what the woman you would love would look like. But now you know, don't you?"

He found himself rendered quite speechless. He nodded instead.

"That's how simple it is, then," she said, reassuming her own form. "How simple it's *always* been, really. You find it easy enough to create when you're depressed. Jack, when you created me you were at your saddest, your loneliest. You thought that was the best writing you ever did, and I tell you, it was...till you finished it, and began the next story. With every word you wrote, with every line you composed, you got better. Oh, it wasn't so easy as it was when you were so filled with emotion, but still, you wrote from your heart, and you channeled that which was inside you." She placed her hand over his heart. "Which still *is* inside you, Jack. And now, think back over the last several hours. Consider what you've done. All those storylines resolved, all those characters satisfied. Could you have done that if you anything less than an *artist*, Jack, an artist, well and truly?"

A smile began to form on his face as the tears flowed freely. "An artist? I don't know about that. But maybe I am a writer. A *storyteller*."

"A noble, noble profession, the storyteller." Kate allowed, wiping his face with a handkerchief. "And you are that, Jack. All that, and more."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day eighteen (Tuesday, 18 November 08) Total words: 47662. To go: 2338

Then, she slid gently into his arms, the radiating warmth of her essence penetrating him, filling him with energy, strength, and hope, hope that this adventure-turned-nightmare would soon be over. "Soon, Jack," she whispered. "Soon. Soon it will all be resolved, and you will see your Deb again. And, if I know you as well as I believe I do, you will never see her the same way again."

"You know me pretty well, I think."

She took him by the hand. "Close your eyes for a moment, Jack," she said. "This might be a little...disorienting."

"As much as getting here in the first place? Kate, I always dreamed of coming here for real. I don't want to miss even a second. Do what you need to do, but I'm not closing my eyes."

She smiled. "I understand. Take a long look, then, and tell me when you're ready."

He looked in every direction, a long look indeed, a long, slow look. They were on One Tree Hill, what amounted to the central locale in the meadows, which as its name would lead one to believe, was a hill with a single tree topping it, the only tree within eyesight, in fact. It was that way because Jack had always imagined an uncluttered field from which he could view the skies. The tree...well, it just made sense to have at least *one* tree. He'd never defined what kind of tree it was, but he decided it should be a fruit tree of some sort. Perhaps peach, he thought. It would be a nice tribute to Deuce, whose story had involved just such a tree. Then he remembered that the "lesson" of the peach tree involved Deuce being stung on the hand by a yellow jacket, and perhaps a peach tree wasn't such a bright idea...maybe a nice walnut tree instead...

The skies...well, they were beyond anything he'd ever seen. He had been in the High Desert in California, hundreds of miles from anything, and even in that remote area there was some measure of light pollution. But not here. No towns, no homes, no passing cars, not even a campfire distracted from the

show above them. It was a sight beyond his comprehension, transcendent even, and he was staggered by the immensity of the cosmos. *I am so, so small*, he thought.

"Only in body," Kate said. "In spirit, in vision, you are so, so large. Believe that, Jack. As long as you have a story within you, there are worlds yet undiscovered."

Not taking his eyes off the skies even for an instant, he murmured, "I think I'm ready now."

Kate squeezed his hand, there was a momentary feeling of weightlessness, and the stars coalesced into a single bright blue-white light that should have been painful to look at, such was its luminescence. Should have, but was not; he didn't even blink, watching as the light grew, expanded, wrapped itself around them, and quickly dissipated as they were gently deposited back on the lawn in front of the motel. "That wasn't so bad," he said, only now finally breathing again.

"Better than usual," Kate chuckled. "Shall we go and visit? I would like to visit with my namesake a while."

"That would be wonderful," he agreed, and hand in hand they walked back to the motel.

It was still quiet. Even room 4 was deathly silent. Jack wasn't sure what to make of it.

"It's nothing unnatural," Kate said confidently. "I'm sure I would know if it were."

Jack had to agree that was true. "Maybe it's just a power failure. Either way, I guess we ought to at least see if we can rouse Stevie so we can get back to work on the stories. There's still a lot to do with that last story, and daylight's not going to wait for us."

The door to room 14 creaked open. "Nobody's asleep," Stevie yawned around a wide smile. "Kate, I knew you were here. I think the little one knew too. She woke us all up about half an hour ago."

"I would love to...oh dear." Kate's face broke into a teary-eyed smile as Gwen came to the door with little Katie in her arms. "Oh, may I hold her?" Kate asked.

"Well, I should hope so," Gwen declared. "She's as much your kin as anyone's."

Kate found a chair and sat, Katie cooing gleefully in her arms, as Gwen looked to Jack and said, "Well Jack, I have good news and bad news. Good news is, your machine is going to live. I think you might need to have a new internal battery, but apart from that, it's just fine. The bad news...well, I'm guessing that it might have just enough power in it right now to copy your stories onto a thumb drive, but not much more. The power went out maybe five minutes after Stevie came in, and we didn't have the heart to wake you up. She said you looked exhausted, and honestly, she didn't look a lot better." She nodded toward the joyful woman and child. "But when Katie starts squalling, nobody sleeps."

"Which is at it should be," Kate declared, tickling the baby's belly playfully. "Isn't it, my little apple dumpling? Oh yes, it is."

"My wife's adoration of babies is unsurpassed," Jeb said from the far bed. "She makes enough of them, that's for sure."

Kate smiled widely. "We do what we must."

"A tough job," Jack said with no small measure of envy.

"Oh, Jack," Stevie laughed, "it's just like you wrote it, isn't it? And I bet I know just what you're thinking now."

"I can imagine you do. But what I'd really like to do right now is get back to work." He looked at her searchingly. "If you think you're up to it, I mean."

"Oh, I'm up to it," she said, "but I don't know what we can get done now." She waved her arms in the darkness. "I'm good at taking shorthand, but...I mean, it *is* pitch dark, and we don't have a working flashlight amongst us. We've already looked, even in your car."

"That's not possible," he said. "There's a crank light in the compartment between the seats."

Gwen shook her head. "No, there isn't. I looked myself. There's nothing in there at *all*, in fact."

That didn't make a lot of sense. He might not be active now, but as a caver-at-heart, Jack always had a surfeit of flashlights, and there always seemed to be three or four in the car. He had one in the toolkit he usually kept in the laptop case, but he knew he'd left that sitting on his desk at the track. The lantern...that was in his workroom at home. The crank light he gotten for Christmas...

...then he remembered. Deb had insisted on cleaning out the car before the trip, which was certainly a good idea. Jack had forever been something of a slovenly housekeeper, and while Deb had managed to get him to mostly pick up after himself in the house, Lucy was usually a cluttered mess. Well-maintained mechanically, but a rolling biohazard. So in the process of cleaning out the car, Deb had emptied the center console and cleaned it, and just hadn't replaced the light. Ordinarily this would just be an inconvenience, but now...

He shook his head. "This is just amazing. So close to getting things wrapped up, and we're thrown for a loop by a lack of light? This sort of thing wouldn't even happen in one of my dumber stories. We're all *cavers*, for heaven's sake!"

"Wait a minute," Stevie said suddenly. "That's right, we are. And there *is* a light. Gwen, we completely ignored it."

"Tell me," Gwen suggested. "I tore both our cars apart, and apart from the headlights, there's nothing. And our battery is pretty low."

"We could sit in Lucy and do it by the dome light," Jack thought aloud.

"I have a better idea," Stevie said. "Wait."

She left, walked out to the Taurus, and returned with Chet Akin's old carbide lamp. "Do you suppose this would work?"

"Well, I don't know why it wouldn't," Jack said with a grin. "If that carbide Jon Beck gave me is any good, we ought to have

plenty of light with this big dog. It might stink a bit, but I can live with it if you can."

"Hey, I *like* the smell of acetylene," Gwen said. "Fire it up and let's get going! I can't wait to hear how all this ends."

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day nineteen (Wednesday, 19 November 08) Total words: 49044. To go: 956

Jack walked to the car and got the can of carbide out of the trunk. The emergency toolkit Deb's father had given them a few years' previous supplied the screwdriver that would be necessary to pry the lid off the can, and carefully, carefully. All it would take would be a spark from the screwdriver on the rusty can, and *whooooomp!* A most nasty scene indeed.

A carbide lamp is an interesting thing. Most folks see them and think, *oh, a coal miner's light*. A few might ever acknowledge that cavers used—still use—the things. But most folks don't remember that the first practical (well, basically so) headlights on cars were carbide-powered Presto-Lites. The founder of that esteemed company, Carl Fisher, went on to fame and fortune as the developer of a couple of pretty solid going concerns; namely, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and the city which became Miami Beach.

How the lamp works is pretty simple. Gravel-sized hunks of calcium carbide (pea-gravel for cap lamps, road gravel for "generator" lamps) are placed in a chamber, then water is dripped onto them. A chemical reaction occurs, releasing acetylene gas, which is carried through a tube and out a ceramic-lined tip. You control the length of the flame by increasing or decreasing water flow. The average cap lamp "charge" will last about two hours, longer if you can make do with less light. A flint "striker wheel", just like those on a disposable lighter, mounted on the reflector

ignites the gas. The result is a warm, yellow light that diffuses nicely and doesn't give the "spot" beam a flashlight does.

The lid popped off the can with a little extra effort. There was no explosive outrush of gas, and the chunks of carbide looked fairly sound. Jack unscrewed the carbide chamber from the bottom of the lamp and added chunks from the can till the chamber was about half-full. Too much, and the resulting mass of slaked lime—the by-product of the chemical reaction—can choke off the water and gas tube. Then he firmly put the lid back on the can and put it in the trunk of the car.

Screwing the bottom back on the lamp, he walked back into the room. Wordlessly he stepped into the bathroom, turned on the water, and, making sure the valve was fully shut first as opposed to fully open (not a good thing!) he filled the water reservoir.

"All right," he said, walking back into the room. "Here goes."

"Wait," Gwen said. "Not yet. Give that to me."

Obligingly, he handed it to her. She removed the carbide chamber, eyed it carefully, then spit into it and handed it back to him. "Doesn't work if you don't prime it first," she said with a grin.

"It's good luck, you know," Jeb added.

Jack nodded. "It's been a while since I've used one of these things. It might take a couple of tries to get it lit. Anybody got a lighter, just in case?"

No one did. "Maybe your friends in room 4?" Stevie suggested.

"Well, let's just hope it works." He opened the water valve about half way, and listened for the sizzle of gas being released. Then he held his hand over the reflector for a few seconds to allow gas to build up, then he rolled the heel of his palm against the striker wheel.

There was a startling "pop", and the room was awash with a friendly yellow glow. "Yay, Jack!" Stevie exclaimed, then she added, "Whoops, you're on fire there..." in an alarmed tone.

Sort of. There was a faint ring of flame around the joint between the two halves of the lamp. He blew out the flame and screwed them on a little more firmly. Problem solved.

“You’d think he did it every day,” Jeb said, clapping. “Attaway, Jack.”

“I used to,” Jack replied, adjusting the water flow till the flame was a steady three-quarters of an inch in length. Setting the lamp on the table, he said, “All right then, now that we’re all fired up, as it were, let’s finish this. Stevie, is this enough light for you to work?”

She nodded. “As long as I sit by the table, it should be just about right.”

“Then let’s do it.”

The room was still for the next couple of hours as Jack dictated the conclusion of *Gypsies*. Longer and more involved than *River of Jordan*, it was the story of Devin Surrat, who leaves the Surrat family home of Top of the Rock, following a climbing accident which claims the life of his father, Jordan, protagonist of *River*. He follows his older brother Alan to southern California, where he works a series of odd jobs while waiting for an inheritance that may or may not come. He is a troubled young man who becomes even more so when he (apparently, anyway) contracts a mysterious illness which turns out to be not an illness at all, but instead a manifestation of something much stranger, and with implications what far exceed the boundaries of the Golden State.

The locations in the Southern California were a joy for Jack to describe, a throwback from his days of wandering there himself in search of gold, or perhaps himself. He never found either, but he did find a direction of sorts, which led him eventually to Kentucky, and then to Deb, and ultimately to Tennessee, which, not coincidentally, was where *Gypsies* eventually concluded...back where it started, at the mythical Top of the Rock.

Too tired to pace now, Jack leaned with his back against the wall of the room, his face dim and ghostly in the pale yellow light from the lamp. He wondered if he looked as drawn, as wore as he felt. Though it sounded over-the-top grandiose, it was no less true: creating and building up a world was an epic task, and destroying it was even more so. It was draining. Then there was the comfort factor: he had never felt at ease writing in the same room with others, even if they couldn't see what he was doing. Having to read it all aloud in front of a roomful of people was, at least, uncomfortable, and considering that some of these were characters in said same story...that went above and beyond discomfort. The others seemed to approve, though, nodding where appropriate, gasping when something frightening happened, crying when things got poignant.

Are they representative? he thought. *Can they be impartial as to the quality of the story, considering that it involves a lot of them? Or is it really that good?*

"Only you can answer that, Jack," Kate said softly, smiling. She got up and sat beside him. "You need satisfy none but yourself, in the end, then present it as it is. If people accept it, fine. If they don't then they don't, and you're no less satisfied, right? Write for none but yourself."

He nodded. "Then I think..." and he yawned hugely, "...I think I'm done."

"Happy, happy," Stevie sighed, lying down the notebook and stretching her hands, waving them over her head to get the blood flowing. And then, almost as if she were a witch and her gesture had deemed it thus, the lights flicked on.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Gwen said, "Geez, Stevie, if you had that in you all along, I don't know why you didn't do it a couple of hours ago."

"Indeed," Elsbeth said, wrinkling her wonderfully sculptured nose. "That lamp smells almost as bad as those people in room 4."

"It is pretty potent in a closed room," Gwen agreed, turning off the water flow and blowing out the flame. "Better put this outside before it knocks us all out."

For Jack, at least, it was too late for that. His head on Kate's shoulder, he had fallen blissfully asleep.

End of NaNoWriMo 08 day twenty (Thursday, 20 November 08) Total words: 50452. To go: 0!

By way of explanation, Redux: *Inevitably, I suppose, at this point the question is bound to be asked: "What do you do now? You're at 50K. Do you need to keep writing?" The answer is: most assuredly, YES! If you've read even a portion of what's above, you'll know that for the past month I have been haunted by characters unfinished. Will I leave them undone here? Heck no! That I've completed the NaNo challenge, that's nifty, and I'm glad to have done it. Now, it's time to wrap things up. Stay tuned, this will probably take a couple of days...*

The room is nearly empty now. Just Jack, the still-faceless woman, and Deb. And, strangely, one more, one Jack has failed to notice somehow. Either an older boy or a young man, he's not sure which. Funny how he never noticed him before...

"All that," the woman says, her voice unbearably sad now, "all that time, all that work, and still I'm here. Why, Jack? Why don't you know me? Of all people, why me?"

It is an awful knowledge, that his memory might be faulty. He is pushing fifty, after all, and from a family where early onset Alzheimer's is not unknown. If she is important, so important that she could bind his wife so thoroughly, then why doesn't he remember her, in spite of all the clues she's given him? If you add it all, why is the sum still unknown?

He considers all of the evidence:

She is not fully developed, but...

Ostensibly, she is in both stories.

She is attached, connected, she says, to another character.

The character to which she is connected is not Jordan Surrat, but instead someone whom Jack has identified with himself, somehow.

That should be a major clue, and yet, somehow, it doesn't register. Yes, Jack did (and does) write himself into stories, he did inject himself into characters. He figures all writers do. But which one? And who...

"Wait a minute," he says abruptly. "I did leave someone out. I got so involved with all the little subplots and minor characters, I missed a big one that I thought I'd already addressed." He looked at her closely. "I'm close now, aren't I?"

She nods. "But even if you are, you can't possibly..."

"If you are who I think you are, I can," he insists. "The story isn't necessarily finished yet. I can change anything I want, any time I want." He walks back and forth agitatedly. "I just need to remember how and where...if I have to go back and re-write the whole sequence, I don't know if I have the time..."

She looks excited now. "You don't have to. It's there, Jack, it's right there with you. If you can just remember..."

The name is not important, but he evokes it anyway: "You're Sarah, aren't you? Sarah McWhorter? Tyler's friend?"

"Tyler's friend? Tyler's wife!" The excitement changes to rage.

"Tyler's wife! You thought enough of Tyler to give him life, and to create me for him, but you never thought anything of me, did you? And our son, you gave him a name, and you gave him a friend in Devin Surrat, but you never did anything for him...except take his father away! Why, Jack? Tell me it's just that you're getting old, please, not that you just 'forgot'..."

He allows her to vent. It's only right. She goes on in this vein for several minutes, then, as if she has run out of gas, she suddenly seems to lose all substance...collapses...and disappears.

And so does Deb.

He woke to the sound of furious typing. Stevie was hard at work transcribing everything he'd dictated, her fingers a blur over a keyboard that would probably never be the same. He looked over at Gwen, who nodded. "I think it'll be okay now," she said to him. "The power manager needed to be reset, I think, and it'll probably be okay till you get home, but you'd better get it checked pretty soon." She winked at him. "You need to change your password."

"Thanks," he said, getting up as quickly as his stiff limbs would allow. "Did I lose anything? Does it look like anything's been tampered with?"

"Nope. Not as far as I can tell, anyway. Who would want to mess with your stories?"

"Thank god." He stood and looked over Stevie's shoulder, and was surprised to see that it looked like she was almost finished. "I don't know if I can answer the 'who' part, but I bet I can guess the 'why'...providing I can remember the 'what' and 'where'."

Stevie giggled. "I guess I should ask, 'how' are you going to do that." She hit the return key with an exaggerated flourish.

Only Stephanie Harmon could provide that sort of relief. "Bless you, Stevie," Jack said with a grin. "That's just what I needed."

"Always ready with a quip, is my lover," said Gwen with a smile. "All done?"

"All done." She inserted a thumb drive and saved the files to it. "Ready to print with time to spare."

"Well, not exactly," Jack said awkwardly. "There is one more. But I think I'm going to have to work this one out myself." He nodded toward the machine. "May I?"

"No one talks like that anymore," Stevie said, getting up as Jack bowed courteously. Smiling, she said, "I feel like I should curtsey."

"Chivalry isn't dead yet." He sat down and began to delve through the drive, looking for...something. He wasn't sure just yet exactly what.

The question had to be asked, of course. "So," Elsbeth said politely, "you're looking for something, something you've forgotten?"

"In a way. A story," Jack replied, several levels deep now into the folders on the machine. "Or, more specifically, an *un*-story. A fragment. I used to write that way, see. If I got bored with one thing or another, I'd move somewhere else and link all the little vignettes later. You'd think it would end up being really awkward and confusing, but it works for me, more or less."

"So, a *part* of a story, then," Elsbeth said, "without a real beginning or end?"

"That's about it." He looked at her doubting face. "Be fair. You do what you have to do when you're just completely locked up with writer's block. It's not easy to do this sort of thing. If it was, everybody would be doing it."

"But it is so odd, Jack," she persisted. "Was I that way? Just a random thought that existed in a separate existence till you, what would you say, *linked* me into the rest?"

"No, not you, Elsbeth. You were an original. In fact," he said, looking at them all, "you all are. I never had a more spontaneous time of writing as when I was doing *Meadows*. And thank you all for being so cooperative. Then, and now. I don't that I could've made it through this without you."

"You'd have done the same for us," Jeb declared. "You *did*. None of us would be here at all if not for you. This, this was the least we could do."

"Wouldn't it be easier for you just to use the 'find' command?" Gwen suggested gently as Jack continued to hunt for the file he was looking for.

"It would if I knew what the name was." Jack said sheepishly. "But I really don't know. Sometimes it'd be something

stupid, like 'woo'. Sometimes it might be the name of the story, and a word like..."

"Fragment?" Stevie prompted.

"Exactly. So if it had been a part of your story, it might be, 'Meadows Fragment'. Or..."

"No," Stevie said, "*there*. There's a file with the word 'Fragment'."

Jack frantically scanned the screen. "Where? I don't see it."

"Right there!" She pointed almost directly in front of him. "I swear, you men..." She sighed. "You're all alike. You couldn't find your winkies if we weren't around to lead you by them."

"Stevie!" Gwen gasped. Even Jeb looked surprised. Elsbeth, on the other hand, was in hysterics. "It's true!" she laughed. "It is so true!"

"Well, what do you know," Jack said, opening the file. "Now, I just hope this is it."

He spent a few moments scanning the document as soon as his word processing program finished opening it.

Oh my God, he thought. Now I get it. I know why she's so upset. I would be too.

"I think I'm going to need a little time on this one," he said softly. "What time is it?"

"Almost seven," Gwen said. "The sale will be starting in about an hour. If we don't get uptown pretty quick, chances are we won't get there at all. This is the last day, you know."

"The busiest, they say," Stevie added.

Jack looked at the lines of text spilling onto the screen. It was a pretty fair piece of work already, but to do what he needed to do would take an hour, maybe two, and even then it would require some serious linkage to the two stories to which it was connected, which meant re-opening both and rewriting the key elements, which amounted to everything surrounding the character of Sarah McWhorter, and her relationship with Tyler Maddox. Even then there were no guarantees he could get it all. And if he didn't?

Never mind, never mind. It was just as she'd said, after all: he *would*, because he *must*. It was as simple as that.

"Jack," Stevie said quietly, "Gwen's right. Unless we want to walk all the way through town, we need to go, and right now..."

"We go," he said, closing the lid of the laptop. "We'll adjourn to the West Side. We'll eat some breakfast and take the roads through the neighborhoods up to the shopping center if we need to. Do you know what time the print shop opens?"

"Nine."

"Then we'll have just two hours. Let's go."

They returned to the West Side. Jack was disconcerted to see that Drea Walls was still missing. *You don't suppose they took her too?* he wondered as he typed. *Why? Just because I like her?*

"I don't believe that," Kate, sitting next to him, said soothingly.

"Don't worry about her," Elsbeth urged him. "Just keep yourself focused on what you must do."

"It is just like him to be thus," Kate demurred. "He is what he is, and he feels concern for his friend."

"A friend he barely knows? Really, Kate..."

Kate shook her head. "Does the length of time you know someone make them any more or less a friend?" She turned back to Jack. "But she's right, Jack. Time is short. I'm sure your friend will be just fine."

So he continued as the rest ate their breakfasts. *Pancakes on me*, he declared as they walked in, and they were all indulging as though they hadn't ate in weeks. *As far as I know*, he thought now, *that might be true*. Especially gluttonous were Wendell and Billy, but then that was only to be expected. They did show an appropriate gratitude for the meal, Wendell managing a thumbs-up in between forkfuls, and Billy saying, "Ish iz triffic," with a mouthful of hotcakes.

"Can't tell you how much we appreciate this," Brenda Lynn said. "Me, I didn't figure I'd ever see the inside of a restaurant again."

"I'm glad I could help," Jack said to her with a smile, then he put his head back down and tucked himself into the story.

This is how it happens, then: you take a lonely, depressed man who, as far as he knows, is completely friendless now that his one constant companion has disappeared, put him into a bar in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, and get him drunk. Well, not stinking drunk, it's not as if this man drinks every day; a half a dozen Leinies will do it. Hey, if you're going to drink beer, let it be good beer.

Next, have the barmaid, who also happens to co-own the establishment, offer this man a ride home. He can't very well take it, can he, inasmuch as he lives about fifty miles away? Not likely. So: "You're an idiot," she tells him, "so I'll just come right out and ask you if you want to spend the night with me." She is several years older than he, but that doesn't matter, does it? She is good-looking, she is warm, and most of all, she is willing.

He may be an idiot, but he's no fool. Tyler Maddox goes home with Sarah McWhorter, and that, like Rick said to Renault, was the start of a beautiful friendship. So beautiful, in fact, that when Tyler is convicted of Grand Larceny and sent to prison in LaGrange, Kentucky, Sarah accepts him in spite of his misdeeds and marries him anyway. In the prison chapel, no less. And she waits for him.

Turns out, she doesn't have to wait long. The man who as much as put Tyler behind bars, Sheriff (now Senator) Everett Weyrick, enlists his help when his daughter and granddaughter are trapped by floodwaters in a cave with which Tyler, and his long-missing friend, Jordan Surrat, are eminently familiar. If you save her, the Senator tells Tyler, you'll never want for anything again. Just so long as my debt's paid, Tyler tells him.

Jordan appears, they come up with a plan, and ultimately they save the day. Not before a lot of drama and horror and sacrifice, true, but the trapped are freed nonetheless. And after some wrapping up of the story, everybody more or less lives happily ever after.

Or not. Remember? This is why this part of the story was a fragment, right? Because while River of Jordan has a pleasant-enough end, Gypsies has an at least equally unpleasant beginning. And among the events detailed are the deaths of Jordan Surrat—a climbing accident, in full view of his son Devin—and Tyler Maddox, who, irony of ironies, is claimed by a flooding cave.

It is mentioned in the manuscript of Gypsies that Sarah and Tyler have a son named Tandy, who is a little younger than Devin, which would make him perhaps eighteen, maybe nineteen. It's not very specific. But it doesn't really need to be; it was meant purely to tie up loose threads from River. And, in the strictest sense, it does...or, at least, it would've, had it actually been completed in the first story. But that part is done now, and Tyler and Sarah are together, and they can conceive Tandy. Nicely done.

But...

...and there is always a 'but'...

...but, does Tyler really have to die in Gypsies? Is that absolutely essential to the plot? Yes, the death of Jordan is pivotal, and being as he hasn't complained about it at all—in fact, he has been pretty specific that he isn't the one Jack hurt, one can only assume that's as it should be. But Tyler?

No! No, he does not! So instead of being killed, what if he gets out alive? Is that such a world-changing event?

Perhaps not for anyone except for Sarah, and Tandy. But that's enough, isn't it?

Well, is it?

He writes quickly, he writes fluidly, he types as quickly as the few fingers he uses can manage. And he fleshes out the characters,

inserts the fragment into the addendum to River, adjusts Gypsies accordingly. Is it enough?

"That's it," he said, pushing himself away from the table. "That's as much as I can do."

"Just in time," Gwen said. "It's five after nine. I don't know how long it's going to take to print this, so we'd better get over to the print shop."

"How many copies do you think we'll need?" Jack asked. "I mean, will one do? Or enough to hand a few around? I've already uploaded it to my web site."

"Here's what I would do," Stevie offered. "I would print four or five copies for each of us here. Every one of us. And then we could dis...dis..." She looked at Gwen. "What word am I looking for? To hand out to a lot of people?"

"Disseminate'?"

"That's it, *disseminate*. We could do that. Walk around the sale, hand out copies. Like that."

"That would be pretty expensive," Gwen said doubtfully.

"Doesn't matter," Jack declared. "I didn't spend much of my yard sale money. It's a great idea. There's at least a dozen of us here..."

"A dozen?" Kate laughed. "Have you looked around lately? Your bill here will be quite large, Jack."

She was right. As he gazed, wide-eyed, he saw not a dozen, but *several* dozen people. They filled every table, and some were even lined up outside, waving at him through the plate glass window. He didn't know all of them, but he knew enough to be sure that these weren't residents of Jamestown, nor were they people here for the Yard Sale. These were his characters, all here, now, at the last, ready to help.

"Oh my," he whispered. "That's a *lot* of people."

"You did a lot of writing," said Kate approvingly. "And all of them ready to hand out copies of your stories. Aren't we all?" she said to the group.

If it wasn't in unison, at least it seemed unanimous. They were ready.

"It's going to take hours to print enough copies for all these people," Gwen exclaimed.

"Then let's go," Stevie said emphatically. "Time's-a-wastin'."

Jack, Stevie, and Gwen went to the print shop and did what they needed to do, and it did indeed take several hours. Even printing just a single copy of each short story involved, the two "complete" novel manuscripts, and the addendums meant nearly five hundred pages. They knew it just wasn't physically possible to do it all, and decided that they would make five copies of the novel, and ten of each of the short stories and addendums.

The man behind the counter of the print shop looked horrified when they detailed the job to him. "Can't be done," he said. "No way, no how, not in one day, not for any price."

"Any price?" Jack asked, pulling his Yard Sale cash from his pocket.

The horror turned to avarice. "Will that be regular paper, or acid-free?"

He had to call in a couple of his employees to help, and every printer in the shop was busily churning out Jack's work. Even so, it was still the middle of the afternoon before they were able to load the boxes into the back of Stevie's Rabbit.

"Now, let's hope everybody stuck around at the West Side," Gwen said. "If they left, we're going to be awfully busy handing these out all by ourselves."

"They'll be there," Stevie said confidently.

And they were. In fact, there were more now, far more, than there were when they'd left. "Jeez, Jack, just how many people did you write into those books?" Gwen asked, astonished.

"A cast of thousands," Jack replied, smiling at Stevie. "Let's get these things...disseminated."

They passed out the stories, and the throng disappeared into the crowd, which was quite large even downtown. Some got

into cars that seemed to appear from nowhere and headed north and south, and almost immediately the material was being distributed. Surprise of surprises, not a single copy was discarded. It was either read on the spot and passed on to someone else, or put into a pocket rolled-up or into a purse for later perusal. It was more than a little heady for Jack to be walking back to the car with Gwen and Stevie afterward and be approached by a young man with a copy of *Gypsies* in his hand. "Here," he said, trying to hand it to Jack, "you've just *got* to read this. It's amazing!"

"Already read it," Gwen said. "Pass it on! And make sure you get the web address on the last page. There's lots more there."

That had been Gwen's idea. Every copy of every story had the address of Jack's web site on it, where the curious could (and it turned out later, *did*) read and download copies of the ones they hadn't already encountered. "I think your hit counter is going to peg," she said to Jack.

"I don't have a hit counter," a stunned Jack said.

"Better get one," Stevie advised.

They had set aside one copy each of the two novels and their addendums, and along with that they headed off to Allardt, the place where it all began, and waded into the Yard Sale.

He stood just off the road, a few steps where the circle still was obvious, a faint line of brine surrounding and demarcating it. The stories were in his hands. All around him, people passed, some of them even walking through the circle as they continued toward whatever destination was theirs. Across the road, the Becks caught his eye waved happily.

"Well?" Stevie asked. "What are you waiting for?"

"I...I'm not sure," he said softly. "I guess I don't know what's expected of me." He looked at her, then at Gwen. "Do you?"

She shrugged. "Not a clue."

"Maybe *she* does," Stevie said, pointing over Jack's shoulder.

He turned around, and there was Gaea, standing with Drew and Ellen. "Hello again," she said, "It's been quite a journey, has it not Jack?"

"It has," he sighed, "but I'm ready for it to be over now. Do you know what it is I need to do?"

She smiled at him. "Simplicity. You need but collect your Deb." Pointing to the circle, she said, "Were it me, I would do just as you have. Go where you lost her, your tokens in hand, and wait. Eventually, *she* will come."

He nodded. "I'll wait forever for Deb."

Now the red-haired woman shook her head. "No, Jack. Not for Deb."

He walked back to the circle and waited. It didn't take long.

She emerged from nowhere, materializing before his widened, but not startled eyes. He'd lost the capacity for shock from such sights. "Hello, Jack," she said softly.

"Hello, Sarah," he said.

So different was this Sarah McWhorter. No longer a faint, incomplete figure, instead she stood before him now: tall, rosy-cheeked and vital. The same short hair, yes, but a remarkably formed body in overalls topping a maroon t-shirt. High cheekbones, dark brown eyes, full lips. Which were smiling, incidentally. A good sign, he decided.

"You did pretty well by me," she noted with a wry grin. "As I recall I was supposed to be sort of plain-looking. This," she swept her arms over her body, "this isn't exactly plain-looking."

"I guess I felt like I owed it to you."

"Well." She looked down at his hands. "Are those the stories?"

He held them out to her. "At least the ones that concern you and Tyler."

"That's all I could hope for." She took them from him, scanned them disinterestedly. "I didn't really need copies, you

know. What happens to me—to us, I mean—I know that. We've lived it."

He shrugged. "I sort of figured that. I just wanted to be sure."

"Of course."

"So...?" he asked expectantly.

"First, take a look around you. See what you've created."

He did as he'd been directed, and was surprised to see some...no, *all* of his characters surrounding him. Some were smiling, some looked sad...but all of them looked grateful. The Becks, Jon and Janey, each cradling a child. David and Micki Bennett, misty-eyed. Tandy Maddox, looking past Jack at...what? Emma Sanders, standing beside her man, Jordan Surrat, the melted man, now smiling so widely that even his undamaged eye was crinkled severely. Drew Harden and Ellen Crosby. Rose Weyrick, Jordan's first wife. Bitsy and Cori and Diosa and so many, many others from the Colony at the Kokowand...so many he couldn't identify, but in time he knew that he could. In time, when he finally completed them all.

Jeb Stuart and Kate Bellamy, and Elsbeth Wilder. Kate, looking up at her husband, smiling adoringly; Elsbeth blowing him a kiss.

And Gwen and Stevie.

"I'm going to miss being around you two," he said to them, his throat thick with emotion already.

"But Jack, we're never *not* around you," Stevie said, hugging him tightly. "You *made* us, remember?"

"Yes," he sniffed, "I remember. Thanks for all the help." He put his arms around Gwen, who was holding little Kate. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"Damn right," she said. "Just keep that in mind when it comes time to write another sequel, okay? Let me give you a clue: a cruise. We'd really like to go on a cruise."

"Anywhere in the Caribbean," Stevie added with a playful smile. "Just make sure the boat has a baby pool too."

"I'll see to it." He kissed them both, and shook Jeb's hand. "You're a lucky man, Jeb Stuart."

"Only as lucky as you made me."

"What about me?" came an indignant, burly voice, from the direction of the circle. "You're not leaving *me* out of this, I know."

A big man, every bit as tall as Jack. In fact, he bore an eerie resemblance to Jack, circa age thirty. Broad-shouldered, gray-green eyes, beefy arms, thick hair on his head and his face. Oh, and a lopsided grin.

It was Tyler Maddox. Of course, that's why Tandy had been looking in that direction. He'd been waiting for his father to appear. He ran to him and threw his arms around him, his father, ruffling his blonde hair lovingly.

"Thanks, Jack," Tyler said. "We sure do appreciate everything. I'm sorry it had to happen like this, but it's all for the best, isn't it?"

"I'll take your word for it," Jack said.

"Really. You finished all those stories, you brought so much joy to all those people. Hell, you brought *me* back from the dead. That's what I'd call a full day's work, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah surrre," Jack said with a grin, copying Tyler's catchphrase.

"Stevie's right, Jack," Tyler said softly. "We're always with you. Just so you know. Keep that close when things are at their worst."

"We may never cross paths this way again," Kate said, "not on this plane, anyway, but someday..." She smiled. "Someday. Just remember: you have an amazing power within you. Use it carefully and well."

"But *share* it," Gaea said, stepping toward him, taking his hand and pressing it between hers. "If you take nothing else with you from here, let it be that: Share it. Let there be life beyond your imaginings. "

"And believe in yourself," Kate added. "Believe that what you have is worth sharing. Because it is."

Gaea nodded. "Indeed."

"I don't get it," he murmured, looking back and forth between Kate and Gaea. "Didn't you tell me that you were one and the same person...?"

"Did I?" Kate asked mysteriously.

"I certainly didn't," Gaea laughed merrily. "What an imagination you have, Jack."

"It's beyond me," he muttered. "Way beyond me."

"It is that," they both agreed.

"See ya, Jack." Tyler took Sarah's hand and looped an arm around Tandy's shoulders. "Be good, you nut."

"Goodbye, Jack," Sarah said, "and thank you."

They walked to the circle, stepped inside, and vanished.

And as they did, so did everyone else. Everyone. Not just the characters, but everyone in view. For a moment he felt a rush of fear, then it vanished completely as he saw Deb stepping from the circle, walking across the road as if she'd never been gone.

Only something had changed. Her clothes, for one thing. She was still in jeans, but she now wore a blue t-shirt on which was neatly lettered, 'Yard Sale Babe' in letters fashioned, apparently, from glue and glitter. She was wearing a floppy sun hat with a red tie-dyed band festooned with an assortment of buttons. He couldn't read them, but somehow he knew they were political in nature, and not at all complimentary either...

He watched her for just a moment, waiting for her to finish (*finish*, he thought, *yes, she must finish*) crossing the road before he called to her. She turned, saw him, and smiled widely. "Well, there you are," she called. "I've been looking all over for you. Is the car close by? I have so much stuff, I had to leave it all the way up and down this road. Wait till you see."

"I've got some good things too," he said. "I think you'll be surprised."

"Oh, I don't know. Did you do any haggling? I won't think you had to work for any of it unless you haggled..."

"You should only know how much," he laughed, walking across the road and hugging her tightly. "You should only know how much."

"Well...my," she exclaimed. "Jack, what's wrong? You look like you've been crying!"

"It's a long story," he said. "And you won't believe a word of it."

He didn't tell her, of course. It took a while for him to understand it all himself.

For instance: exactly what had happened? He worked that one out while they were on their way back to the Jordan, and the solution was oddly simple. All this time he had been thinking that Deb was the one who had disappeared, when in the end it had actually been him.

It was the only thing that really made sense, really. To her, he'd been gone three hours. He had lived it as three *days*. She certainly had the evidence to back up her end of the story: along the road from Allardt to the motel she directed him to stop at various homes and tent cities, where she picked up her treasures...most of which were for him. A first edition copy of Clive Cussler's *Raise the Titanic!*, signed even. A framed print from the Indy 500 for his office. A model kit of an Indy Car, half put-together, but apparently otherwise complete. And more.

"The big thing, that we'll have to come back with a trailer for," she told him as they pulled into the lot, "but they said they'd hold it." She looked around. "Oh, this place is Yard Sale Central. You were right, Jack."

"Sometimes I am," he said with a smile. "I think my stuff is inside."

"You think?"

He didn't know what else to say. He hadn't been entirely sure the car would be at the lot when he escorted her there; he'd ridden to Allardt that morning in Stevie Harmon's Rabbit, hadn't he? That took a bit of getting used to. And when he opened the

door and saw all the things he'd bought over the past three days, stacked up in the room as though he'd set them there for her to view the moment she walked in...that was something of a surprise too.

"Oh my, Jack!" Deb squealed, setting eyes on the jewelry box. "That's just *beautiful!* And look, it even has a 'DG' on it!" She looked at him with a mixture of delight tempered with suspicion. "Did you have this made? Be honest now."

He held up his hands. "I was as surprised as you," he said. "I bought it at the sale. God's own truth. If you don't believe me, just look inside. I didn't have all *that* made."

"All that?" She opened the lid, saw the necklaces and the earrings. For a moment she was silent, then she turned to him with red-rimmed eyes. "Oh Jack, they're lovely. Just lovely." She kissed him tenderly. "I just know you spent too much, sweetie."

"Not so much as you think," he said with a smile. "But it was a...a trial, tracking it down."

She eased away from him to look over the rest of the goods. "Oh, look at the brooch, it looks just like the one in your story...you really need to try and sell that, Jack, you really do." Her eyes lit on the carbide lamp. "Well, so you *did* find that one. Is it what you were looking for?"

"Not exactly." Then he thought, *but it was just what I needed, when I needed it.*

"Well," she said, reaching into her bag, "maybe *this* is what you were hunting."

In her hand was a faded brown box, on which were printed the words: *Autolite Carbide Lamp, Universal Lamp Co.* On the side, a picture of a smiling man wearing a cap lamp, and the slogan, "It's finer, says the miner." And inside...

"What do you know," he murmured. "Unfired, even."

"Unfired?"

"It's never had carbide in it. Never been lit. That's unfired. It's worth a lot more that way."

She smiled. "How about that. It's just amazing what you can find at the Yard Sale."

He kissed her fondly. "It's just what I was looking for," he said. "Exactly what I was looking for. Where did you find it?"

"Funny you should ask. I think you might've been there. After I was done looking one direction I went the other, and along the way I found this nice old man...he didn't have a whole lot for sale, but he did have *this*. He told me somebody had been around already looking for something like it." She grinned. "He described you almost to a 'T', Jack. So I figured I'd beat you to it. Do you like it?"

Oh, I like it, all right, he thought, pulling her close. "It's perfect," he said. "Just perfect. Like you."

"Like *us*." Another kiss, then, "Oh. Something else. He gave me *these* too." She reached into the bag again and pulled out a sealed manila envelope. A thick manila envelope. *Very* thick. Thick enough to hold several hundred pages of paper. "He said you'd know what to do with this." She looked at him funny. "Is he somebody you know?"

Jack shook his head. "Not as well as I'd like."

They stopped to look for him on their way home the following morning, this mysterious Chet Akins. He was nowhere to be found. More, no one seemed to have a clue who he might be. Drea Walls, who had resumed her duties at the West End just as abruptly as she had left them, told them so. "For the second time," she sighed, "there's no such person around here. If anybody knows, it'd be me. You're losing your mind, Jack."

Maybe. Maybe he was. Another week or so away of vacation, that might be enough to give him a rest...but no yard sales. Or Yard Sales, capital Y, capital S, for that matter.

The message light was blinking on the phone when they walked in the door, the baby jogger laden with their treasures. When she'd seen *that*, Deb gave him a sly look. "You think we're too old to be parents again?" she asked, to which he'd replied, "I

guess you never know." It was a good answer, judging from Deb's reaction.

The messages were run-of-the-mill. A driver calling to complain about an on-track ruling the previous event. A sponsor wanting extra tickets. Deb's Mom, checking on them. Three times.

And then...

"This call is for Jack Gilchrest. Mr. Gilchrest, my name is Joan, Joan Turner...I was in Jamestown this weekend, and I was given a very interesting manuscript. It had your name and number on it. Now, I don't want to get you excited or anything, but I'm a literary agent, and..."

...and she would be very interested in seeing more of his work.

Jack smiled, and kept smiling. He would not stop smiling for a long, long time.

Back then to Jamestown a few days later, to pick up the one remaining piece Deb had gotten for him. He is not at all surprised to find it is a gorgeous cherry roll-top desk, the same one she'd mentioned in the phone call the same day. He does not ask how much she paid. He knows it was a dear price indeed. He wonders if he will ever tell her just how dear it might've ended up being. On the way back, he passes through Allardt, for just one last look. And there is the mailbox, there is the house, and there, sitting on the front porch, is Chester 'Chet' Akins.

Jack stops, parks in the driveway, and walks across the lawn. He wonders, will he recognize me?

And Akins does. "Well well," he says. "See you're a man that keeps his promises."

"I try," Jack replies, shaking his hand. "I do try. And I think I understand it all now. Or most of it, anyway."

"That's as much as a body could hope for," Akins says with a sage nod. "The road's still long, Jack, but I'd say you're makin' good time. God bless you on your journey."

They shake hands again. Jack is tempted to give his friend a hug, but suspects it would not be in keeping with Akins' stolid nature. He settles for a solid two-hand clasp. "And you, sir," he says. "I won't forget you."

"No, I don't believe you will." He smiles at Jack, they part, and they never meet again.

But then again...

Afterward (after word)

So, finally, *Unfinished* isn't.

No, that wasn't the original name of the story. If you read it online (and I hope someday someone will actually buy a *printed* copy of this work) then you know the title was once *The Big Yard Sale*. But after I put the final words to it, I realized that the Yard Sale—notice, still capitalized—was really only a small part of the whole, and the story was really about Jack Gilchrest and his unfinished tales. Thus, the change in titles. I hope this doesn't prove too confusing.

Just so everyone knows, there really *is* such a thing as a Yard Sale. Fact is, there's lots of such sales, though the first one I heard about is, as far as I know, the One-And-Only-Truly-Original Endless Yard Sale. It takes place in August, not June (hey, I didn't think my characters want to be cruising yard sales in August, it's too damned hot!) and it runs along a 650-plus mile long corridor of US 127, from Gadsden, Alabama through Georgia, into Tennessee, and eventually ends somewhere around Defiance, Ohio. The northern verge is actually somewhat north of Sherwood, but I like to say Defiance because it sounds cool, and besides, it's the hometown of Sam Hornish Jr., 2006 Indy 500 Champion and All-Around Nice Guy.

So yes, there is a Yard Sale. *And* there is a Jamestown, there is a West End Café, and there is an Allardt. Oh, and there definitely is a Jordan Motel. I highly recommend it; the rooms are clean and comfortable and the walk-in showers are truly a wonderful comfort after a long day on the spectacular trails of nearby Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, or Pickett State Park. There's even trails that span the two. I could spend months up there and not get bored. So could you.

But the rest, including the burg referred to as Cox's Crossroads, and everything that happens therein...they are all figments of a disordered mind and a stilted imagination, and should not be accepted nor inferred as anything but.

Chances are this story would've appeared on its own eventually, but it was hastened into the world courtesy of NaNoWriMo. Thanks to Chris Baty and all at the Office of Letters and Light for enduring for ten years as of this writing, and for bringing so many budding novelists together. Special plaudits to "skypigeon" and "mclarke" for joining me as Team TrackForum 08, and congratulations to both for their accomplishments. Yes, fifty-thousand words *is* a lot of work...

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Special, "big warm tight-hug with extra kisses" thanks and love forever to Shell and P. J., who not only were the inspiration for two *very* important characters, but who put up with moody me through twenty frenetically long November days.

Dad: you heard a lot of these stories already as a stream of gibberish spewing from me over the years. I sure do appreciate the patience and the available ear. I love you.

Finally...Mom...I will love you always and I miss you. Thanks. For *everything*.

J. Reyome
Lyles, Tennessee USA
26 November 2008

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