

Steve De Jarnatt

Wraiths in Swelter

PROLOGUE: PRITHEE DO NOT TARRY

IT WILL NEVER LEAVE HER—SEVEN HUNDRED SCREAMS MELTING TO A SINGLE cry above the roar of combustion. When you’ve been to hell as a child, you’ll always hold some brimstone.

What was little Winnie thinking that crisp Sunday morning, the last of 1903, as she slipped on her rose crinoline? She’d tried other dresses too, but always came back to the pinkish one. Seven times. Because it was beautiful—and because a numerical demon inside her craved that digit, compelling most everything to be done in sevens.

Her family had wealth, she was fairly certain. Perhaps an inordinate amount. There was a packing plant, a school, and two parks in Chicago named for the Gillespie family. The best steakhouse in ten states. So her clothes were of the finest silk from Siam.

Off to the matinee premiere of *Bluebeard* with her aunts, six cousins, and Robbie Temple, the regal nanny who’d raised Winnie since her father left to set up the mines in Bolivia after her mother perished from a bout of influenza (in truth—a long scourge of laudanum abuse). Robbie, of Cape Verdean Creole heritage, whalers from New Bedford, spoke nine tongues and taught Winnie how to use a slide rule from Uncle Isaac’s factory in Sheboygan, as well as all the standard dictums of “finishing” a proper young lady. Robbie, so proud of her new custom-built Crestomobile Runabout, third off the line and gaudy red as a baboon’s ass. As it pulled up, the crowd murmured, assuming she was some exotic potentate, layered in her multi-hued finery, hair a grand nimbus of intricate graying curls. Something to behold. The crowd parted as they made their way in through the rococo lobby, down the sloping aisle of the parquet level of this five-story cultural cathedral built to shame all others in the city. Winnie brought her best friend Sabatha, who’d been loved so dearly, stuffing poked from every seam.

Seventh row. Seventh seat from center. Seventh Heaven it would be, she thought, waiting with a tingle of anticipation for the rest of the relatives to arrive and the show to begin. As they all found the Gillespie row and settled in, the star of the play, Eddie Foy, squeezed his boyish face through the curtains, revealing a smear of hubbub behind him, and a little blur of smoke leaked out. He began to announce calmly that there would be a brief delay in the matinee schedule—then something cracked and fell somewhere and a red dragon of flame ate a hole in the billowing curtain in two bites. The audience, witness to utter chaos

backstage, begat their own with a collective gasp and in an instant ferocious movement flowed towards the lobby.

Because the doors opened inward, they were doomed. Because the bascule locks of the exits were fixed tight from being painted over, they were doomed. Because the newfangled *fireproof* asbestos curtain failed to descend when its designated stagehand fled, because the Kilfyre containers were half empty (though it would not have mattered by then)—they were doomed. But fate was sealed most decidedly when the crowd, reacting to the most primal of stimuli, became a hive mind, limbic and merciless.

The room brightened orange with an explosion of flame from the stage, then just as quickly began to dim from obsidian smoke. Robbie poured tea from her thermos across a hankie telling Winnie to drop to her knees and breathe through it. Both were trampled—first by the cousins, then again by dancers leaping from the stage. The aisles jammed quickly; even those scrambling over seatbacks could not move another inch. The stampede stalled as suddenly as it began, squeezing itself into one cruel mass as leaping fire grew everywhere. With her last strength, Robbie was able to heft Winnie up above the cooked smash of bodies, which had begun to melt, flesh into flesh. Robbie gave a prayer and a push to usher her young charge on toward the transom above the lobby doors where arms were waving in a shaft of light. A walk of fifty feet to saving air.

“Forty-nine steps to get there! Seven times seven, little one!”

Winnie froze after taking just a few, till Robbie began to sing:

“Skip to my Lou, skip to my Lou my darling—”

Winnie squinted back, lucky that smoke obscured Robbie’s great head of hair aflame. The little one could still hear the straining melody through the din and hurried on—as if heads were lily pads and she were a dancing frog. At forty-seven she was yanked upwards Rapture-like into oxygen and coolness. A return to the realm of life.

Surgeons all over the Prairie State were called in to delicately sever best they could the ghastly mass of charred remains for individual burial. (A wicked secret few were privy to: twenty-seven butchers, the best in the city, had done the same.) A week of closed-casket wakes and impotent blame, the likes not seen since the O’Leary bovine took the rap for burning the Windy City back down to the sod a score and a half ago.

The *Tribune* caricature artist, Franklin Meeks, fallen back on the sauce again, his cynicism spiking, wielded vengeance against civic fools who’d skimped on safety and against the rich in general, but saved his most acid vilification for a privileged girl. His front-page sketch was reprinted in most every paper in America, prime fodder for a Roman appetite of the grotesque. It depicted a gussied-up brat, doll swung in hand, as she blithely skipped her way to impossible survival along the tops of human heads—the worst of Bosch and Doré all around her, writhing just below her feet. Smiling all the while with a carefree *let-them-eat-cake-whilest-they-burn* air. Some victims knowing they will perish are reaching up, trying to pull the little imp down to join them in gruesome death. Envy of the greenest hue.

Her name for years to come would engender abnormal scorn. Little Winnie Gillespie—damned to infamy.

I: SISYPHEAN NIGHTS

The call has come again from a well-known location, aborting Rahman's knight to bishop 3 move. I race my partner to the rack for gear, pulling on an EMS jacket with the name Buddy Rawlson inked on the tag, though that is not my true born name. We mount the chariot and roar away from Station 43—off through the Chicago summer night.

"Your rook would have been taken in two moves," Rah assures me as the reds are run down Rockwell.

"It certainly would have. Laying the Spielman trap, my friend—the Art of Sacrifice," I tell him and he expels a self-loathing lungful of air. But of course.

It is comforting to know that waiting for us on Windsomer Avenue there will be little of the unknown to be dealt with. A junkie will either be alive or dead. Or somewhere in between. If still breathing, one of us will pump Narcan into their heart and yank them back across the River Styx. If dead, we'll call homicide, cart the corpse, and drown in paperwork the rest of the shift, chalking up another one to death by misadventure.

First half of 1995, we've taken this same call a dozen times now. More than thirty times the last two years. We spew cherry light south, blur east, then wail up the hill to park at the base of the old Reinhold Arms Building, a stellar exhibit of Prairie Renaissance splendor fallen to SRO squalor and decay, and one of the few structures in this part of the city to have survived the Great Fire of 1871. I stop to pluck a handful of red mutant roses from an untended garden, stash them in my bag, then methodically trot the seven flights up.

Rahman's tongue clucks as we rattle/squeak the gurney down the bile green hall. Faces poke from chained doorways, all the same visage—*not again!*

"Why not let their God just take them already? You can only tempt him so many times," Rahman ponders, lungs heaving from the climb.

"Took an oath, remember?"

"Then it is we who play God."

"We play Cook County EMS. So pass our checks. We do what we can. Go home. Do it again tomorrow."

Mascara melts over mountain-range acne on a once-pretty waif standing in the doorway at the end of the hall, waving at us to hurry.

"Iced him in the tub like they said," she shout-whispers, fevered and shivering at the same time, scratching furiously at the crook of her elbow. The door swings wide and out roll the unventilated ethers of those who've lost their shame. Sickly yellow light leaks from windows taped with old *Tribunes*, peeling in penitence. Dribbled red caked on the floor from the missing of veins and copper wire scraps scattered everywhere. A couple bodies barely breathing. Rahman and I will check them all before we leave, offer ignored advice, and drive away. The slothful monsters we battle here are human will and inertia. Powerful foes.

Rah maintains the scuttlebutt he's heard, that the whole building is owned by Lionel Workman, the bluish occupant we find in a tub of ice. He's held opiate court here for four years now. The last dregs of a once-plump trust fund going up his arm.

"Precisely why you never let your children have a single thing they have not earned," Rahman mutters. "Their most certain ruination."

The Narcan injects—Lionel bolts alive like a jump-started corpse in a James Whale film. His body wrought in soul-deep ache as the waif squeezes him nearly back to death again. He nods to her to offer us a tip of soiled money from a cache hidden beneath a rug. We shake our heads no as we always have before, but Rahman gives an odd glance and we both seem to consider it this time. Why the hell not? Next one perhaps. (As Rah prepped the dose, I'd pilfered what was left of a dime bag from a nodding junkie's palm.)

I've been cursed to return again and again to the place my Ruby died, and I take this all as penance deserved. Rahman, my partner of two plus years, doesn't know she was lost in this building, in this apartment. She'd gone to score and never returned. I'd made the Reinhold call three times before putting it all together, such was the state of my life not so long ago. I could harshly judge these addicts, try to exact some hollow Hollywood retribution, but that would not bring Ruby back. She chose the life long before she met me, and I walked it with her for a while. In the half light and fetid air, I've often thought I've heard her speak my name, turning to witness something shimmering just beyond peripheral view. There—not there. If some limbo-realm could exist on earth, the Reinhold would surely be the place.

In the weekly, sometimes daily, repetition of this OD run, an ornate door, the only one on the hall's northern side, became a fascination. One could imagine the stellar view this massive suite must have all the way down Pershing to the lake. The sound of scratchy 78s bled from the old walls. I began to make a point of whistling along, stuff like "In the Good Ole Summer Time" or "Shine on Harvest Moon," on our way out, those occasions when our business was finished quickly, no death, no paperwork. One day, a harmonized humming returned the favor. I came to believe that, upon hearing our siren's slow fade downstairs, the elderly denizen here had come to expect me. Despite Rahman's irritation, I paused long enough to hear the rattle of the chain, the soft click of several locks, and there she was—a sliver of translucent skin and cornflower blue eyes, shy and glistening. A once-great beauty, hair oddly coiffed in the youthful style of some distant decade. We exchanged smiles a couple times, which evolved into innocuous chats. She seemed to enjoy my gentlemanly flirting. An eerie stillness seeped out of her room, always kept fifteen degrees below the temp of the hallway.

She never let me in.

It became a hobby learning all I could about her. The rumor of Workman's ownership was dead wrong, though I never told Rah; Winifred Sabel Gillespie

owned the Reinhold Arms, as well as six other apartment buildings. (I also learned that she had a numerical affliction with the number seven.) She once had a certain notoriety and rarely has left the premises in the entirety of her ninety-nine-year life. Probably a hoarder, say the select few who provide her service. None is allowed beyond the parlor. The super told me there are three redundant AC systems dedicated to her private wing, her cool comfort being one of many obsessions. He gave me clippings—the same perennial rehash article some city rag runs every dozen years or so, speculating about the little survivor of a gruesome Chicago tragedy.

As another emergency call comes in, same night as Lionel's resurrection, I knock seven times and leave the seven errant roses outside the door. I do not turn back to witness her reaching out with a walking stick to fetch them. That would be rude, but wrestling the gurney back down the stairwell, I imagine her nose deep in roses. A small joy.

Any health-fucked soul getting Wagon 19 on their 911 should consider themselves a very lucky bastard. Rahman was a full-fledged MD back in Bangladesh. A surgeon, so he says, though he misses pneumothorax enough for me to doubt this. Still, he knows his street damage and battle wounds in a masterful way, having used Army Med Corp to snag a green, then his bona fide US Cit. Rah has a special feel for the limbo just before the flesh gives way unto death, as only one who has walked halfway down that tunnel himself can. In childhood a congenital heart defect stilled his blood repeatedly, till a Catholic missionary group gifted him an operation. It takes every shred of Bangla will each day for Rahman not to exceed his sanctioned limit as a lowly EMT here in Illinois.

Few know I quit two months short of adding Dr. before my real name not so many years ago. From Johns fucking Hop no less. None know the real story. I've told Rah only that I dropped out during the first month of med school. Just didn't have the stuff and couldn't hack it, I said. I didn't say that I'd been on the verge of first in class from a top five school. But he suspects what I've hidden, as few things escape him.

2: CRAZY HAZY KISSES

It had taken only one night veering from the destined tracks for me to annihilate all my parents' dreams. In my previous incarnation—Hubert “Buddy” Kahn—I'd aced everything in life—SATs and MCATs, a Phi Beta Kappa Ivy grad at twenty. Just waiting out the fait accompli of the next crowning achievement.

Flat Duo Jets were playing Ottobar. Having heard just a random thirty-second snippet on the radio, I went to check their wild groove that night—on whim. I didn't do whim back then and paid dearly for the deviation.

I met Ruby coming out of a men's room stall. A girl unlike all others I'd ever known back in Barstow. *Barstow—the poor man's Bakersfield*. That was another life. Two dentists in the raw Mojave living through their sole progeny—smalltown golden boy, class prexy, two-sport MVP, full ride to Princeton. I'd

dated Queens of Prom and Harvest there, then courted a few daughters of world industry while a Tiger in New Jersey. None sunk the hook the way Ruby did. She fit none of the folks' criteria for a lady friend. That was precisely the attraction.

She needed a bass player for a gig, the last player, sadly, fresh in the grave. I'd never even heard of a Fender Precision, let alone held one, but I'd been first chair cello up through college. (Same genus I thought, why not give a try?) It weighed heavily on my neck, and as it throbbed on, crackling out from their stolen Ampeg, my bones awoke. Sine waves surged through my pelvis and thundered in my skull. Her band had attempted rehearsal twice before, but by the second song I was already leaps and bounds better than them all, striving to keep tempo and key. (Which proved pointless.) Batting smiles back and forth with incandescent Ruby, I turned my fingers loose, fucked it up, and felt the purity and joy of neophyte rock 'n' roll.

I'd never touched a tattooed back. Never lain down with hot inked skin impaled with metal, ready for whatever. Ruby relished my corruption.

"No rules of desire. Wallow with me, Buddha-Kahn."

She in heat and I slave to scent and primal purpose. I cried when I came. And I came like I'd been birthed again. She laughed at me so sweetly—drinking, toking, Hoovering rails of this and that, then Sunday morning, saying *Church*, she brought it out. The needle. I was so petrified of that spike violating my blue quivering vein. Refused even a skin pop. Mind racing—HIV, embolism, staph—I relented, chose to chase the dragon, let an evil wind fill a shallow soul. By the end of the month I followed Ruby to Chi-town as would a yellow chick a mother hen, full well knowing the absolute betrayal being done. I deserved the hell of '95.

Neither Rahman nor I do angel work just for the money. We do it for some purpose, so the collapsing balloon of our lives won't seem quite as null. Rahman is a quiet man. The only time he trips loquacious is when we pass one of the creations of his countryman, the Great Fazlur Khan—the *Einstein of structural engineering*.

"Chicago is monument to him. There shall always be the Sears Tower—no matter what devil should purchase and try to change its name!"

Rahman has poured through Khan's archives at the Ryerson and Burnham Library. Quotes from memory Fazlur's favorite poet, Rabindranath Tagore: *Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come . . . Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless when facing them.*

His extended family dwells on the entire third floor of a brownstone on Devon. They took down half the walls between units. A bit chancy since they do not own it, but the deed is held by a family who shares a business with relatives in Dhaka.

Rahman's social circles and mine hardly overlap, but I've been to his mosque

twice, his home thrice. And he brought his daughter Yasmine to see my new band, stayed for two songs, and only barely mentioned it a week later. The frenzy of the pit disturbed him more than the speed-chording and one-note screaming.

“Not important if we’re any good or not. It’s catharsis, not even music really,” I explained.

“Some cleansing ritual then?”

“If you will.”

“And the girl you chased from Baltimore—she no longer plays such music?”

Rahman doesn’t know that Ruby died at the Reinhold three months after I hit town. He doesn’t know she died at all. Or that I curled fetal for weeks, trying to stop my heart, but it kept on beating. My lungs would not cease just because I wished them to. The sun rose again and again, despite my damning of the light. When I finally emerged from that necrotic womb of depression and chose to be human again, the EMS trials and tests were a snap. I possessed superior knowledge of the flesh, and still had the organic strength of a blue chip athlete. What better way to pay the rent, as well as procure certain elixirs necessary to remain benumbed, yet highly functioning, when I needed to be?

Khan/Kahn. Would Rahman love the anagrammatical rhyme of that, if he knew my real surname? Would the coincidence offend him, or only that I’d lied? Feeling no longer worthy of Kahn, I appropriated Rawlson from an old Spike Jones ditty my Grampa sang. Only thing I can remember of him. *Hut-sut rawlson on the rillab-rah and the brawla brawla soo-it*. A staple on the set list of every band I’ve had.

Rahman knows he pushed his eldest son too hard to emulate the Great Kahn. Not just in naming him Fazlur. Nothing short of Fountainhead-like prowess in the field of architecture was going to suffice, and Faz was failing, falling further behind each quarter at SAIC. A dowry-sized bribe helped procure a diploma. Another, an internship at SOM, the Great Kahn’s firm, Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill.

On his twenty-fifth birthday, Fazlur took his father up to the skeletal top floors of a skyscraper the firm was working on. He had been part of the design team on the flag-stand edifice, and he pointed up through the naked steel beams to show it to his father. Faz knew that he’d never measure up to his namesake, knew that he should be designing long-range plans for the Burj Khalifa in Dubai or some other noble dream. He noted the limit of his father’s patient smile, his sigh upon realizing Faz was merely a flagpole designer. As Rahman began yet another lecture about dedication in the land of plenty, his son took steps toward the east, towards Mecca, where girders existed only on blueprint, and screamed—*Forgive me!*—forty-nine stories down.

Rahman never speaks of this. Only that he lost a beloved eldest son to disease. But I know at least five variants of the story. Those in the urban fray—cops, fire, and emergency—hold no real secrets from one another; a rumor will always out someday. And it’s never quite the exact story, but it’s every word true.

3: THE HEARTH OF JULY

Seventh day of the seventh month—an elephantine weather system ambled in and sat on the toddling town. The wind had vanished somewhere, driven underground perhaps. Slow, infernal suffocation began. Cook County apropos. Calls were ceaseless once the oven was lit.

Those who summer somewhere flew the coop to milder climes, cabins and second homes. Others with lesser means took transpo the hell outa town to stay with cousins and friends, anywhere beyond the red molten lines of the meteorological map. The poor holed up right where they dwelled and waited. As if there were any other choice. Sleeping on rooftops, by day packing like sardines into every library and lobby. Towards the end, the day of the killer crux, the enormous power drain of 24/7 AC usage shut down the grid and it was no longer the twentieth century.

I'd been dreaming of heat after a spring of damp night shifts and was heading west as it began—a quick jaunt out and back via Route 66 burning unused sick days before expiration. The stated goal: to spit off the Santa Monica Pier and return post haste. Perhaps an excuse to find myself passing through Barstow on the way and rationalize a making of whatever amends might be possible. It should have been in a Corvette like Milner and Maharis, but it was a Chevy Citation, which broke down before I hit OKC. Made it back on Greyhound to find the station empty. All shifts were out on calls around the clock, meals taken on the fly. Not being pegged on the board for duty and with authority taxed as they were, no one could even take the time to tell me where the hell to go. I helped awhile with the incoming phone jam but quickly reached my limit of uselessness, and so commandeered a Wheeled Coach with a broken muffler from motor pool repair, pilfered supplies, and set out to do some fucking good.

Rahman was sleeping the day away after OT on three night shifts. He'd already heard word of the stolen vehicle I was driving, but said nothing, just hopped in. There was no beating anyone to calls, no predatory tow truck attitude. Jurisdiction meant squat as the city baked. Life moved in molasses. We could not see the burning forest for the ailing tree or two we aided, were less aware of the whole of the event than the millions huddled at the tube, fed the intravenous fear drip round the clock. The news just can't help itself.

If the Reinhold Arms call had chimed, we would not have taken it. There were more pressing needs. But I thought of her the whole time. Winnie Gillespie—all alone in Room 777.

After another thirty straight, Rah became delirious. The plum wine he'd often swig from beneath his seat when he thought I wasn't looking had pulled the water from his cells. He was as high a functioning alcoholic as I was a weekend dragon monkey and could hide it just as well. But not in this heat, which broke every deceit upon its anvil.

“It's coming—only miles away now—the great Bhola Cyclone,” he babbled, believing he was seventeen again and back in East Pakistan.

“Will George Harrison be singing?” I chided him.

He wanted to take a kid with a compound fracture to the Royal Empress Hospital on the banks of the Buriganga. It was overwhelming to see such a proud friend come unglued. He looked into me with a father’s eyes—at his lost son.

“I’m so sorry—to the depths of my soul. It is I who should have leapt, not you, Fazlur—” he stammered, then, eyes clenched, manically quoted his poet till he fell to slumber.

I dropped him home to the anemone of his family’s waiting arms, all chattering Bengali, in dire need of patriarchal comfort. Then I took an ice bath, ate his wife’s *maach bhuna* and *sabzi*, and went back out into the broasting night.

I can relive that peak day, as if it were right now, anytime temperature and humidity rise toward the century mark. Dormant, folded back in some deep brain recess, easy to rekindle. Eyelids droop and the day of the crux, when the city broke, waits for me, moment by moment. I am there again.

One hundred six degrees. Humidity 93 percent. All emergency rooms on bypass status. All morgues full. There is nowhere left to go. The belly of my vehicle holds what I believe is perhaps a Kurdish mother, her three heat-prostrated children and unconscious grandfather in renal failure, and two deceased neighbors from Nicaragua.

“Do you know their names?” I ask the living of the dead.

“Always argue. Scream day and night—fuck you hey-zus! Fuck you mah-ree!” the mother spits, unable to conceal contempt. The oldest child, a green-eyed teen, pulls her mask away, wanting to defend them.

“But the next day”—gestures hands into a vase—“always flowers.”

“Stolen from a neighbor’s garden!”

“Then the tears. A squeaking bed.”

“And shouting again! Like a clockwork moon, the wax and wane. Madness.”

We’re crawling through Cicero looking for an underground free clinic I’ve heard about where one can procure Canuck scrips and such. Perhaps they can take this fragile cargo.

The road ahead is slick with mirage, rippling in heat warp. Someone in a bathrobe stands in the road to block the path, waving a wimple in the air. A nun half-clad in slumber wear. Her body stunted, trapped in juvenile form, though she must be in her sixties. Shar-Pei wrinkles looking like a mask, a life of too much sun.

I decide not to run her over.

“A woman upstairs,” she pants at the window when I crack it, the hands of Fahrenheit reaching in for my throat.

“Already beyond capacity. Sorry.”

“She’s going with you,” the nun tells me, mouth caked white, fingers affixed round the rearview so tight I’d have to pry them with a Halligan tool to leave. I offer the last of my water. She waves it off.

“You will drink. And I will take them.”

She accepts the bottle, plastic adhering to her tiny trembling hands as she draws a languorous sip of the warm liquid, clouds of my backwash floating there.

“I’m Sister Lucy.”

I’ve heard there are fires now that cannot be put out. Too many hydrants open. But this moment I don’t care. I step out and crack open one more. There’s a limp upsurge of a dozen feet, an ever-changing shape, backlit and glowing. If I squint, a glimpse of human form quivers within it. Today I believe in water sprites.

The wagon pulls beneath the fountain. Mercy crashes across the roof, a staccato beat, a calming thing. Metal steams. I yank the gurney from the back and roll off to find another half-baked beast for my ark.

Soulless jackals come to pick the ambulance clean of drugs—Sister Lucy pulls her wimple on, the rest of her body still in PJs, feet in bunny slippers, hiding behind the front end of the ambulance. When the jackals seem ready to assert their way, she pulls out a snub-nosed .38 and they retreat. She wishes she’d kept the bullets, in case it comes to more, but couldn’t pull the trigger if it did.

Sister Lucy asks the family if they would like her prayers. They tell her they are Zoroastrian, but they will take what words she will give them. The Sister kneels and gives last rites to the dead Nicaraguans—that they may find a final peace together and never fight again in the next life. The green-eyed child has one more request.

“Can you marry them?” she asks. “They never got around to it. Engaged and broke apart, then planned again, but never enough time between the fights. Could you please?”

“Of course,” Sister Lucy sighs, “and let us hope it will bring Armaiti as they approach the Bridge of the Requirer. May we all seek kvarenah—in this life, in the next—unto the last.”

The family is nearly turned to stone, astonished by her cursory knowledge of their beliefs. Lucy wishes to ask them if lore of their burial rituals is true—that their heaven or hell is all left to nature’s chance. The first vulture landing upon an open-air funeral pyre will always peck first the eyes. If it chooses the right, there is salvation of sorts. The left leaves damnation. The totality of life’s good works not factored in. Only a buzzard’s whim. Such is eternal fate.

Four flights up in another SRO warehouse of sorrow, a four-hundred-pound woman from Alabam lies face-down on broken tile in the communal bathroom. I tilt her head to expunge vomitus so she won’t Jimi out, then strap a mask from a small go tank, which blesses her with the minimum O₂ to keep her this side of the Pearly Gates for a while. Neighbors help heft the woman. No one knows her true name. They call her Namu. She’s dropped eight times, but with their assistance we get her to the street.

There’s barely half the room we need for her in back, but she’s wedged in somehow, this nameless one. The children must sit atop her now, riding like cowpokes.

Sister Lucy kept thieves at bay for a while, but a sneak thief cracked the front

window in while their crew distracted her. The fountain has drenched the seats and dash. The radio is gone. As are my cigs and wallet—and worse, my petty stash from the glove compartment. The smidgeon of monkey repellent I'll need to make it through the day.

“Will you come with us?” I ask the Sister.

“Still much to do here.”

“Can't even find out where next we can't go.”

Sister Lucy scribbles on a page and rips it from her Bible.

“Scripture won't help us now.”

“Only paper. My friend hangs meat at McLemore's. Out where the stockyards used to be. It's black market, so make sure they know you come from me.”

“Guess that's a plan.”

“A good one. I'll gather the old and infirm from over there,” she says, pointing to a derelict building that would make Cabrini wince.

“I'll be back. When I can. If I can.”

I am strangely compelled to tell her my real name instead of the Rawlson ruse and give her Rahman's number, asking a favor—that one or both of them might pay a visit to the Reinhold to check on Winnie. The way I speak of her, Lucy seems to think she must be a nine-year-old girl. I do nothing to change her mind.

Out on the western outskirts, I stop to check the map against Lucy's scribbles. In the back, the dead have their final say. Expulsion of infernal vapor from orifices. First the Nicaraguan man, then his mate, then the man again. Back and forth, sounding like a string of words, some last whispered conversation. The mother thinks—*We know now, we know*—was said. The daughter heard—*she shows how, in shadows, the toll, the truth*. But it is an unknowable ill wind. And I pretend I didn't hear Ruby saying—*see you soon, Buddha-Kahn*.

Despite AC barely keeping a livable 88 degrees inside the wagon, I crack windows to expel the unbearable stench, and heat seizes all within. Those who do not throw up, faint.

Up ahead, a cinderblock building glows in the dying red light of sunset, painted gorgeous from the palette of a hundred fires. Nothing marked on any walls, until I park and walk near enough to find scrawled just above the nipple of a buzzer—*This is McLemore's. You better know us. If you don't—you still have time to run*.

I laugh reading it. How could I not? A camera watches and I nod its way, brace myself and breathe deep. Heavy footsteps approach inside, then a rattle of locks and a door swings wide as sweet winter rolls out. A stout old man with an unlit cigar sniffs me over.

“Sister Lucy sent us.”

He makes sure I see the handle of his belt-tucked gun.

“Mercy. That's all I got,” I tell him.

The man looks out at the ambulance packed to the gills.

“Tough times, I guess. Okay.”

I drive in under a roll-top metal gate, which drops back down as soon as I pass. Everywhere swaying carcasses and red-smearred butcher-paper packages, stacked to the hilt. My flesh, on the verge of collapse all week, is cured of every cellular ill within minutes. As lush a welcome as any fix.

The Zoroastrians make a nest in the corner. Huddle and pray.

“All Gods are one tonight. May they listen for once.”

Miss Alabam lies in the soiled truck, nursing another oxygen tank empty. All will help wash and carry her before I head back out into the night.

The stout man helps me with the perished ones. Together we wrap them several times in plastic, then build an igloo of ice around them.

“Names?” asks the stout man.

“Marie and Jesus.”

“Serious?”

“What I heard. Gonna be a lot of dying without knowing who these days.”

“Lucy sent you? She all right?”

“Right in her wheelhouse. Made for such times,” I tell him, sharing a look of deep admiration.

“We were common law seven years till she took up the cloth again. Lucky to have those, being an unrepentant sinner and all. We ran a nightclub for Momo if you can believe that. Twelve years older’n me. Lapsed nun she was then. Then got herself unlapsed. The things she’s seen. Calcutta—those favelas down there in Brazil. A year in the heat vents of Ulan Bator with feral kids. God knows how many other hell holes.”

“She knew your worth, man. Sent us here with faith in you.”

I put an arm around him as he breaks down. A festival of tears and quaking. *May I bring more of the lost and stricken?* He laughs and waves his hands in a gesture I take for consent.

4. THE NIGHT CANNOT BREATHE ANOTHER BREATH

Most of the county grid shuts down after five more loads are brought back to the meat locker. It will stay cool in the blackness two more days despite the little campfire the stout man keeps going in the corner of his office. Every block of ice I load going out melts in minutes. Not until I leave for the last time do I notice the ancient faded signage on another condemned building on the lot—Gillespie & Gillespie Meat Company.

The last trip to Cicero, the vehicle is only half-filled, and for once, no other criticals waiting. I come upon an incongruous sight: six humbled gang members, all too weak to stand, being IV’d by Lucy and Rahman. Both of them say I look like I’m about to drop.

“Not ’til the temperature does. Back in a jiffy.”

“What is this jiffy?” Rahman asks Lucy.

“You know—three shakes of a dead lamb’s tail,” Lucy says just to stump him with more quaint Americana.

After staring for a long confused moment, Rahman breaks out in gut-bust

laughter. We all do, the gang kids too. At nothing. Because this moment we all need it as much as oxygen. When ribs have ceased throbbing and our faces melt from the rictus of involuntary grinning, I try to convince them that Winnie's AC might be just the thing for those in the ambulance and any more we might yet find. I tell them the electricity at McLemore's, like two-thirds the city, is on the blink now.

They won't let me leave on my own to go check up on things at the Reinhold Arms. Both squeeze in front. I will not let Rahman drive.

"This is all on me," I insist. "You were never here, okay?"

The chariot slinks sans siren and crimson all the way to Winsomer, an echo of all the other times haunting as we pull up for the last one and park where the flowers have died.

Lucy and Rahman begin to comb the lower floors, seeking more of the overcome, as I hike up through the dark stairwell. Extra batteries in my pocket, a webbing sling if needed to haul down Winnie's brittle bones. The air is oppressive, like water on the bottom of the sea at some ungodly pressure per square inch.

The junkie door stands open. A knowing silence. No life here. They are gone, one way or another, all of them. My demon half wants to pillage every inch inside for some portion of a discarded gram. I am dope sick, in early-stage heat prostration, and on the verge of diabetic coma. Left foot inches inward—but my weight and better angels pull me back with the right one. Something smolders in the kitchen, then fire erupts in full, but I pull the door tight.

Let it all fucking burn!

My Halligan tool jacks the door from its hinges and light sweeps through Winnie Gillespie's suite. Vast and dark, mist hugging the floor, a chill intact as backup diesel generators pump out a cool 46 degrees. I call out and go unanswered. Decades' dust upon every cluttered object. What appears to be silver bullion, stacked ten feet high and tarnished to a dull filthy hue. Robbie Temple's Crestomobile, dismantled and reassembled seven stories up. The deepest red I've ever seen. Hundreds, maybe thousands of slide rules in a wanton pile like Pick-Up Sticks.

I approach a tiny portrait in a gilded frame. Young Winnie in a pink dress. Stylized and heroic, doll in hand—faceless human forms elongated in the chiaroscuro darkness behind her. I cannot stop staring at the damaged grace of this perfect child. Reaching out to touch it, a voice calls—and I turn. *Buddha-Kahn!* Only Ruby ever called me that.

Tattoos writhe on someone who appears before me, but it is not my dead ex, only some glowing alabaster thing with obsidian eyes, playing cards with a little girl. All dealt from a Tarot deck, each one the Reaper. They smile my way and wave for me to join them.

"We need a third for Hearts," they chime in unison.

I have begun to slowly dissolve—out of Chicago and into this room. I want to join the game, I want to sleep forever in the cool bliss here, but I tell them a better game is underway and they should follow me down to the street.

“You can play in the hydrant with a water sprite!” I promise them.

The slide rule in her hand flashes into a syringe and the wraith is a fully cackling Ruby now. Little Winnie’s eyes reflect a roaring fire, but she smiles and the flames are extinguished. She stands, and with each step she takes across the dusted floor to the wall of the portrait she grows and ages five years. All the while her face is skewered by a sliver of light across it, as if through a barely opened door. She tells me how a young Thomas Hart Benton was commissioned to paint it during his two-year stint at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Gillespie family paid for a full-page print to be published every year on her birthday in the *Tribune* after they bought the paper and fired Franklin Meeks. Great sums were spent to procure every last copy of the infamous sketch of the privileged brat who skipped upon skulls to safety in the theater fire. Hundred-year-old Winnie pulls the last existing one from a pocket on the back of the frame. She unfolds the brittle pulp, which crumbles to dust in her hand, then hands me the painting and the few remaining cloth remnants of Sabatha, her ancient Bru doll, a solitary eye-bead dangling.

“For my only friend.”

I slip them into the folds of the webbing sling. Smoke begins to fill the room, fighting the mist for obfuscation, as voices call my name from down the bile green hall. The familiar squeak of gurney wheels.

Knees buckle and the floor rises to meet my face.

My parents had come to visit while I was comatose. They’d left my favorite home-cooked foods and a simple card they bought in the gift shop, along with a Buddy Bear. But they did not stay until I woke. Perhaps hoped I never would—the concrete truth in front of them worse than all the dark possibility I’d made them endure by the incommunicado years. A junkie EMT. Their benign imaginations had me happy somewhere, a struggling creative sort, a convert to some religious cult at worst.

Rahman had met them and declared I was indeed a fine young man. He defended me—as a son. Was astonished they were not proud. Furious they would leave before I woke. He’d smiled oddly telling me all this—a twinkle in his eye. A concealment. I will not find out for two more years when I come down off the mountain and return for a visit that he nearly left his family for Lucy and she nearly left the church again. They counsel immigrants and the aged together in Cicero where Lucy grew up, the great grandniece of one Alphonse Capone. Both kept their vows in the end. What bond they have is more than enough to satisfy what they need from one another. As I’d hoped, Rahman indeed feels the divine at work with the Khan/Kahn connection. What more he told me, I refused to believe: Winnie Gillespie died seven weeks before the heat wave.

I was late to the service at Homewood Cemetery on the outer edge of the metropolis. I came to pay something—respect, more penance. Not for Winnie (who indeed had been buried in the family plot in Sheboygan), but for three

hundred unclaimed souls laid out in serpentine trenches of worm wriggling loam. Caskets strewn like runes. The spine of some plesiosaur. Cheap boxes of repurposed wood and cement nails.

Is this Rwanda? Kosovo or Cambodia? The shame! People choose Chicago because there is a machine here that gets things done. Snow falls and is salted away while you dream or an alderman gets the boot. A hard, simple town, but fair, always fair. Not this time.

The dead here outlived everyone they knew, or were abandoned by them. More than half are nameless. Left this earth with not a single other soul in their lives. The wind stops to remember. Even leaves are moved to silence. Though the heat has crested, it's still balmy and uncomfortable. Shirtless youths begin to toss the gesture of dirt on top of the coffins, echoing a dull thud down the line. Heavy machinery grinds on, standing by to fill the ground whole.

I watch a scrawny Dalmation weave down the trench, following its snout, in search of its perished owner. Panting heavily, slobber dribbling in great foaming gobs. Miles from wherever home had been, growling at anyone who would halt his mission. The dog finds a particular casket near me and sniffs in circles, building a low moan into a high-pitched crescendo howl filled with such sorrow that all work halts a moment. The old dog paws at the wood, whimpering, digging furiously, then finally—in acceptance or exhaustion—curls up upon it.

The Reaper isn't any fearsome wraith. Death is only slow, relentless attrition, a breaking down on the cellular level and the civic. Atrophy of oxygen, of compassion, of companionship. In the aftermath, as everyone threw blame like monkeys with their excrement, I was an easy target—the rogue healer gone off the reservation. *Rawlson lied about his name and many things, broke protocol, turned his radio off. Illegally borrowed and did not return the vehicle to the motor pool. Rawlson used supplies unauthorized and perhaps OD'd on some of them.*

The aberration of the 1995 heat wave brought a brief light to bear on the plight of those who outlive their people. A tiny clot of media came to newsbyte the sadness of it all, the harsh truth that almost no one showed to mourn these dead. My photo was taken—head hanging, tears streaming, still in my CC EMS windbreaker, bringing that dog a bowl of water. I became a minor iconic figure for a week or two. The overworked Joe who cared. My own fifteen minutes—for empathy, not infamy. The Department hated me even more for that. Rahman sent copies out to Barstow.

I left Illinois with a single duffle bag and the dog who mourned a nameless master.

5. LICKING WOUNDS ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

I've gone as far away from that Chicago summer as I possibly could. In centigrade and longitude, in attitude and altitude. I supervise a clinic in Nepal during spring and summer with a couple ex-Gurkhas and their wives. I'm the doctor when the doctor is not here, which is often. The rest of the year I live humbly in Lumbini and help other volunteers rebuild the water works. The vague plan is to stay here

'til I turn twenty-nine—then walk down and join the world again. Worked okay for Gautama.

Winnie left most of her holdings to the U of Chi and other charities, but some were parceled out to staff and distant relatives. And an undeserved portion to me. I set up a scholarship at SOM in Fazlur's name. Paid my parents' mortgage off and some other such gifting.

I live penniless as possible in a cinderblock abode with a wood-burning stove. The Dalmation, now named Homewood (Homey), always at my hip. That Thomas Hart Benton, the only treasure I possess, makes a tiny rouge island on the ocean-gray wall—exactly opposite a small window with a universe-class view of Kangchenjunga. Storm clouds roil endlessly across the Himalayas. They are significant creatures up here, the breath of gods. I have order and simplicity—the needs of others keep me occupied from my own. I sleep well from good exhaustion. In dreams, though, haunted still by lust, chaos, and regret.

Time to time I'll read from some dog-eared paperback I brought (Stuart Dybek stories mostly) and wonder what's the what back in the Second City. Ponder deep dish and Ditka, all that's good about the humble burg. And every useless jagoff I ever met as well. Part of my soul will always be there. Some still at Princeton and in Baltimore, and way too much left back in Berdoo County. My dream now—to be of some new place. Another me with better memories, looking back on a life yet to be lived.

On occasion, I stoke a fire with extra fuel, boil water to steam the room, bundle up in layers of fleece till a lather of sweat (and a small chew of the local *wolsbane*) brings back the veil of madness. *Some cleansing ritual—if you will.* Every once in a while, I'm sure Ruby can be glimpsed in the serpentine shadows behind Winnie in the portrait. That *why not* smile. Flames crackle and I hear her tender, wicked laugh beckon once more.

Two daughters who danced with death, one who embraced oblivion in league with another who lived long beyond a destined fate. It all stirs a maelstrom within me. Sometimes Robbie Temple calms things down with a song.

Can this be a bit of true magic, conjured by ordeal, artistry, and alchemy into century-old paint somehow—or only the trick of thin air, heat, and my synapses dying, one by poisonous one?