

The Truth Is In The Water

Chapter One –

It's 3:53 am, I'm awake, and it's raining—it is always raining. My world has drowned. There is a virus sweeping the planet that is killing people in droves, a silent killer. It may be, it is probably, right outside my door. I'm a coward, sometimes I think about killing myself, but I don't think it would help and might make things worse. My name is Charlie, and I have these thoughts at 3:53 am, as I lay here in a pool of my sweat. To try to sleep, I recall my days as a boy when the pieces of this life seemed to fit together before the edges became jagged and ruined.

A memory, summer 1963... as the sun was setting on the day, the distant and primal evening yell of mothers echoed off the woods, and reeds, and mud-stuck boats by the swampy lake, calling the children home. We all scattered and ran, so as to not be late, never wanting to be late. Late was something terrible, never clearly defined. It was always like that. Some perceived threat, be it the Soviets, or dark, or being late, or panthers. I was scared to death of being eaten alive by panthers, and though I'd been assured many times that panthers lived in Africa, I was convinced one lived up on the mountain behind my house. I'd best to get my ass home, and not be late, knowing the panthers came out after dark.

I was a muddy boy; I liked mud, mud found me, attached itself to me. Mud and me, we had a bond, but the specter of a bath loomed, and I'd just as soon sleep in my mud as get all wet. Bathing had no place in the life of a young boy, as the long days were ending.

Early that summer, my father's mother came to stay with us. She took me to church, what seemed like every day, and a circus once. I preferred the circus with its flowing red and white tent, with a big pole jammed right there in the middle. The big tent was tied to the ground so as to not blow away, I presumed, to big steel stakes in the hard dust.

Inside that tent was a sickly-looking elephant and even sadder looking lion and some monkeys. I called them, "Goddamn sad-looking animals," and my dad's mom, she cuffed me upside my head. She told me not to swear, and I told her someone should give some water to them sad goddamn animals.

As the bathwater ran, I hear my father's voice from the next room, "Don't waste the water," my point exactly. Wouldn't this water be better used, and the world better served to save this precious liquid for some sad-ass elephants and monkeys and that sickly-looking lion?

My father's water was communal property, but my father was no commie. He made that abundantly clear. He was a Republican, and he liked Ike.

His well was hand-dug, and thirteen feet deep, a fieldstone lined pit that led to a spring at its base, and it never went dry. Some summers, when other wells had yielded little more than trapped air, hoses would be run, sometimes great lengths to supply a stream from his magic well to a neighbor.

He'd sit in the moldy, damp cellar by the pump, and watch it run. It was as if his presence would ensure the flow of the water. The pump was a god-awful contraption of pistons and belts, old even by 1960s standards, but old was good as long as you could get parts.

My father knew his pump intimately. He knew it would blow a fuse if it ran at the same time someone made toast or ironed a shirt. He told me a hundred times, maybe two-hundred times—NEVER—put a penny in the fuse box. If the fuse blows, there is a reason. If you put a penny in the box, it could burn down the entire house. I was long baffled by this lesson. What would ever make me put a penny in the fuse box if he didn't tell me not to?

One day, after someone committed the crime of making toast, and running the water, and ironing a shirt, I guess it all got to be too much for my old man. As I walked down the creepy, shaky stairs to the cellar, I saw him putting the penny in the box behind the fuse. I spent the rest of my childhood years expecting, at any moment, the house to combust.

The lesson I learned that day, on the creaky stairs, was never to believe a word I was told. Everyone is always selling you their version of some story.

To this day, I believe it is a crime to waste water and needlessly run the pump, but I don't believe much else.

Today, for no reason, I am letting the water run. I hear the words and know it's my father's voice, "Don't waste the water," but I let it run. I open the tap wide and let it run.

I'm told that electrons flow through the wires in my house, and gas flows through the fuel injectors in my truck, but I can't see it. I have to trust, and I trust so little anymore.

So today, as the water swirled and washed down the drain, my father's words be damned. I let the water run. I stare out my grimy kitchen window and out across a field of dead grasses and wet, windblown leaves. I put my hand in the cold fluid as it runs from the tap, and I feel it on my skin. It's the only thing that feels real to me.

Within weeks, it seems, this world has gone mad. The unthinkable is now only yesterday's news; my worst fears, after a lifetime of mistrust, seem to be coming to fruition. I realize what I have long known but chose to ignore; we are totally on our own.

With nothing left to believe in, I trust the cold water.

I reach out and close the faucet, tight, watching the water drip, and finally, stop. Opening some cabinets and drawers, and then the refrigerator. Closing the doors echo the emptiness inside. The large amount of nothing they contain frightens me.

I've pushed it back as far as I can. There is nothing left to eat in this tiny kitchen, or anywhere else in this house. I have to go out; I need to shop for food. I'm drowned in anxiety. I have covered my face in a bandana and travel down this hill and into town. The fear makes no sense to me. Me, the boy who'd rather be beaten than bathe, the test pilot of every twisted plan concocted by the older neighborhood kids. The fearless boy, the man who never once backed down from a fight, the boy with the proverbial chip on his shoulder who grew to a man with an even bigger chip, begging the world to knock it off, standing here, as the sun begins to crest the tree line, afraid of this day.

Having inventoried my last egg and slice of bread, knowing that I must now go into town for groceries. I find myself asking the question, after this many decades of living, how did I become such a goddamn coward, how did I become such a fear-filled old man.

I take a cup of coffee with me to the table, doing some old man shuffle, that is new and annoying to me. I look down at my skinny legs and the pair of bunny slippers on my feet. They were a gift from my

daughter, from a long time ago, but the slippers keep my feet warm. Alone on this hill, my bunny slippers are my secret.

I miss my daughter; she has a family now, so they tell me. She's over a thousand miles away. I'm angry at myself I didn't go south to visit last fall, or the fall before that, or the summer before that. And now everyone and everything is on lockdown, and I'm sitting here alone in an empty cabin, thinking about my father and water and my bunny slippers, afraid to step outside.

I open the newspaper, it's thicker than usual, every day when I see the ten to fifteen-page paper, I lament the death of printed news. Print media, words on paper, no one's opinion, unless it's clearly labeled OPINION. Local news, national and international news, the funnies, some advice column, I read it every day, mesmerized by the simple shit that perplexes the masses, so they feel the need to pour out their dirty laundry to "Dear, Whoever." Then, on to the obituaries, TV listings, and sports. The paper is thick today, and it's not Saturday, it's not weekly ads, I quickly scan the pages, I come to, after counting twice over, seventy-five obituaries.

I stir my coffee, and light a cigarette, and say to myself out loud, "What the actual fuck?" Usually, the obits are two pages; maybe they'll run on to two and a half. Today it's page after page after page: old men and women and younger kids. Usually, it's some old woman, maybe someone I knew a little, died at ninety-four at home, and I think to myself, "*Oh yeah, I used to run with her son,*" or, "*Oh yeah, I think I screwed her daughter a couple of times.*" Maybe some old boy my age died of a bad heart or cancer. Then there are always the sad ones, the young kids, and I know most of them are that goddamn heroin. But this, these pages on pages, they are all from the bug.

It's no wonder I'm scared...

Trading the bunny slippers for my old worn work boots, I'm dressed in a twenty-year-old flannel shirt, and jeans about the same age, and headed for town. The old Ford F-150 doesn't want to start. I remind myself for the hundredth time I need to stop by the auto parts place to get some plugs and some filters, but I'm afraid. I'm always afraid these days. Finally, the engine coughs and chokes and sputters to life.

A trip to the grocery store has gone from a pain in the ass to dystopian terror. People with masks and people without masks, lined up far too close to each other coughing and spitting and hacking. I broke out in a full sweat that must have made me look as if I have the fever, it's just I can't breathe in this damn

mask, and the rubber gloves and I'm scared and pissed off, and I don't want to be here. The cashier comments I'm sweating, and maybe I shouldn't be in the store, the fat woman behind me agrees. Some guy a couple of feet behind me, turns his attention from the candy bars and gum, chimes in, and my fear turns quickly to anger, and I pull off the stupid mask and scream, "Boy, maybe you and me should discuss this in the parking lot?" He shuts up and looks back to the breath mints. I swipe my card, and grab my bags and walk from the store, vowing never to go back until this is all over.

Stopping for gas at the Sunoco station leaving town, I see her again, the same girl I see every trip to town. I ask the kid who works the gas station register about her he says, "She's some junkie, hooker, she hangs around here all the time, looking to give blowjobs to guys in their cars. I've called the cops, but they ain't doing much these days. They sure as Hell aren't busting hookers and vagrants."

It's a cold and miserable day. The sky spits snow, and winter won't let go of its grasp on the northeast. Exiting the store, she is huddled next to a stack of precut wood, sold to the locals, who I assume don't possess the skill to cut their own firewood for their custom-built mini mansions.

She lights a menthol, as I pass her, she asks me for spare change and then starts talking about her little boy. "My baby lives with my mom. My baby's daddy died last year from a heroin overdose. I had a room in that motel down the street," she points down the street past the gas pumps, "It was a hundred and fifty a week, and I was doing good, then this virus hit and all my business dried up. Nobody wants to be five feet from each other, ain't nobody sure as Hell want to fuck...I was hoping to get a good job at the Burger King, but now they ain't hiring. I need the money for my baby; I miss my baby."

I pass a comment, unintentionally glib, sincere, I thought, "Maybe you should be aiming higher than working at Burger King?"

She looks me cold in the eye and says, "Old man, you don't know shit about low. Maybe you think you know low. Trust me; I'll dream the best day of my life to see your lowest day. We all live right the fuck out here among you, every day you walk by us. We are here, and we are dying here. I was going to offer to suck your dick, but I don't need nobody's money that bad!"

I put my head down, against the cold breeze, and her words and walked to my truck. Throwing the groceries on the ripped and duct-taped seat, praying the old beast would start, and I could outrun her stare.

Grudgingly the old Ford did start, I called myself an asshole, made a mental note that tune-up needed to happen soon, and I drove away and back to my home.

I put away my food and fry myself an egg. I thought about the girl. She was far younger than my own daughter. She looked rough, maybe sick; she probably had the bug. I turned on the radio and heard a public service announcement about social distancing and wearing a mask and washing my hands. I thought for a moment of people who didn't even have soap or running water. Once again, I heard my father's words, "Don't waste the water!"

Her words wouldn't leave me the rest of the day and into the night.

Before going to bed, I once again opened the faucet in the kitchen sink and let the icy cold mountain water run over my old, dry hands. The water was real. Maybe nothing else in this world, now gone twisted, was real, but this water was as real as the water from my daddy's well, from so many years ago.

I heard the wind, the rain battering my roof. I thought of that girl. It's been a cold spring: every night cold, every day, a cold piercing wind. I'm warm and safe here. She is anything but warm and safe. I think about her baby. Tonight, it rains a soaking rain.

So much and so many good things I've allowed to slide through my hands, to live in a fool's oblivious safety. I've become weak and fearful. I tell myself it's the years, too many of them, but it's more than that. I'm an old horse, to easily broken and bridled, to easily mastered.

There was a time when I took a stand. I remember that girl from school who looked me up a few years ago. She remembered me as the cute, energetic blonde boy, so full of Hell and laughter. Always, it seemed on the run from someone, a teacher, or the next fully deserved ass-kicking. The little boy with the big mouth, always looking for a fight. We laughed a bit on the phone and shared some memories that were ours alone. It was a trip to a place that no longer exists. We laughed and recalled the buildings and the faces and the names, stopping to remember minute details, how someone always smelled bad, or a bad name we'd given them. I wanted to see her, I wanted to hold her hand and walk back into those years and reconnect to someone, but I couldn't allow that. I was afraid. Afraid she'd see me as I am now, as a broken man, who's dream was shattered, and unable to muster the courage to fight back, I simply faded away, to this house on this hill, looking down on a small town full of so many sad stories.

My daughter stopped calling years ago. The doctors said I suffered from chronic depression. They tried for a time to feed me pills, but the pills just made me feel drugged—and depressed. I'm not sure if she stopped calling, or I just stopped answering. All that mattered to me was that everyone seemed better off, leaving me only a memory.

It was the boy, the way he drowned, I've died with him a thousand times now. He's why I don't sleep. Everyone on the shore said it wasn't my fault, but I knew the truth. I'm a coward; I was so scared for my own life, I let the boy die. He was choking and grabbing at me, his head would pop up, and he'd try to cry out to me, grabbing at my arm, and his eyes, bugging out his head, then a wave would wash up over him, it was only a few minutes, and then just the top of his head out of the salty water and then the quiet, some bubbles, and he was just dead. Dead in that cold water.

The wife and me we quit talking pretty much after that. The daughter, she tried, she tried for a good long time. The more I think about it, the more I think it was more a case of I stopped answering than she stopped calling. I bought the house up here a few years after she got out of high school, never got around to telling her where I moved. I went down to Florida to see her and her family once, that's how I got my bunny slippers, and I never went back. I guess I wanted it that way.

Tonight, that young girl at the Sunoco station haunts me. Her words won't give me any peace. Looking out my kitchen window, it's raining in sheets.

Chapter Two –

I can't sit here all night, in this dingy kitchen, staring a hole into the wall. I walk to the phone and call my neighbor, "Shug, it's Charlie. Why don't you come over for a few beers on the porch? Bring your banjo."

I go out to the wet porch to wait for him. It's cold out tonight. Spring won't come. It snowed a little last night, and it's April. It should be seventy degrees during the day. This whole world seems broken and sick.

Shug walks up from the dirt path that separates our two houses. He's carrying a six-pack, his banjo in a case. Stepping on the wet wooden deck planks he almost slips; I jump from my chair and grab his arm. We pause for a moment, both thinking about social distancing.

Taking a chair over by the railing, about ten feet from me. He looks at me, a bit ashamed, sad, and says, "I guess it's like that now. I brought my own beer. I figured it was safer. You grabbed my arm; I guess we ain't even supposed to hold each other up no more. What the fuck you supposed to do if a man is drowning..." and his voice trails off. "Oh, man, I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean nothin' by that!"

I take a long drink off my beer and smile. "I know you didn't, Shug. It's ok."

Shug is a big man, about six foot four, three hundred pounds, purple skin, massive hands. He was about two-forty when he fought as a heavyweight. His real name is Raymond. He evolved into Sugar Ray, and to me for all these years just Shug. He played minor league baseball too. He still holds a few records for hitting. He plays some of the sweetest bluegrass music anyone has ever heard.

We form an interesting contrast. Me bone skinny and so white I could pass for a ghost and the mountain that is my friend. We've been friends since the first day I moved up here. I've always been pretty good with my hands and able to fight my own battles. I was always comforted, though, to know this man lived a few hundred feet away. Shug knows my whole story, all the ugly details. He's always listened, offered an honest opinion, and never judged.

I crack my second can of beer, as my friend tunes his banjo. "Shug, did you ever see that girl, she's always hanging around old Albert's Sunoco station down the hill?"

He replies, "Yeah, man, why, you plannin' on tappin' that? You'd better watch your elderly ass, brother!"

I put down the beer can, “No man, I don’t want to fuck her. Something about her bothers me. Something about her calls to me: maybe it’s all this illness and dying. Maybe it’s because ain’t a goddamn thing feeling right. Maybe it’s me fearing I’m going to die from this damn bug, but Shug, I need to help her. Like maybe I need to get myself right with God before my time comes, and I feel like it might be coming any day. Like I got to help her, and that will get me right with God and forgive me my sin.”

The big man puts his instrument down on his lap and takes a drink from his now warm beer. “Charlie, you ever know yourself any of them junkies in town. I ain’t sayin’ they are good people or bad people. Charlie, they ain’t got one thing on their mind, that’s the dope, and they either thinking of getting’ the dope in them or how to score some more dope. I know you ain’t never been right since your boy died, but Charlie, this ain’t the way to get right with God nor anybody else.”

I let his words soak into me. Shug is my friend; he is my best friend. I always consider his position, but this feels different. “She’s got a little baby, man, and the baby-daddy just died from heroin. She’s got no one. I see these ads on the TV, and everyone is always talking about washing their hands. What about the people who don’t have running water, or even soap? I guess we just let them die?”

Shug picks up his banjo and starts picking an old, slow bluegrass song, Blue Mountain. I get up quietly, as to not to disturb my friend and walk back into my house. I reappear with my fiddle and standing there, a few feet from my friend, I join him as we play the sad song. The steady rain on my porch’s roof provides a half out of time rhythm. For a moment, my thoughts are far away, from pandemics, and my loss.

The song finished; we both crack another beer. We are sitting in silence listening to the rain and this year's silent spring. I comment, “You’d think we’d at least be hearing the tree frogs by now, but nothing. Only the sound of the rain.”

Shug finishes his beer, puts his banjo back in the case, and says, “I got to go home and get some rest. I guess you know what you are going to go do now, I suppose. You are about to bring a whole world of hurt into your world, Charlie. You’ll bring this to your world and mine, since we share the same driveway, on the same hill. I always got your back, bro, but I hope you sleep on this one.” He stands and extends his huge hand, and pulls it back, “It will be good to hug you again, brother. Why don’t you go inside and call your daughter? Make amends with her. Fix that, man, I know junkies, bro. My nephew was a junkie. Now he’s a dead junkie. There ain’t no win here, man, no win.”

I stand my six feet, proper social-distance away, and say, “Shug, we both discussed this bug at length. We are pretty sure we are immune at this point. I’m still scared of it, and I’m scared to go into town, I’m scared of the news. I’m scared all the time. Some days I’m scared of my own shadow. I’m afraid to die, but that has made me afraid to live. I’ve lost my family to fear and cowardice. This may be my last chance. Shug, I can’t let this girl die.”

He looks me cold in the eye, and says, “Charlie, we are discussing something bigger than this bug, we both know that. The heroin kills more than the bug, every day. You should get right with your daughter, make your peace with your son, make peace with your wife, make peace with God, but let this go.

With a wave goodbye, Shug walks the well-worn dirt path back to his house.

I’m not quite drunk enough to do what I think I need to do. I find a bottle of cheap scotch in the kitchen and take it and another beer out to my porch. The wind has picked up, and the raindrops dance across the worn wooden planks. I sit there in the cold, damp night, feeling the water slapping my face. Recalling the last moment I saw my little boy's eyes before he went under for the last time.

I pour some of the scotch and the last beer down my throat. I find my keys in my pocket and start the pickup. It’s a five-minute drive to the gas station; It takes me fifteen. Pulling into the parking lot, I see the girl is gone. Her garbage bags full of what I have to assume are her worldly possessions are wet and piled by the same stacks of firewood she sat next to earlier today. A flash of light breaks open the night, and she walks out of the men’s room, followed a half step behind by a man, who darts past her and sprints for a car. The girl walks past my truck and into the store. She emerges a few minutes later, smoking a cigarette. She sees me and approaches my door. With the window still up, I hear her say, “So you decided you want a blowjob, old man?”

I sit there, unable to answer for a few seconds. Finally, I roll my window down, and face her, “I’m not here for a blowjob. I have a small house about a mile up the road. It has a spare bedroom. We are living in a bad time. You shouldn’t be out here on the street. I don’t want anything from you. If you want to stay there, you can. Don’t steal from me, don’t fuck with me, and you can stay until you can get yourself a job and your room and your baby back.”

She stands there in the rain, staring back at me. “What’s your angle, old man, I don’t need no fucking pimp. What are you, some old psycho? Do you want to fuck me, then kill me? This world is trying to kill me, old man, it don’t need no help. Get you and your rusty piece of shit truck the fuck out of here and leave me alone.”

A part of me, the dyed in the wool coward, was now satisfied. I tried; it didn't work out. I can move on.

I drove back home, and the rain was heavier now. I made an uneasy peace with myself. I'd tried, in these terrifying times, I'd faced my fears, and rose above them. I was done with any kind of heroics. I need to go home, lock my doors, and ride out this pandemic. I climbed into bed, feeling my work was done.

A pounding sound outside my window awakens me. Thinking at first, it was a tree branch hitting the side of the house I roll over and go back to sleep. The banging continues. Going to my front door, at first, I don't see anyone. Then I look to my truck, and I see a body in the front seat. I'm in my boxer shorts and my work boots, grabbing the baseball bat that I keep by the door, I go to investigate.

She sits on the front seat behind the steering wheel. I reach out and open the door. Her garbage bags full of her stuff sits on the floor on the passenger side. "If you are planning to steal my truck, I hope you are a damn good mechanic. I've been turning wrenches all my life, and I can't keep this piece of shit running."

"I'm not here to steal your truck, old man. The faggot night manager at the gas station told me to get the fuck out, or he was calling the cops on me. I tried to knock on your door, said fuck it, and figured I'd sleep in here for the night."

She smelled terrible, she smelled like the street, a mix of sweat and stale smoke, and maybe a hint of wet dog, and garbage, and something that had burned, maybe rubbery. I held the truck's door open. In a moment, I realized that my grand plan to make myself right with God and my family had now landed itself right here in my driveway. I wanted to run inside and hide. I was in it now, up to my neck, it looked like good or bad, I was in it. I looked across the wet field to Shug's house. I wanted to run and bang on his door and wake him up and hide behind his massive frame, what the actual fuck was I thinking. "I guess you'd better come inside, get cleaned up and get some sleep. "We can figure all this out in the morning. I knew my sleep for the night was done.

I took her garbage bags into my living room. She asked me again if I wanted to fuck, or 'just a blowjob.' I declined both. I hope it made her a little more comfortable being here. She went into the bathroom for about a half-hour. She walked out in a towel, her hair wet from the shower, her legs and arms bruised. She stood there, finally speaking, "Old man, I should learn your name, I suppose. You got to know, you can't hurt me, you can't rape me, when you've lived where I've lived you could probably kill me, and I'd not give a fuck, just do it quickly if you decide to, I've had enough. It's like that out there. It's day to day, hour to hour. The dream, any dream, died a long time ago. I hope you don't hurt me, and you let me just

sleep, but truth be told, no matter what you do, it don't confront me. I'm going to get some sleep, old man. Thank you for bringing me in.

"Charlie," I said, "The name is Charlie."

She said, "Good night, Charlie," and I heard the bedroom door close.

As is always my mode, I perch myself here, balled up in confusion and regret. I try to sort through my feelings as to what could have possibly made me think this was a good idea—at all. The girl is prettier now, cleaned up. Some of that street stink washed from her. I have no desire for anything from her, but I don't trust myself. Between the virus we all face and whatever STDs I'm sure she's bringing to the party trying anything sexual with her would surely be a death wish, but I've often pondered if I do, in fact, have a death wish.

I'm sure Shug went to bed earlier this night, convinced I'd lost my mind or was thinking only with my dick. Neither is true. This virus, this pandemic is terrifying me. I've lost friends, for the most part, old bastards like me, but that's the thing. That's what is driving me. We all know we are going to die, but I don't think any of us, most of us, believe it's going to be today.

That's how it feels now. I could touch the wrong thing, get the bug, and be gone. I genuinely fear this thing, death. I fear it more now than I've ever feared anything. I've no idea what happens next after we die, maybe nothing happens. That is both a comfort and a terror to me. I wrestle with my thoughts and fears. I must believe something after all this. I think I need to make the one thing right, that one thing I can't resolve, my cowardice.

The boy would be a young man now. I'm not trying to save this girl. I just want her to have a dry place to sleep. Seeing her outside in the rain was all I can stand.

No one should have to sleep in the rain.

Chapter Three –

I decided I'd try to sleep for the rest of the night on my couch. A disastrous excuse for a piece of furniture. An old, brown, and well-worn and stained mess that should have been relegated to the dump decades ago. As the sun rose over the hill through the still leafless trees, I finally fell asleep. I was awakened by Shug standing in my living room, holding two big mugs of coffee. "I'm glad you had the sense to sleep out here, last night. I was a bit worried about you, Charlie. Is she still here?"

I sat up, looked around, saw her garbage bags still on the floor, pointed to them, reached out with my other hand for the coffee, and said, "It would appear to me, yes, she is."

Shug makes the world's best coffee. The perfect mix of cream and sugar. Never too much, never too little. He turned and stepped out onto the front porch. I joined him. "It's supposed to be nice today, Charlie, almost seventy degrees!"

I countered, "We need it; it's been too cold and too wet for too long."

Shug took his place on the far side of the porch; he ran his hand across the weathered rustic railing and sat down. "You got any idea what the fuck you are going to do now with your roommate? How drunk were you last night, my friend?"

"I wasn't that drunk, and it seemed a good idea at the time. I've got to admit, I didn't think all these virus issues through concerning this..." my voice trailed off in my coffee mug.

We heard some rustling inside the house. The girl was moving around. Shug looked at me, and I stared deeper into my coffee mug.

She appeared on the porch in a pair of dirty jeans and a gray hoodie sweatshirt. She waved a little, shy, motion toward Shug, and came up close to me. She bent down and hugged me; Shug's eyes bugged out of his head. Walking to the middle of the porch, she rested her ass, and both her hands on the railing. "I want to thank you, Charlie, for taking me in, and for not raping and killing me." She let go a little laugh. "I need to get going, though. My boyfriend will be looking for me down at the gas station. He gets real upset if he can't find me."

It takes a lot to get Sugar Ray upset. He's generally the mellowest man you could ever hope to meet, but this statement crossed a line. He smashed his coffee cup down on the little round glass and aluminum table next to his chair so hard the top shattered in a million shards, and the thick ceramic mug was reduced to the handle in his right hand. "Wait a goddamn minute, you mean to tell me you got a man, and he lets you sit outside that goddamn filling station sucking dick? Fucking-Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with him, and what the fuck is wrong with you!" He stood up, said, "I can't be a party to any of this shit, Charlie, I'll see you later!"

Shug walked down the dirt path to his house, the girl, turned and went inside, grabbed her plastic bags, and reappeared on the porch. "I don't expect you to understand me, or my life, Charlie, I guess your friend doesn't approve. Truthfully, I don't approve, but it's the life I have right now. It's nobody's business but mine.

I sat, silent, looked at the glass and coffee cup mess I had to clean up. I looked up and watched her walk down the hill and back toward town. I grabbed a broom and dustpan, cleaned up the glass, went inside to shower. About noon, I took a walk down to Shug's house. He was still visibly upset.

"Fuck me, Charlie. That girl, that goddamn girl. These junkies, man, take me back to my nephew. It just took me right back there, man, I'm sorry. It's been three years, and I still feel it. I did nothing to save him, either. All he ever did was feed me lies, and I lapped them up like a kitten to milk. Then the phone rang, and the boy was dead. Just fucking dead. His boy, his little boy, found him lying there face down in the bathtub, passed out from the dope, drown from the water—dead—with the goddamn spike in his arm. I swear by God I went on a rampage, tried to find his dealer. I wanted to kill the motherfucker. Then I realized it was the boy who put the junk in him, not the dealer. I guess brother, we both got a lot to make peace with."

"Man, Shug, I remember the boy. I wondered why there wasn't a service. Truthfully, I was a little hurt you didn't ask me to come. I didn't know it was dope."

"Nah, man, Charlie, he drowned in the dope. Shit rushed up and swallowed him. Sure as that Atlantic Ocean took your boy."

We both stood out there in the rare April sunshine, on Shug's dandelion and crabgrass lawn, hands in our pockets looking down. Shug was the first to comment, "My weed crop looks to be coming in fine this year, in spite of the rain!"

We both laughed. It felt good, out there in the bright warm day. It had been a while since either of us has had a good laugh.

Out of nowhere, Shug asks me, "What do you suppose happens when you die? Do we know we are dead? Do we fly away and off into space, like way out there past Jupiter and Saturn? Does it all come to make sense? Are all the mysteries solved? Does the junkie soul suddenly become healed, and all pain is gone, or is it just another door to another shit show?"

"Too many heavy questions for today, Charlie. You tried with that girl, you tried and failed. Unless you got a better idea, I think we should go up to the lake, take a boat and catch us some dinner."

I could not think of a better way to spend the day.

After a solid month of gray skies and rain and water puddles deeper than my boots, a sunny day out in the warming air felt like a cure to some unknown sadness. Out there on the lake, the gently rocking boat on the small breeze driven waves, it felt almost like a baby in a cradle. I sat in the back and watched Shug, a master fisherman. He commented that we eat what we catch. I'm sure to starve then, but I knew my friend wouldn't let me go hungry.

Sitting on the water, that first day in months where my mind wasn't on viruses and death and bad news and junkies, absorbing the sun, looking up at a cloudless blue sky, full of birds and bugs, I had an answer.

"Shug, I think when we die, it's a lot like this. Just a boat on the water on a perfect spring day!"

Shug said, "Yeah, man, I like that. I like that a lot! I think we've caught our fill, well, I caught us our fill!" We both laughed again. I said, "Let's head back to my place and cook these bad boys up. I got potatoes and vegetables."

We went back to my house and cleaned and cooked the fish. We sat on my porch as the sun set, drinking cold beers, playing sweet bluegrass music. Shug broke into a jam of Foggy Mountain Breakdown that was so good we both sat there after it was over and listened to the last notes fade into the wind. Finally, both of us saying—at the same moment—“Damn, what the Hell was that?”

After a couple more beers, I yawned, and Shug stood to leave. We almost hugged, and we caught ourselves. It had been a good day. A day so good, we’d both forgotten how broken the world had become—a quiet ending to such a tumultuous morning.

The next dawn was gray and dark again. It was like we would get a one day reprieve from the rain, and all the water, before it all came back again—day after day of raining in sheets, and a howling wind. I stayed inside, wearing my bunny slippers for days, never setting foot out the door, other than to grab the newspaper and mail from my mailbox, cursing the cold and the rain. Reading the paper, making notes of names in the obituaries I’d known, who now had passed.

Thinking of the day on the lake and wondering if that was where all these souls went when they died. When the sun set on the lake, did we then fly off past Jupiter and onto the stars?

Staying inside in silence and wondering if and when my time would come.

Another week passed before I saw Shug again. A rainy Saturday morning, I heard a banging on my front door. He stood there holding my paper and yesterday’s mail and a bag full of coffee and donuts from the convenience store, the Sunoco station. Never as good as his coffee but appreciated. I welcomed him into my kitchen in my boxer shorts and a ratty old flannel shirt and my bunny slippers. Shug half laughed and said, “Damn boy, you got style!”

Then he sat down, took the coffees from the bag, and said, “You might want to drink this, put some pants on and go down to the gas station. I saw the girl; she looked bad. Looked like maybe she’d been beat up. It could be the dope or the bug; I don’t know. I figured I’d better tell you. I didn’t want to tell you, but you know I don’t play shit like that.”

I took the cardboard coffee cup from his large hands and thanked him. Taking a sip, it was hot; I motioned for him to sit down at the table, as I sat on the opposite side.

“Man, I don’t know. Do I want to open up that can of fresh Hell again, or do I want to count myself lucky I survived the first go-round with her relatively unscathed?”

Shug replied, “I think we both, sadly, know the answer to that. You are a haunted man, Charlie. I think you ain’t going to be right until you make some peace with your boy and the water that took him. I don’t know how this dooper girl fits into your whole plan, but I’m pretty sure she is part of it, right or wrong.”

With that, I poured the rest of my coffee down my throat. I went into my bedroom to find some pants to wear. I walked passed the spare room where the girl stayed. I’d not stuck my head in there since she left. It was surprisingly neat, and the bed made like she’d never been there at all.

I rejoined Shug in my kitchen. “To stay here comfortable and clean and safe, away from the hookers and the dopers and the virus feels to me exactly like that moment my boy went under the water for the last time, my friend. I can’t do that again. I can’t sit here and drown in the sin of my silence and indifference. I can’t let another person drown. I’ll appreciate it if you’re here when I get back. I’ll understand fully if you decide not to be.

With that, I found the keys to the F-150 and grabbed the kitchen door handle. “I’ll be back, Shug. I’ve got to go see how this plays out.”

It was raining in sheets again. I’ve never in my life seen so much rain. The world looked saturated and wet-moldy, and there was no grass, just wet weeds, and mud. There was no color, just gray, and a sadness permeated over everything. The day on the lake, where I pondered dying and flying in space now seems a cruel illusion, another man’s memory.

Miraculously the Ford starts and coughs and gags and finally starts to idle. I head off down the hill and into town. As I drive, I keep hearing the nagging question in my head, will one single, decent charitable act, wipe the slate clean of a lifetime of cowardice. Am I doing this to get right with God, or Allah, or the universe, am I doing this so I can fly in space and see all the mysteries unfold when I die, or am I just bringing a hurricane of Hell down on my quiet life and the life of my best friend. I need to consider Shug. No matter what I choose to do, he won’t sit idly by. That’s not his nature. Shug is the kind of guy if you told him you just killed a man, he’d say, “Let me finish my sandwich, I’ll grab a shovel, and I’ll help you

bury the body...” That was Shug. I needed to think about that too. Shug don’t need to wipe his slate clean of any cowardice or fear. That’s my stone to drag, not his.

I arrived at the Sunoco, and she’s not there. I’m relieved for a second until I notice her garbage bags. I assume she’s off doing her business in a men’s room stall. I wait. The rain had slowed, but now it’s back with a vengeance. It just seems to rain in this unending deluge—day after day, walls of water fall from the sky.

A half-hour passes, then forty-five minutes. I go inside the store. The same clerk is behind the counter. Taking a deep breath, I say, “Fuck it,” to myself. I ask the guy at the register if he’s seen the girl.

He says, completely straight-faced, “My friend, there are better girls in town. Prettier girls, not so sick. This one is trouble. I don’t know why the fuck she insists on hanging around here. She’s trouble, she’s a junkie, most are junkies, I suppose, but this one, this one and that Nazi asshole boyfriend of hers. Not worth the trouble to get your dick wet!”

I step back and notice my fist is clenched. I size this guy up. He’s pretty fat, taller than me; I see a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, he is maybe early twenties, a college boy, I figure. I don’t think it would take me more than a good roundhouse to the jaw to drop him. Even now, at my age, I still have to measure-up every guy who confronts me. I know the ones I can beat are in an ever-shrinking group. I’m pretty sure he’s safely within that group. I’m pissed at him; I’d like to swing. I realize it won’t help an already bad situation.

“Douchbag, I’m not looking to get my fucking dick wet. What the fuck is wrong with you. I know this girl; I’m trying to help her.”

He counters, now angry, “Look, old man, I don’t care at all, about her, or you. I know I’ve called the State Police, but right now, ‘cause of this damn virus, they are covering their own asses too. Who could blame them, they aren’t busting hookers or junkies. Hell, I went by one doing sixty in a thirty the other day, late for work, he just looked at me. She must be here somewhere. Maybe she’s in a car sucking a dick. Get her and her bags of wet shit and get her out of here, please!”

At that moment, the door of the store swings open. A pretty, well-dressed woman, kind of obvious she's not from this depressed little burg. "Excuse me! Someone needs to call the police; there is a girl in the ladies' room, she's very sick, she's bleeding. I think she's going to die!"

The clerk looks at me, "There is your cue, Superman, go save the dying hooker!"

I'm actually for a second torn between wanting to run, wanting to go save the girl, and wanting to climb across the counter and beat this punk's ass.

I decide on the girl. Pulling hard on the door, stuck in the swollen frame, I walk in the women's bathroom. She sits there on the floor in the first stall, leaning against the bowl. Her pants are off, and blood is flowing from her crotch—a lot of blood and what looks like pee. The water in the bowl is blood red too.

I step out of the stall, holding my head with both hands. I walk around in a circle screaming, "WHAT THE FUCK!? WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK!"

Pulling my phone from my pocket, my hands are shaking, I call Shug. He answers, I tell him what I've found. He listens, doesn't say a word at first, then slowly, as if he had to pause to collect his thoughts, he says, "Charlie, man, listen to me. We are two old men. We are in the high-risk age group for this virus. Three-thousand Americans died of this bug yesterday. Three-thousand man, do you hear me? This ain't all over, this ain't getting better. This is the real shit, bro, you feel me? More people died from this bug—yesterday—than died when them towers came down in NY in 2001. You got that? I know what's driving you, man, but you need to think about what you are about to do!"

"Shug, I need you to run over to my house, open the door, get some towels, and I've got a couple of old blankets by the washer. Put them on the bed in the spare room, ok?"

Shug says softly into the phone, "Ride or die, brother..."

I'm nearly screaming, "Shug, is this an act of courage and bravery, or am I an even bigger coward for doing this? Am I acting out of strength or weakness? I can't leave her here drowning in a puddle of pussy blood and pee, man! I see the boy again; I can't do this again!"

Shug's response is short, "I'll meet you at your house. Bring the girl, Charlie."

Chapter Four –

Trying to focus and gather my thoughts—impossible in this wet, moldy, smelly women’s bathroom, I kneel down and try to help the girl to her feet. She’s dead weight, like a sack of potatoes. What an ungodly goddamn mess. I’m standing in her piss and blood, her pants on the floor soaking up some of it.

Placing her limp arm around my neck, my right arm under her knees, left arm behind her back and carry her half-naked body out to my truck. The cashier and well-dressed woman have come outside and around the corner to watch the show; I have to assume. I call out to the kid, through the rain, “Come on, man, get the door for me!” He stands there in silence, smoking his cigarette and talking to the pretty woman.

“I drown in the milk of your fucking-human-kindness, asshole! I’ll be back to kick your teeth down your throat!”

The pair turn and re-enter the convenience store. I place her limp body on the seat of my truck, then shut the door on her side and run through the deluge to grab her plastic garbage bags, throwing them in the back. I see she’s shivering. I’m scared to death that she has the Coronavirus fever now. I take off my coat, an old Army surplus field jacket, and cover her with it, like a blanket. Like a miracle, the truck fires to life. The engine still warm, I blast the heat and turn out of the parking lot and head to my house.

Pulling into the dirt and stone mud-puddle that once was my driveway, I’m blowing the horn. I know Shug stayed and is in there waiting for this disaster to unfold. I run around the truck, open her door, and pick up her limp body. Yelling at the top of my lungs for Shug, the front porch light comes on, and the creaky wooden screen door opens. Walking straight passed him, I lay her on the bed in my spare room. Shug walks up next to me, wearing an orange bandana over his face, and offers me a red one.

He stands next to me, staring at the half-naked, and half-dead girl. “Man, look at the bruises on her legs, that’s from the dope. Why is she bleeding like that? We need to clean her up and keep her warm. I hope we don’t die from doing this, Charlie!”

“I feel bad, Shug. I shouldn’t have brought this on you. It’s my problem. I shouldn’t have brought all this Hell down on you.”

“Well, we are in it now, Charlie. There don’t seem to me to be any other way than to keep moving forward. We can’t let this girl die here. What the Hell do we do? Do we take them filthy clothes from the rest of her and clean her up? Do we just cover her up?”

With that, I reached for her sleeves and started to remove her jacket and shirt and bra. Her body was covered in bruises and scabs. Shug went to the kitchen to get a pan of water and some soap and towels. We both began to wash her up as best we could. I went to my room and found a couple of t-shirts and some socks to dress her in.

The room looked like a scene from some imaginary, dystopian cowboy-porn-war movie.

Finally, pulling my red bandana over my face, thinking *too little, too late*, I say to Shug, “We’ve got to get her a doctor, no idea how to accomplish that!”

Shug says, “That woman who works at the clinic in town, Lori is her name, she’s like a super nurse, like a nurse-doctor, she’s good people. We talked a lot about my nephew. Maybe she’d come up. I got her number on a card in my wallet.”

“Oh yeah, I know who you mean, what do they call her, a nurse-practitioner, I think, right?”

Shug says, pulling out his cell phone, “Yeah, that's it. Let me see if she'll come up here.”

He steps out on my front porch, pulls off his face-mask, and I hear him speaking to her. Shug walks back in, saying, “Lori is leaving the clinic at about 5 pm. She’ll stop up and knows where we live. She said, for now, just keep her warm. It’s only about an hour to wait.”

With that, I put my hand on my friend's shoulder and thank him. Shug says, “No need to thank me, you’d do the same for me, I know that.”

I go into my bedroom and take the blankets off my bed and take them to the girl. She is passed out, but even now dressed in my t-shirt and socks, and covered by the spare blanket she looks to be shivering. I cover her with these and wait on the porch with Shug.

We sit and wait and listen to the endless rain. “Goddamn coldest spring I ever recall, brother!” I comment just to pass the time.

“What’s your plan with that girl now, Charlie? Do you have a plan?”

“Man, I wish I knew. I’m still questioning my motives.”

We sat there for a good forty-five minutes in silence listening to the rain fall, the day's temperature peaked in the mid-sixties, but now was dropping. I was about to suggest we go inside to wait when a woman pulled a car into my driveway. Shug waved and got up to greet her. She was a pretty woman, long brown hair, late fifties, early sixties, about our age. Shug brought her to the porch and introduced us. She asked me why the girl was here. I could not answer. Shug jumped in, saying, “Charlie, here is my best friend. He’s a good man, he may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, I think we both question his wisdom here, but he’s a good man, his motives are pure. Will you look at this girl for us, Lori!”

I held the door for her and motioned toward the bedroom where the girl was sleeping, or dead; I hoped she was just asleep. I told her we’d wait in the living room. Shug and I sat down and turned on the news.

I blurted out, “No medicine, no progress, another three-thousand dead, today. Where are they stacking the bodies? There is no vaccine; I feel like this is it. The economy is in shambles. Every time they try to get people back to work, the deaths spike. I hear they got reefer trailers down there by the docks in the city packed with bodies. What the fuck was I thinking, bringing that girl here? What the fuck is my problem, Shug? Life here in this hill wasn’t bad. We had our fishing and quiet and music. You are a good friend, and we have a good life, quiet. I ruined that, didn’t I?”

Shug thought a moment, in silence, “What was the first thing that made us friends?”

I said, “I don’t know, man, the fact that I moved in here next to you years ago, and so you were stuck with me?”

He said, “No, man, it was the ring. I knew we were going to be friends when I found out you understood the ring.”

“Not everyone understands the sport. A lot of men talk like they do, a lot watch the sport, a lot act like they get it. I don’t know that many anymore that know life around, and inside that ring. I used to, but they’re gone now. You know what it’s like inside that ring. Boxing is the most honest sport in the world, man; it’s the truth. There ain’t nowhere to hide inside the ring. You’re roped in a sixteen by sixteen-foot box, nowhere to run if you wanted to run.”

“You can’t hide from the guy who wants to whup your ass, and you can’t hide from yourself. It’s you and that man that wants to beat you. He don’t want the ball from you or to hit some damn ball with a stick, and he doesn’t cross some chalk line more than you did or get more baskets. No man, none of that. He wants to hurt you. He wants to see you bleed, and he wants to break your bones, bro, he wants to hit you so hard you fall to your knee, like begging for mercy, maybe knock you out.”

“More important than that, man, it’s about courage and honor. It’s about facing your fears. Neither one of us ever fought a man we didn’t respect. You can’t fight a man in that ring and not respect him. The most honest man you’ll ever meet, the one great truth in this life, is that sweaty motherfucker across from you with his hands up waiting for you to make a mistake.”

“The ring, Charlie, ain’t about only one thing. Facing the truth and facing your fears and standing up and being a man. The ring is life; it’s this life. That girl in there, be she dead or alive, is truth brother. She’s this world and this life laying right there in that bed. Death-virus sick, maybe, strung out on dope, sucking dick for a couple of dollars, broken, sad, she lost her baby and the baby daddy to the dope. She’s the hard truth of this world.”

“Underneath the fancy suits and nice cars, underneath all the bullshit smiles we both see every day, strip away the lie, the shit nobody wants to see, is this life, this girl. Everybody knows a junkie, everybody knows someone who is broke and won’t be fixed. We don’t like to look at them, Charlie, but they here among us. People starving, brother, starving for their next meal, for someone to love, for a place to sleep, for some understanding. Some people are starving to death. That girl in that bed, she’s starving to death for a lot of things. That’s why you brought her in. Maybe it was part your boy; maybe it was part you thinking you need to get right with God. You ain’t no coward, Charlie. No coward would have that sick, starving girl sleeping in his house. Not now, not this day when people scared to shit of their own shadow. They scared to shake hands.”

Shug took my hand in his, “You ain’t no coward, bro, and that, like that girl, and like the ring, this is the truth.”

I had tears in my eyes as Shug spoke. He took me back to my old days when I knew courage. He honored me with his words.

Nurse Lori came into my small living room, still wearing her well worn N95 mask. Removing it and fumbling with the elastic in her hair, she said, “Well, boys, if you were looking for a basket case, you found one! She’s very sick. Fever of 103, very ugly chest congestion, her breathing is shallow, blood oxygen is probably very low, her lips are blue. I’d say C19, without a doubt. That means you two were exposed, and you should quarantine. Have fun with that. She is in heroin or some opiate withdrawal. I can write a script for Lucemyea. It’s a newer drug, far better than Suboxone and Methadone. This drug actually works and doesn’t make the addiction worse. I’ll need to get a doc at the clinic to approve it, that’s not a problem. The vaginal bleeding was because she miscarried a baby. My guess is it was tonight, the past few hours. I’d think it was from her being so sick, but there is evidence of bruising in her belly area. I’d say someone beat her. Didn’t you two notice the bruising when you were washing her?”

Shug jumped in, “Damn, that’s a lot. Nah, I don’t think we were looking at much, just trying to clean her up and get her warm...”

I commented, “I bet it was that asshole pimp of hers, beat her. Her ‘boyfriend.’ I’ll kill that motherfucker.”

Lori simply replied, “I don’t want to know or hear about any of that. I think this is a police matter, I also know, right now, the way the world is, the police are not busying themselves with dying junkies and prostitutes. Keep her warm if she wakes up get some fluids in her. I’d say call an ambulance, but it’s 50/50 if they’d come. It’s the new America boys, and the ability to pay is a factor in healthcare. Let her rest. My guess is she’ll be awake by morning. She’s pretty sick. One of you should run down to the drug store in town. I made a list.” She handed it to me.

I read it. I said, “Bedpan?”

Lori replied, “unless you want her shitting and pissing on your blankets, yes...”

Shug thanked her, they fist-bumped. I thanked her. She walked out into the rainy night. I asked Shug if he'd stay and watch the girl while I went to the drug store. He said he would and sat down in front of the TV. "Charlie, we ain't even got fucking baseball now. What the fuck, bro, what the fuck?"

A few weeks passed. The rain didn't stop. May was a wet and cold mess. We'd get a break for a day or so, then more rain. The mountain we lived on look sad and damp. The trees finally revealed some leaves, and there were hints of green beginning to brighten up the dreary landscape. Neither Shug nor I showed any symptoms, which led to our running argument if we had the bug last winter or not.

The girl, Layla, while very weak, began to recover. The medication from Lori helped with the withdrawal. She was a tough kid, a few times I went into her room, during that first week and I thought she was dead. Her lips were blue, then she'd start a horrible coughing fit, and I'd know she was at least alive.

Her recovery was a slow process. I left her mostly alone in her room. Shug brought over a spare TV, and we chipped in together and bought her a phone. We threw out the contents of her garbage bags, the three of us took a ride to the local Goodwill store to buy her some decent clothes, she'd lost so much weight, she was bone skinny.

Early June, some local businesses were starting to open. Shug came in with coffee and breakfast one morning, purchased from the deli in town, and as the three of us sat on my front porch drinking it and eating egg sandwiches, he mentioned that they were looking for help. "Ten dollars an hour to start, not bad."

I commented, if she stayed here and worked, maybe her mom would let her see her little boy.

Layla looked out across the now green field, and I think for the first time since I'd met her, she smiled, a private dream-smile. She looked at Shug, started to laugh and said, "Fuck, that's got to beat sucking dick at the Sunoco station, right?"

Shug didn't know what to say, and I spit out my coffee all over the floor. Layla laughed out loud. She commented that we both would have been good dads, and she wished we were hers. Those words were sweet to my ears, but they also burned. She wasn't that much younger than my baby girl in Florida. She was a bit older than the boy would have been. For the first time in a long time, I wrestled with the word,

‘Dad...’ Shug simply smiled and said, “I never had any kids of my own, but if I had a daughter, I bet she’d be a goddamn, pain-in-the-ass just like you!”

It was a nice morning on the hill. The sun was out, and it was supposed to warm up.

We decided we’d all take a ride into town and see about the job.

Shug could sell a drowning man a glass of water, and it wasn’t more than fifteen minutes after that he and Layla entered the deli she came out with a smile of victory on her face. She had a job! She could start tomorrow.

It was far from an idyllic world; Layla had her struggles with sobriety. NA/AA was doing online meetings, and that seemed to help her. We talked openly and honestly about my problems with painkillers after I’d left boxing. I still drink a little, but not enough to be a problem. Layla managed to learn the oddities of the F-150, and she took it to work at the deli.

Shug and I went back to our music and fishing and generally avoiding contact with the outside world. One afternoon, in late June, she came home and jumped from the truck, happily excited. Shug and I had just blasted out a killer rendition of Poor Ellen Smith, and we were quite pleased with ourselves. Shug pointed out the song was written about a murder. I wasn’t sure the significance. I was simply impressed that the more we played together, the better we got. I said, “Too bad we are so old, and nobody but us likes Bluegrass. We could be famous stars!”

Layla ran onto the porch and announced she’d just spoken to her mom, and she wanted to come to the village this coming weekend and bring her baby boy.

I think I caught a tear welling up in Shug’s eye. I openly cried. This girl, so sick and broken, this girl who I mocked for her dream of a job at Burger King and getting her baby boy back, may actually be realized!

She asked if they could come here to what she now called ‘our house.’ I just said, “Yes, of course.” Layla insisted her other dad, Shug, also be there. Shug was genuinely pleased, maybe even honored.

Saturday arrived, and it was raining again. Layla was visibly nervous. Shug brought over his delicious coffee in a big thermos and some sugar donuts, and we drank it on the porch and listened to the rain.

Layla spoke, looking first at Shug, then me, then the ground, “My mom is a hard-ass, she drinks a lot. I want my boy back from her. When I was sick, she was the only option, but now, a few months clean, I see she’s a terrible choice, a terrible person. I own what I’ve done, who I’ve been. I learned that in AA. My mom is a racist, Shug; she don’t like black people. I felt I should warn you.”

Shug said, “Sweetheart, you think your mama is the first racist bitch ever to confront me? She’s good to your boy, and if she’s decent to me, I can deal with her for a visit.” Then he looked at me and said, “YOU, need to keep your big mouth fucking shut! That mouth of yours has caused both of us more bullshit than I can count. Look at me, man, do I look like a man who needs to be defended?”

I quietly said, “Nobody fucks with my friends, Shug. It’s that simple.”

Shug countered, “It’s not that simple, it’s never ever been simple, Charlie. That’s the point you miss. As a young boy, I learned to take the shit from you white folks, because that’s the better part of valor, literally to live to fight another day. My granddaddy taught me—and he saw men lynched— keep your head down and don’t pick no fight with the white man. We are always outnumbered, outgunned by the cops and the media and the courts. The bullshit we take is for a reason, man. It’s to keep your ass alive. You are a good friend Charlie, and you always got my back, I know that. But you got no idea what it’s like—at every level, every day—stick with me, I’ll teach you yet, brother, but I’ll fight my own fights the way I learned to fight them, ok?”

I sat there and said, “You know, Sugar Ray, I’d hug you, but I know your crabby-ass probably got the bug!”

Shug threw a donut at me, like a fastball. I caught it and ate it.

Layla shook her head, thanked us both, finished her coffee, and waited for her mom’s car in the mud-puddle driveway.

Her face lit up like the sun as her mother arrived at our house. Layla ran to the car, tore open the back door, and took her baby from the car seat. She opened the door for her mom, who wore a homemade cloth mask, Layla attempted a hug, and then put the toddler down and holding his hand, walked him up to us. She introduced us and hurried the boy inside the house.

The mother, she introduced herself as Doreen, stood until Shug offered her a seat. She sat down, Shug offered her some coffee, she declined, lit a cigarette, and looked us over. “So, which one of you is fucking my daughter?” Looking at me, she continued, “I hope it’s you.”

I turned my gaze to Shug. He gave me a look that said, silently, *tone it the fuck down!*

It took me a few seconds to recover from that, and I commented, “Doreen, neither my friend Raymond nor I have been fucking your daughter. She’s not in that life anymore. She’s clean and sober now and become quite a nice person, and quite self-sufficient. That is kind of amazing as I sit here and experience you. She undersold you. I hope she can soon take her child back and get the boy away from you. That decision is up to you two, I suppose.”

Doreen crushed out her cigarette on my porch floor and said, “I don’t care which of you she’s fucking, actually. I’ve no legal tie to that damn rug-rat, I packed up his shit in the back of my car. As far as I’m concerned, he’s hers now. I’m done.”

Shug jumps to his feet and says, “Let me help you with all that. I’ll get the boys belongings, and you can get your ugly-bitch-ass home, and off to that Klan meeting, you must be missing!”

And with that, me and Shug kind of became grandfathers.

Chapter Five –

We settled into a routine, far from dull, far from anything I'd ever experienced. The introduction of a young girl and her baby into my home and life was a sea change. I wish I could say everything was rosy; It wasn't. Life was hard; the economy was terrible; people didn't have work. I had to finally accept Shug's offer of a shotgun to keep at my house, after a couple of attempted break-ins. One night I heard a noise outside, and I let a blast of pellets fly. I saw a couple of young men scatter. I think Layla may have known those guys.

It wasn't just the dopers now, damn near everyone was down hard on their luck. Generally, civilized people were acting pretty uncivilized. Shug and Layla had more than a few conversations about the possible fall of civilization. All of this and more caused by this damn virus no one could seem to fix.

The baby boy was cute and full of life. Most days, I enjoyed my role as some sort of grandfather to the little guy; he was about two and a half years old. There were times, quiet moments, where I'd find myself being sucked into a comfort and fantasy I would not and could not allow. As soon as I let my guard down, I'd be there without thinking. I'd tell Shug about it, and he'd talk to me, like the good friend he is, about self-forgiveness and letting go of things we cannot control or change.

I never went into much detail about the day there in the Atlantic, off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. One night, while Layla was putting her son to bed inside, Shug and I sat on the porch as he strummed his banjo, and I tried to tune my fiddle. I stopped and said, "Right after my boy drowned, I let it all go to the wind. I ran off to the southwest. I had some friends there, and they offered me a place to stay and try to heal and recover. All I did was get fucked up, day in and day out. Mainly out there in the Saguaro Desert, in that dry heat. That shit will drain the life from you and leave a man weak and confused."

"I recall being naked in somebody's backyard pool, in Mesa, Arizona, the wrong pool, the wrong house. Tripping my ass off on gobs of peyote mescaline and good Mexican tequila and Negra Modelo beer."

"From the next house over—the place where I belonged, and the pool I was supposed to be in—the stereo was deafening. With Cyndi Lauper's 'She Bop' screaming in my ears, a rising fear rose inside me of being found dead and naked in the neighbor's pool; a voice in my head was telling me—as I struggled to hold my head above the water and not drown—that everything I'd ever known or been told about right and wrong, the rule of law and the rules of being a man was wrong."

“It somehow felt right that I drown, like the boy did, sucking all that warm water into my lungs. By rights, I should have drowned, but I didn’t. All I did was float there in that water, face down, listening to that goddamn song, thinking about my dead boy. Not a day goes by, Shug, I don’t wish I’d died in that pool.”

Shug continued to strum his banjo. Looking across the empty and overgrown fields that surround my house and his, said, “That was thirty-six years ago, Charlie, another life. You can own your actions, or inactions, for that matter, but put them in their place and make some peace with them, brother. Look at that girl in there. She’s clean, she’s survived the bug, and she’s surviving the dope. She’s working at a decent job, Charlie, she got her boy back. As far as I see it, you saved two lives. That may never wipe the slate clean, but it’s got to count for some...”

“I appreciate your point, Shug. Maybe this is part of the grand scheme; maybe this is my part to play to make things right with my boy.”

Shug started to pick, ignoring me.

Spring let go into summer, and the lockdowns were easing, but the virus was still killing people, too many. Alone up on the mountain, it was easy to go fishing, or work in Shug’s garden, or work on our cars and ignore the world, but there was always a moment when reality hit. It didn’t have to be the obituaries, it could just be a comment passed, and you’d know that you were no longer in the world that existed last summer.

Layla was becoming edgy, life at our house was never perfect, there were a lot of changes for all of us to get used to, they happened in a very short amount of time. It was hard to believe at times that two months ago, we were all complete strangers. She seemed less interested in being a mom. Some days she’d leave the boy with me, other days she’d take him to work and have a girl in town watch him.

Layla didn’t like her job anymore. I tried to speak to her about it, telling her the isolation was hard on all of us. It didn’t seem to help. Shug tried talking to her too.

One day she came home, looking quite upset and agitated. I was alarmed. She went looking for her boy, then realized she’d left him in town. She left the house, swearing, and cursing and bitching how much her life sucked. I just let it slide. In my mind, this was all, I hoped, part of her finding her way.

Shug said to me one night when Layla was out in town. “The girl stopped humming; you notice that? She always seemed happy and humming all the time. She don’t sit out here and listen to music anymore either. I thought it strange she’d sit out here with us two old fucks, but it was nice.”

I countered, “I think she’s stopped going to the online NA/AA meetings too. I mentioned that to her, and she told me it wasn’t my concern. I was about to go off on her and remind her she lived under my roof, but I remember when I was getting clean, I didn’t want to be told anything. It’s the same feeling when I have a beer and someone who knew me then sees me. I don’t think my beers now are anyone’s business either.”

“Charlie, beer ain’t dope. Dope is a different animal. I think if you notice stuff, you need to say stuff.”

With that, the quiet summer night was shattered by the loud exhaust of an old rusty, half red, and half gray primer painted Chevy Camaro. A big redneck looking boy climbed out wearing a trucker’s jacket, sleeves ripped off, with a big confederate flag patch ironed on the back, a ‘1488’ tattoo up near the shoulder of both arms. I didn’t recognize it, but Shug did instantly. It was some white supremacist symbol.

He walks up to Shug and me on the porch, no introduction, he says, “Where’s Layla?”

My reply was simple and straightforward, “Who the fuck is asking?”

“Look, old man,” he shouts back, “I’m here to pick up my girlfriend and get her the fuck away from you and your friend here. The only thing I hate worse than some black motherfucker,” pointing directly at Shug, then back at me, “Is the lowlife white motherfuckers like you who don’t have enough respect for them self’s and their heritage to get them some friends of the proper color.”

Shug stands, looks at the boy, says, “I got to piss, and I got no time for this asshole.” He gets up and goes inside my house.

I stand too, and go up to the boy, “Who and what, exactly the fuck did you just say to me?” As I’m making a fist, the screen door slams wide open, and I hear a shotgun blast, it peppers the deck—Shug has blown a large and quite proper hole in the wooden floor of my front porch!

The boy stepped back, but Shug kept coming, “This is a double-barrel motherfucker. That first shot was a warning. You got something else to say to this black motherfucker?”

Shug pointed the .12 gauge right at the boy's head, and he turned and ran back to his rusty Camaro. Shug moved in closer, his finger on the second trigger, as the redneck started the car, and tore up a swath of gravel and mud from my driveway as he backed away. Turning to leave, shifting frantically from reverse to first gear, Shug ran after him, I heard the gunfire again, and the back window of the old Chevy exploded. Shug stood there on the road, so mad he bent down, grabbed a handful of gravel and threw that too, screaming, "Why you runnin' motherfucker?"

I joined him on the road and watched as the taillights disappeared heading toward town. "Damn, Shug!" He looked at me and said, "Damn Shug, nothing." I saw that tat on that motherfucker. That's the only way to play with those pussies. I hate to tell you, Charlie, but we are at war."

We sat down on the porch. I was a bit confused. "Jesus, bro, what the fuck did you do to my deck?" And I laughed out loud.

Shug said, "We can go into town tomorrow, pick up some boards, I'll pay for them."

I said, still confused, "Nah, man, that's not it, I've just never seen you that mad! You don't think a couple of old fighters like us could have just old-school kicked his ass?"

Shug looked down at the hole in the wood. "You know I never talk about my wife..."

"Yeah, I've noticed that. I never pressed you. I knew you were married, not much more. I know you didn't have any kids."

"We were pregnant, Charlie. I just got out of the Army. We were living in Livingston, Alabama, near Mississippi. Me and my wife, Lois, we were out riding around one night, just to cool off, it was hot as fuck, we didn't have air conditioning in the house, just the car windows. This was 1980, mind you—not fucking 1950. She had to use the bathroom. Them pregnant women seem to get to pee all the time. So we pull into this filling station and the counterman, he gives her the key. While she was in the bathroom, this pickup load of these assholes comes up. Same goddamn tattoos as that boy tonight. You know what that 1488 shit means, Charlie? The 14 means these fourteen words: We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children. The 88 stands for 'Heil Hitler.' H being the 8th letter of the alphabet."

Shug stands, "You ever notice I never take my shirt off. We could be fishing or working in the garden, no matter how hot it gets!"

I said, yeah, “I never asked, kind of figured it was a black thing, and you’d tell me to mind my own damn business.”

Shug smiled at that and lifts his shirt and turns his back to me. In his dark skin were cuts, long healed cuts and creases, scars, deep, lighter colored than his skin, a red-toned purple, long, deep and ugly.

“Shug, man, what the fuck?”

“That pickup load of assholes was the Aryan brotherhood. They ripped off my shirt and pants, beat my naked ass in the parking lot, dragged my pregnant wife from the bathroom and made her watch as they attacked me with bullwhips—not one, two of them cocksuckers taking turns—I can still hear that goddamn whip snapping the air. I can still feel each cut. Blood everywhere, my spit and sweat, and screams filled the air that night, and not one motherfucker came to help us. They were people there too. I saw them. I went down to my knees, and the fuckers kept at it. I heard my wife screaming; she screamed so much she started to bleed out, like our girl Layla was bleeding out that night. They left us both there. Those assholes went inside and told that boy at the counter if he called a cop, he’d get the same. My wife, she lost the baby, she bled out and died in my car. I passed out from the attack, and they dragged me out back of the building, left for dead, I suppose. Come morning; the police finally showed up. They only came because the guy who worked the morning shift at the gas station called to complain about a body outback. I swore on her grave the next time I saw that 1488, I’d kill the motherfucker.”

I was stunned. I’d learned more about my best friend in a few moments than I had in the years we’d shared this hill.

“I loved her, Charlie. I loved her so deep and complete I could never love nobody else.”

He stands and pulls his shirt back on. He takes out his wallet and shows me her picture. We both stand there, weeping. All I can manage to say is, “She was beautiful, man...”

The sun has set, and the summer night was coming in cool.

I looked up; Layla was pulling my pickup in the driveway. Shug finally spoke again. “I guess I blew-up that whole ‘keep your head down and take it shit,’ huh?”

The only words that come to me are, “Fuck that asshole, Ray!”

Layla came in, and she didn't say five words. Her little boy was asleep in her arms. She joined us on the porch after about fifteen minutes, looking at the gaping hole in the decking. Somehow, she knew. "He's not my boyfriend. He's the guy who was my pimp when I was using. He's been coming around the deli, talking to me. Telling people I'm a whore. He's brought me dope. It's hard to turn down. I think I should leave town."

"How did he know to come here?" I asked.

Still staring down at the hole in the floor, she said, "My mom, I would guess. She loves him, Tommy, that's his name. She's as evil as he is, I suppose. I don't want him around me or my baby. I don't know how to get away from him. He scares me. His dope scares me. I know I've got to get back to the meetings. I know I've been slipping up.

He said he's going to kill you and your 'black boyfriend.' He actually said worse than that, but that's all I'm going to say.

"Who shot him?" She asked, "I saw him in town, and he was bloody, really pissed off! Running his mouth, threatening me, and the baby."

"Well, child, the shooter would be our good friend Sugar Ray!"

She walked over to Shug and hugged him. He hugged her back.

Layla says, "I need to get the fuck out of here, out of this town. I need to take my boy and go!"

Shug, counters, "Fuck that! We ain't running, no, fuck that, not from these assholes. No, we ain't running from anyone. Let's get out of town for a day or so, get away, gain some perspective. We all need a day off from all this!"

Layla shook her head. "I'm terrified of this guy. I have a friend down in Jersey. Down by the shore. She said I could come there and stay..."

Then it was my turn to comment. "I agree with Shug, we shouldn't run, we ain't running, but you and your boy got to be safe. When do you want to leave?"

Layla says, "Let me call her now." She returns to the porch in about five minutes. "She said, come now, come anytime." Layla looks concerned. I can't tell if it was the phone call or if she's genuinely terrified to

be here. I ask her where at the shore does her friend live, she says, “Down by Sandy Hook, a pretty area, she has an apartment over a restaurant. It’s better than here.”

Shug looks at me, and I back at him. I’m white as a snowman. “Sandy Hook, huh... yeah, I know the area. Let’s get some sleep, Shug, can we take your car? It’s got more room.”

Shug responds, “A road trip sounds like a good idea to me. We need to think, figure all this shit out. I’ll be here at 8 am.”

Morning came quick, Layla had trouble with the baby, but we got him in the car seat, after a struggle. I asked Shug to drive. I was unusually quiet as we drove down the Garden State Parkway, before taking the exit for ‘Shore Points.’ I’d never shared my Sandy Hook story with Layla. I had no intention of doing so today. We took the exit for Route 36 south. Shug looked at me, and I felt like I could not breathe. Layla asked me if I was ok. I looked sick.

Her friend’s apartment was over a pretty seaside restaurant. The back porch overlooked the bay. I couldn’t get much of a read on her friend. She seemed quiet, sad, but nice enough. She looked tired.

Shug would say on the way back he thought she might have a drug problem. I had the same feeling.

They were still practicing the social distancing at the shore. The restaurant was open but only for take-out. We ordered some food and ate it on the little back porch that overlooked the Atlantic Highlands. I was looking further out across the little spit of land that was the main road out to The Hook and the beaches the abandoned military base; I tried to make out the spot where my life changed all those years ago.

I could not eat, I sat there on the perfect warm summer day, and started to weep, not caring who saw me—not caring who questioned why. I excused myself from the table and the meal. Layla asked what was wrong; I saw Shug motion to let it go, let me be, as I left the screened-in area, and leaned against the third-floor deck railing out in the heat of the day. The view across the narrow bay and past Sandy Hook and New York Harbor was clear as glass. So clear, even the typical haze that fills the afternoon sky here at the seashore was missing. Just clear blue sky, a raging hot sun, and the water. The green-blue water, boiling as the waves crashed against the beach. I knew a storm must be out there somewhere. It was a day just like this, that day. The water was just like that day... a day just like this day.

As my eyes scoured the shoreline and all the way over to New York City, towering to the east, my view was unobstructed. Somewhere out in the great expanse before me was where I let my boy die.

They allowed me my moment, and they finished their meal. I came back inside the screened-in room. Shug commented that we should leave before traffic got heavy, it was early afternoon, I think he was just trying to get me out of there.

We said our goodbyes, and there was a genuine sadness in our parting. I think over the past few months, the four of us, Shug, Layla, the boy, and me, had grown into something of a family unit.

As we drive north, my friend looked at me, “You ok, Charlie? This day has been a lot, bro.”

I looked out the window as the Hudson Highlands faded in my passenger side mirror. “Nah, I’m not alright, Shug. Not now, not for a long time. It’s the first time I’ve been back to this area, to that beach, since the day. Nah, I’m not alright, brother, but I’m happy to be going home.

Shug drove the entire way. I sat, looked out the window, and tried to absorb the day. At about 5 pm, we stopped at a Subway for a sandwich, about two miles from home. We ate it on the picnic tables outside. We talked about going fishing the next day, not too much about the events of the past twenty-four hours. A police car went flying past us, lights flashing, then a fire truck and another.

“Someone is having a shitty day, Shug! Worse than us, I suppose!”

We cleaned up our wrappers, took our soda cups, and headed up the road to our houses.

Chapter 6 –

We drove up our hill, pulling over to allow fire equipment and police cars to pass. We were overtaken with the uneasy certainty that what awaited us was not good news. Turning the corner, passing Shug's house first, we saw mine in flames. The entire structure was involved in fire, big long flumes of red and orange and sparks reaching for the sky, igniting the pine trees towering over what once was my home, now a fire pit. A loud bang would erupt from somewhere inside the chaos.

A man approached us, looking to be in charge. He asked if I was the owner of the home, identifying himself as the local fire chief, we'd met before, in town, a young man, nice enough guy. Through the roar, I asked him if we could move my truck away and over to Shug's house. It appeared to me the F-150 was my last earthly belonging. That and the clothes on my back. He said there were still explosions going off. That was the explanation for the loud bangs. He said he believed the truck would be ok where it sat.

Shug and I watch long and wide streams of water raining down on the structure, overwhelming the inferno. A few more bangs, then explosions are heard, and a ball of flame erupts.

We stood there, getting wet from the steam for about thirty minutes. The sun was setting behind us, we heard no more explosions, and after about another hour, the fire was out for the most part. I walked over and climbed in the F-150. A good thing I leave the keys in it. No one would steal it anyway.

Walking back to the smoldering mess, we notice chunks of melted aluminum and big shards of metal littering the entire scene. The fire chief joins us. "Charlie, how many propane tanks did you keep here, and why so many?"

"Man, I don't even have a grill. When we cook out, we use Shug's grill!"

Shug adds, "Yeah, and I've only got two. This looks like a bombing, more than a fire!"

The fire chief agrees. The police are on-site, too; they have a few questions. Most, I can't answer. I tell them if they need me, I'll be sleeping on my friend's couch.

Back on Shug's back deck, overlooking his garden, we drink beers; many beers, more than either of us would typically drink. Looking at the smoldering wreck that was my home, I have brought my fiddle from my truck, and placed it on the table in front of me. Fortunately, I'd planned to take it to the music

store later this week to have the guy there adjust the neck. I look back at the smoke, then Shug, then my fiddle. I make a sweeping gesture with both hands and exclaim, “My worldly possession...”

Shug asks if I have any idea who did this. “Of course, I do. It was our friend Tommy.”

“Maybe this is part of my process, Shug. Part of my letting go. I’m free now of material things, and I’m still here, still ok. I don’t want to dump this on you, Sugar Ray, but you are my entire family and all of my friends. Sixty-some-odd years on and I’ve got one halfway decent fiddle that needs work, a twenty-year-old pickup that needs work, the clothes on my back, and one friend. I’d say if this is part of my healing and making peace; if this is all part of my cleaning my slate, I have to think I’m about as stripped bare as a man can get.

With that, it started to pour again, and I laughed. “I was worried we might go for two days without the sky opening up!”

The deluge put out the last of the fire. We sat there, smelling the stink of the burned-out remnants of the past thirty-five years of my life.

“Is this how it ends, man? Stripped and barren, I go before my maker naked with my one good friend, and my one good deed? It ain’t going to be much to tally.”

“Charlie, I spent a lot of my boy years in church, between my mama and my grandma, getting my ass slapped for fidgeting; and making noise. I hated sitting in there, wearing a damn tie, listening to that big man up in the front talk, preach to me, especially in the summertime. That was the worst.”

“I never encountered no God with some damn tally sheet in that church, Charlie. I heard, and I recall a lot about forgiveness. There was some of the pie-in-the-sky bullshit too, but my takeaway from all them goddamn Sundays, and the bruises to go with them, was forgiveness. We are men, Charlie. We are all imperfect. Forgiveness is what I learned sitting next to my mama and her mama. It starts with forgiving yourself. You’ve got to learn that now.”

“Now, this Tommy son-of-a-bitch, ain’t no forgiving that motherfucker. I’ve thought long and hard about this, Charlie. Many an hour on exactly this subject. When a man decides to kill another man, it is a heavy decision. It’s a life-changing decision. It’s a moment you cross a line. A decision from which you can’t return. I’ve been a killer since that night in Alabama all those years ago. I made up my mind that night. That was the moment I became Sugar Ray, the killer. I ain’t killed anyone yet, but my mind was changed.

I became a killer that night, all bloody and beat-up, on the ground, outside that gas station. The question of ‘if’ was taken away and replaced with ‘when.’ Well, my friend, that ‘when’ question has been answered. The time is now. We are both tired and old men. I’m going to finish this beer and go wash up and get some sleep, you should too. Tomorrow I’m going to go find Tommy and kill him.”

“Simple as that.” Shug looked at me.

I said, “Simple as that.”

Morning came, with Shug kicking his couch, handing me a mug of his coffee, and waking me. Maybe not in that order. He sat down across from me. “I think we should go down into town. There are a few places where the homeless congregate. There’s that one parking lot behind the Catholic Church and another behind the YMCA. I want you to call Layla and see if you can pull any information from her as to where this motherfucker hangs around.”

With that, there was a knock on the front door. The local sheriff and a New York State Trooper stood there. Shug invited them in, offering coffee, saying it was more comfortable on the back deck, but it was still raining.

The cops, both wearing N95 masks, had questions about my house. The sheriff, a man both Shug and I knew, but not well, sat with me in the living room while Shug and the trooper went into the kitchen. He asked if I had any enemies. I said, “I don’t know how a man can live six decades or so and not have any enemies, but no one who would do this. We have a good idea who did this, though.”

The sheriff offers, “As near as we can tell, and this is a full-on arson investigation now, there were six to ten propane tanks used as bombs. Someone was off in the distance, shooting them with a high-powered hunting rifle, even as firefighters worked to save your home. Someone had it in for you.”

Shug enters the room, followed by the trooper. “Truth be told sheriff, and like I just told the officer here, that boy Tommy, the one who pimps out the local girls, sells them heroin—fine upstanding citizen—and I had a run-in over at Charley’s house just the day before yesterday. Then the next day, Charlie’s house is firebombed. You don’t need to be Sherlock Goddamn Holmes to figure this one out. If you arrest that boy, you tell him he needs to be on a knee thanking God you got to him first!”

The sheriff, looking at the trooper, then back to Shug, says, “You need to be careful making threats against anyone, sir!”

Shug, serious as death, looks the sheriff square in the eye and says, “I tell you, mister, that ain’t no threat.”

With that, the two police officers said goodbye and left.

I half-laughed and said, “So, I guess we will be the number one suspects when they find this fuckers body!”

Shug says, “What makes you think there will be a body to find?”

I’ve never seen my friend like this. We finished our coffee and took my truck into town. Shug tried calling Layla and her roommate, Terri, a few times. He said as we drove, “Something about that whole situation bothers me, man. Something ain’t right. I know I got no claim to the girl, but for a time, she seemed like family. We all did; her and her boy, you and me. That roommate of hers concerned me too. I guess she’s better off than here with our pal Tommy, but I worry about her down there. I worry about the dope. That shit only takes, it only kills, it never gives an inch.”

With that, we pulled into the parking lot behind the Catholic Church. There was evidence of a small tent city, made out of cardboard boxes, that popped up here each night and was scattered at the light of each day. The wind strewed wet garbage in every direction.

Shug and I got out of the truck and walked. The rain was coming down harder now—so much water and misery everywhere. An overwhelming gray was the color of this year. As we walked our shoes crunched glass vials under our feet, the pavement was littered with tiny empty plastic baggies. There was a stench to this place, a stench of decay. Not so much of bodies, or garbage, more the stench of a broken world, of our failure as a society. The dark and narrow alley led from the church out to the street, full of 7-11 Stores and bodegas, and a newsstand that sold cigarettes and beer. These places became the daytime haunts of the church’s nighttime inhabitants. In the light of this dismal day, they now vanished—scattered, and unseen.

From the church, a door opened, it was a young priest. He pulls on a cloth mask, giving us a puzzled look. He asks if he can help us. Shug stepped up, “Yeah, we are looking for a boy, a big boy, covered in tattoos. A couple of them show 1488 way up here.” As he motioned to his own shoulder.

The priest looked at the ground and the litter, evidence of the life here in this alley, “Are you fellows here on business?” He asked. I was impressed with his courage, as I was silently begging Shug to be quiet and NOT say, “Yeah, we are here to kill a motherfucker!” He didn’t, to my relief.

Shug presented a genuine depth of concern for the people who lived here. “No, father, nothing like that. My friend Charlie and me, we’ve been involved with helping one of these addicts for a time now, we think that boy we are looking for might be dealing and exploiting these people. We just want to talk to him.”

The father looked almost relieved. “Yes, I know that man. He is here more often than I wish. These people don’t like police, understandably, so dealing with him and his business is a tough call.”

“There was a time, up to last year, I opened up part of the church to them, but they stole, they stole a lot, it was decided to let them have their place here in the back. That is all we can do. I’ll let a few in if they seem to want help. Sadly, most aren’t there yet. This world of theirs seems a death trap, few can escape.”

“You can only do so much for some people. Many of these people, I fear, are broken beyond repair. I don’t like this man you refer to, he’s not a good man, but like I said before, these folks here don’t like it when the police show up. I suppose if this fellow were to be removed, another would rush in to take his place.”

Shug replies, “Yeah, man, another will come rushing in like water...”

Yes, you can find him here, most nights just as it gets dark. I’ve tried to talk to him. He is not a good man.”

Shug attempts to shake the priests' hand for a moment, forgetting the world we now live in. They both nod at each other. The priest says, “Come back after dark if you want this man, whatever it is you want with him. He’ll be here, selling his poison.”

We turn and walk further down the alley away from my truck. Breaking onto the street, you can see them everywhere, in and out of the shadows. On eye contact, many scatter.

In the narrow passageway, a dead-end, between the newsstand and auto body shop, I see a young girl, and a shopping cart, stolen from the local grocery store. With her are two young children. I enter, she huddles with her kids and tries to protect them. I put out my hands, "I'm not here to hurt you, I want to find Tommy, that's all. For fuck's sake, these are your kids? When was the last time you ate? Jesus, Fuck!"

I look back and see Shug at the entrance. I ask him to get some food from the 7-11, anything. He doesn't hesitate. He turns, and he's gone.

I go in closer, but keeping my six-foot distance, "That's my friend Shug, he'll bring you and your children some food." This girl and her two kids are huddled under an awning, trying to stay dry. I can see track marks up and down both arms, from her wrists to above her elbows. "I look into her eyes, they are hollow, not even sad, not drugged or glazed, hollow. Like I'm looking through her as if she is opaque.

"I took a girl in; her name was Layla, maybe you know her. She's doing good now. She left the area. You know the priest at the Catholic Church will help you, do you want me to take you to meet him?" She didn't speak.

I stand there in silence. Her kids look wet and cold, filthy, and terrified. In the far corner, back by what was at one time a wall painted a bright yellow, now overgrown with black mold and weeds, and discarded coffee cups I hear a noise; it must be rats. I hate rats. A chill runs down my spine.

Shug returns with hero sandwiches and bottled drinks. Iced teas, with lots of sugar in them. "That's all they had..." He half apologizes.

The girl grabs the food, without making eye contact, and huddles with her kids, turning her back toward us.

"That's the best you can do here, Charlie. You've got to be ok with that. Some days just doing something is the best you can do."

"These people cut me, Shug, sure as if they cut me with a bone-handled knife. They cut me like Layla, like all of them. People talk about toilet paper shortages and hand sanitizer, man. When was the last time you think those kids had a meal, or washed their hands, or had a glass of clean water? Every dime that girl gets goes right in her arm. I have literally nothing left now, and I'm a rich man compared to these people and to these starving kids. A kid who looks to his mom for comfort and protection, but she has none to offer. Her humanity has been consumed and replaced with an uncontrollable hunger, and they are all

drowning Shug. Every goddamn one is drowning as sure as my boy drowned. This dope, this poverty is like them Atlantic waves man, relentless, unstoppable.”

Shug is quiet, in his thoughts, then he says, “The trouble with us Charlie is we are old men. We are old enough that if you chose not to look too close, you could almost believe the lie of the American dream. It was easier for you than me, thank that white skin of yours for that, but I could at times believe it too. We are seeing the failure now man, before our eyes and you, I think, you are trying to make it stop. You want to go back to the lie when people could still turn a blind eye to the facts, white or black or brown, and believe. The truth is there to see, man, raw and naked and wet and moldy and exposed. We are living in the final days of the lie, in a failed state. This country can’t heal; it’s sick; thousands are still dying from this bug every day. Health insurance costs as much as a mortgage. Millions and millions out of work, the economy about to collapse. People dying in debt, after a lifetime of working to just keep a roof over their heads. Ain’t no leadership at all, the rest of the world don’t even laugh at us, Charlie, they pity us. The great American experiment has failed man, look no further than this alley.”

“These people you feel the need to help are part of a much larger machine. It’s a machine you can’t stop. I got much respect for you for trying, brother, but you’ve got to make your peace with it. We got to get the priest to help those kids, save the kids, Charlie. The mom she may live or die, she’s in it too deep for us to help her. I saw three people in that dead-end alley drowning man; we got to try and save the kids. That’s all we can do.”

“I need to say this to you, get pissed if you need to get pissed, I’m saying this as a friend. You got to ask yourself, have you suddenly come across this great caring for the oppressed and the broken, the genuinely helpless in this world? Is this more about your balance sheet with God and your internal battle with good and evil. You need to answer the question, Charlie. No one but you can. Who are you Hell bent to save here, those kids and the junkies, or your own ass?”

We looked at each other. I didn’t answer, because I couldn’t answer, and started to walk back to the church. Shug knocked on the door. The priest appeared after a few moments. He began to explain about the girl in the alley, and the kids. I started to hear words from the priest about proper channels and social services and police cleanups. I was about to start running my mouth when I looked down the street on the other end, and I saw the red and gray primer Camaro. I grabbed Shug’s arm, his eyes bulged out of the sockets, and he let out in a dead sprint. I told the priest we’d be back, call the cops, get those kids, and I took off behind Shug. We were almost to the street when Tommy saw Shug coming at him, three hundred pounds of pissed off, breathing like a racehorse. Shug started to run even faster. Tommy turned and

jumped in his Camaro. I jumped in the driver's side of my truck, Shug riding shotgun. The Ford sputtered and choked and finally started. We could see the Camaro running a red-light and heading out of town. The F-150 was no match for the Camaro, we held him in view until he turned on the Interstate headed south, and he was gone.

Lights were flashing behind us as I pulled over. Looking in my mirror, it was the same state trooper who'd been at Shug's house earlier today. I offered him my license and registration through the window. I tried to joke that it was nice to see him again. He was straight-faced and humorless; finally, he says, "I assume that is Tommy you were chasing!"

Shug jumps in, looking across the pickup cab and out my window, "Fuck, yes it was! We lost him! I told you if I catch him, I'm going to kill the motherfucker!"

I looked back at my friend, unable to keep my mouth shut, yelled out, "What the fuck, Shug! You don't say that to the cop!"

The trooper went back to his car.

"He's calling for backup to arrest us, thanks, Shug!"

Shug laughed hard, "Did you see that .40mm in his gun belt? Do you really think he needs backup to arrest two busted up old fools like us? Really, Charlie, do you?"

The trooper comes back to my truck. He seems more relaxed, perhaps even friendly. He puts his forearms on the window frame of the driver's side door. "Ok, Batman and Robin, there is a warrant out for your boy. They will be looking for his car headed south. I guess the warrant was issued earlier today, in part because of your house fire. There were other pending charges, drug trafficking, conspiracy to promote prostitution, and human trafficking. When he's caught, and he will be caught, your boy's ass is done."

"I'm not going to give you a ticket, besides a sixty-five mile per hour 'high-speed chase' is pretty weak. As a man, as a father, as a cop who has seen too many dead junkies here in our town, and elsewhere. I'm with you. If he did to me what he's done to you, I'd want him dead too. I understand, but you've got to let

us deal with him. If you two do what I know you want to do, he may end up dead, but you'll be in jail for murder—go home, please. It's been a long day for everyone.”

Chapter 7—

We spent the next few weeks in relative quiet. The country, state, and county were starting to open up. It was an economic necessity; people were still dying by the thousands every day from the virus. There was talk of a vaccine in the fall. I think anyone with any sense was hopeful for this. A handful was convinced they were going to be microchipped and secretly tracked if they got the shot—that could save their lives. I wish I had a bridge to sell these people.

I spend half of my time talking to arson investigators and fighting with my insurance company.

I finally mustered the courage to go to the auto parts store in town and get the parts to tune up my old pickup. That's the world we live in now. You have to evaluate if a trip to the auto parts store is worth the risk.

My late 1990s F-150 was running like a clock. I was quite pleased with myself, and a bit annoyed, it took me so long to do this work. It wasn't the work; I find that enjoyable, it was going to the store: the masks, the handwashing.

Shug came home laughing this morning. He was in town, at the garden supply. He overheard something about 'Those two old queens' who live together up on the mountain. Shug assured them he wasn't gay, and if he was, he was sure he could score a hotter guy than me. He ended with, "No offense to you, Charlie!"

I replied, "None taken, you are a fine-looking man, my friend. I'm sure you could too!"

With that, we broke out the jam on the back deck. My fiddle had new strings, and the neck tightened. We dove into "Ain't Going Down To The River," and when it was over, I said we needed to find us a singer. Shug agreed.

Life was quiet and good; we'd been in town a few times. The priest at the Catholic Church and the sheriff took those kids from that girl in the alley and got them in foster homes. No idea what happened to that girl. We didn't give up looking for Tommy, but he seemed to be long gone. June gave way to July, and there was talk of a socially distanced parade in the village. While Shug and I both were very much opposed to parades and chest-pounding pseudo-patriotism, we also thought a celebration with people out in the street might be something worthwhile.

A quiet rainy afternoon rips wide open as my phone rings. It's Terri, Layla's roommate. Tommy has made his way down to Sea Bright, New Jersey, selling his shit.

Layla told him where she'd been staying in the Highlands. Terri said Layla had left the boy with her—and Terri didn't sound happy about that at all—and the boy's mom had, for the most part, disappeared. She was turning tricks in Sea Bright for Tommy's heroin. Terri was straight up with me. "Can you call the grandma, Doreen, and help her get the boy back to New York State?"

I wasn't impressed with Terri, but I understood her position.

I hang up, and throw my phone across the room, barely missing Shug, who is sitting at the kitchen table eating a sandwich. My phone shatters in a million pieces all over the kitchen.

My friend is a horrible cook, even by horrible cook standards, and he's a better cook than me. We eat a lot of sandwiches.

Shug turns to me, and I tell him the news. The big man's comment is simple and expected. "Let me finish my lunch quick. We should pack a bag. We may be there for a few days. I'm not coming home until fucking Tommy is dead, and Layla and her boy are safe. She can stay here. It's all family. Bring your fiddle too."

I was a little confused about the fiddle comment. Shug gets great relaxation from playing. It wasn't a bad idea.

Shug ate, we packed my truck, we left and drove to the Atlantic Highlands of Jersey.

Terri's apartment was a sprawling mess, clothes piled everywhere, dirty, clean, a mix. Old food take-out containers on the couch and coffee table in front of it. The kitchen looked like it should be condemned; it smelled like garbage.

It was dark inside, and the windows closed, some ripped blinds pulled down so no one could see in or out. The air was stifling, humid. It stunk of dirty laundry and body odor.

The change in this place in just a few weeks was disturbing.

The little boy ran to us both smiling, yelling “Tug and Chewie!” Shug picked up the boy and hugged him and handed him to me. I did the same. I tried to keep my distance from the boy when they lived at my house, but I couldn’t. The boy had an infectious laugh. A head full of tight, blond curls, and a constant smile, unaware of the reality of this life. Unaware and unimpacted, even now.

I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, “What the fuck happened to this place, Terri. What happened to you?”

“Life happened, old man. This fucking life happened. Fucking dope happened. This bug happened. I’ve got no money. I’m not letting Tommy own me like he owns Layla. I need money. I’ll fuck you, I’ll fuck both of you. You’ve got to help me.”

That feeling washed over me again—the need to help someone possibly beyond help. The ledger of good and evil, I believe, will confront me at my end, my cowardice and fear. I’d been talking to Shug a lot trying to find my peace, it still escaped me. Finally, I said, “Terri, we didn’t come here to fuck you, and, truthfully, it’s not even a very attractive offer. Tommy may not own you, but you ain’t free. You know that, right? You might be better off with Tommy than fucking every man who walks in here off the street. We need to find Layla, can you tell us where she is?”

“That’s the problem, old man. With this bug ain’t nobody fucking anybody. No money for dope, or rent. I need you to take this boy. I can’t take care of me, let alone him. Layla, she’s got a room, at the Beachcomber Inn, in Sea Bright. Room 214. The second floor, on the bay side. It’s right on Ocean Avenue. You can’t miss it. Big ugly looking place, pretty run down. It looks like the 1960s went there to die. Seahorses and clamshells on the sign out front. It’s painted, or it was painted in a sad, ugly blue-green, mostly faded now. Are you sure neither of you wants to fuck? I need money bad. This boy eats a lot!”

Shug jumped in. “Terri, you need some help. I wish I was here for that. We both know that none of your fucking money is going to this boy. We are going to get his mama and drag her ass back home with us. I hope you get the help you need before you end up just another dead junkie. We’ll be back for the boy and their things. Come on, Charlie, get me the fuck out of here!”

The boy grabbed Shug’s leg and would not let go. He was crying. I picked him up and promised we’d be right back, and he’d come with us.

We headed down Ocean Avenue, looking for this dooper paradise. It wasn’t hard to spot. Right at the very outskirts of this quiet, pretty beach town stood this wreck. It was a relic of another time. Rundown and

dilapidated. The stairs leading up to the second floor looked about to come crashing down. It was just about 7 pm, an hour or so before dark on this warm July night. We parked the truck in the nearly empty lot to wait. You couldn't see the ocean from here; its view blocked by the huge sea wall that had been built a hundred years ago to protect the long-gone railroad bed from the ocean and tides. You could hear the waves crashing on the beach, and you could smell it—that fishy, salty, wet sand ocean smell. I could never decide if I liked that or not.

We waited in my truck, unsure of exactly why we were waiting. Finally, for no particular reason, we both shifted in our seats and opened the cab doors. I guess we were going in; both Shug and I scared of what we might find.

We stood down on the first floor by the steps, making long shadows as the sun was setting west of the bay.

Perhaps we were hoping one of us would suggest we turn around and head home. Neither of us did that. We climbed the stairs. Standing outside room 214, we listened for any noise coming from inside. It was quiet, almost eerily quiet, no talking or yelling or sounds of fucking, nothing but quiet.

I put my hand on the doorknob and turned it. The door opened. The room was a disaster. Clothes, and sex toys and empty fast food bags and wrappings, and empty beer bottles littered the floor. On a nightstand, I saw a picture of the boy.

This room was not unlike looking inside the running parts of a broken machine. Like the inside of an engine after the timing chain that holds all the moving pieces together breaks and the spinning parts devour each other. That's exactly what this room looked like to me.

Everything was broken.

We heard water running from the bathroom. I went to the door and called her name. I called her name twice; looking back at Shug, I pushed open the door. The sight that greeted me stabbed me through the heart. I was consumed with rage and fear and sadness, and I began to cry, Shug pushed into the small room behind me. On the floor, crumpled and mangled between the toilet and the bathtub lay Layla's half-nude body, on the counter mingled in with some of those soap and conditioner samples they give you in cheap motels was her works. Cotton balls and a spoon, some shoestring, and a lighter. I knelt down, my tears dropping to her thigh, and touched her. She felt cold. "Shug, man, take her pulse. I can't do this! What the fuck, man, Jesus, fuck!"

Shug pushed me out of the way, I stood and leaned on my elbows near the sink. “She’s dead, Charlie. She’s cold dead...”

We stood there looking at each other, no idea what to do. Do we call the cops and ambulance, do we beat the Hell out of there?

Shug comes to me as the faucet drains into the sink. He puts his big arm around me. “Charlie, man, you tried. You tried harder than any man in his right damn mind would try. Charlie, there just ain’t helping some people. It’s this dope, brother. It ain’t the girl, it ain’t how fucking hard you try, it’s the dope. Girls like this, man, all they know is pain and failure. No matter how hard you try to pull them back from that edge, you show them love and caring and kindness; they only know what they know. They find their comfort in the hardness of this world. Down here in the ugliness is the only comfort this girl ever knew. It’s like kids who grew up being beaten, when they have kids of their own, they beat them. It’s all they know. This girl was born into a hard life, look at her mama, that piece of work, Layla lived a hard life, you gave her a glimpse of a good life with her boy, probably the closest to family she’s ever known, the four of us. It ain’t much, bro, but it’s more than she ever had.”

I reach out and turn off the faucets, tears dried on my face. I look up at my friend, “Like my daddy always said, don’t waste the water...”

With that, we heard a noise at the outside door of the room. Turning in the tiny bathroom, we see it’s Tommy. The big boy takes off in a sprint. Shug follows him, and I take off after Shug. I’m dumbfounded at how fast Sugar Ray can run. I think it must be adrenaline pent up since 1980, he’s not fast for a big man, he’s not fast for an old man, he’s just fast.

Tommy hits the parking lot blacktop and runs across the front lot, and across Ocean Avenue. About every hundred feet or so are these long wooden stairs that lead to decks that allow beach access, called ‘walkovers.’ All have chains to deter, but not stop trespassers. Tommy tripped, trying to jump a chain, big mistake! Shug gained on him. Up the stairs across the deck and down, as Tommy descended Shug crossed the deck on top, I’d just made it to the chain. From up on the top, I saw Shug chase the boy as both fought to stay upright running in the sand. As I began to climb down to the beach, I saw Shug take a flying leap and tackle the big redneck boy by the water. It was on, Shug flipped the boy on his back and started beating him, hard shots to his face and head. By the time I got there, it was nearly over. Tommy laid there lifeless, blood running from his nose and mouth, as Shug continued the barrage with his huge

fists. I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him from the boy, as I began to beat him. “We are both killing this motherfucker, Shug. It’s on both of us. We both owe this motherfucker!”

Sitting on his chest as the warm Atlantic came up to surround the boy Shug yelled out, “His phone, get his phone!” I reached in his wet pants and realized it was part seawater and part that Tommy had pissed himself.

Shug dialed 911, said he was Tommy, and there was a dead girl in the Beachcomber motel, room 214, and he killed her, and two men were coming after him! He looked at me and said, “This boy did kill her. Sure as I’m standing here looking at his carcass.

Shug shoves the phone back in Tommy’s pocket. Said, “Hit this fucker one more time, and let’s go!” There were a few people down the beach, maybe a quarter mile away. The beaches were open during the pandemic but quite deserted for such a warm summer night. The incoming tide had Tommy’s body half-submerged now. “Let the Atlantic claim this boy!” Shug yelled! “Let the water take him!”

With that, we both ran back across the beach, and the walkovers, back to my truck, and took off.

We pulled into an open donut shop and got coffee in the drive-through—my turn to buy.

We sat looking at the sea wall, unsure of what to say.

“Shug, are we killers now?”

“As far as I know, Charlie, the Atlantic Ocean, killed that boy. Near as I can tell, we are just facilitators.”

We drank our coffee—this was not a cause for celebration or bravado. It was a moment between two men who’d just done an unpleasant job that needed to be done and were trying to deal with the fallout.

“Shug breaks the silence once again, “Nah, man; we fucking killed him; we are killers. Like I told you, I’ve been a killer since that night in Alabama, this was just coming full circle. You wear that 1488, you are begging for this. We just answered his challenge. Even if that boy lives, it was my full intent to kill him. So yes, that makes me a killer.”

I reply, “We should go back to Terri’s house and get the little boy and find us a place to stay the night. We can ride by that Beachcomber place and see if the cops are there or not.”

I start the F-150, and we head back toward the Highlands.

Passing the Beachcomber Motel, we see one lone cop car in the rear parking lot. We were sure we'd see more, or an ambulance, or worse a roadblock looking for an old white guy and an old black guy with bloody knuckles, but nothing, just one car. Shug said, "I guess a lot of effort don't go into justice for dead hookers and junkies and pimps..."

Under my breath, I whisper, "There is no justice for people like Layla. The deck was stacked against her, knowing her mother, I'm sure, since birth."

Shug gives me a long, sideways look, "Damn brother, that's profound. I'm glad you see that. That's growth man; things happen, Charlie. Shit happens, junkies and heroin and hookers who love their pimps, because that's the only kind of love they know—just happens, like Atlantic Ocean riptides. Some things are beyond our control but can't be helped. Now you know this, please choose to believe it!"

We were fast approaching Terri's apartment. It was about 9 pm.

We climb the stairs and knock and wait. I hear the little boy crying in a back room. I open the unlocked door. Terri is dressed in some macabre bra and panties outfit. It looked more 1950s horror genre than anything sexy. She was extremely agitated. "That fucking boy won't go to sleep; he won't shut up. I've got a guy coming here, three-hundred dollars for full service. I need the goddamn money, Charlie!"

Shug already has the boy in his arms and has joined me in the messy living room. "Charlie, grab some clothes, I'm taking the boy to the truck. Terri, Layla, is dead. It looks like an OD. Tommy is dead too, looks like some motherfucker beat him to death."

With that, he turned and walked down the stairs to wait for me.

I go to the bedroom but return.

"For God's sake, Terri, all his clothes are dirty? For fuck's sake!" I grab the few toys the boy had on the floor, shove them in a McDonalds Happy Meal bag I found in a pile of trash.

Terri asks, crying, “Is it true? Layla is dead, and Tommy too?”

“Layla, yes, I’m quite sure Tommy is too. We are leaving. Enjoy your date.” My last words to her.

I join Shug and the boy in the pickup. The boy is sound asleep in the big man’s arms. “Let’s find us a room, any place but here, or the Beachcomber!”

We pull into the first place that looks decent. Shug went into the motel office, the boy slept on the bench seat next to me. Using Shug’s phone, I called Doreen, Layla’s mom. I figured now Layla had passed she’d want her grandson. The conversation left me numb. It lasted less than 5 minutes. Shug came out with the room information and key. He said, “I thought you were going to call Doreen?”

“I did...”

He looked at me, confused, “Ok, man, so what’s the plan.”

I rubbed the boys' head, “Apparently the boy here is half black. His daddy was a black man.”

Shug kind of laughed, “You just figuring that out now, brother? Seriously? You always say you are not very observant, but really? Can’t you see that? Look at that head of hair for a start, them tight blond curls!” He follows with a belly-laugh, “It must have been all the headshots in the ring, buddy.”

“Well, apparently it was ok with Doreen for Layla to be fucking and sucking all the white dick she could handle, but she went and did a black dick, and that was the end of the line for Doreen!”

Shug looked back at me, not sad or surprised, blank-faced. “This here doesn’t surprise me, Charlie. Not at all. I know it shocks you, and you are sitting here thinking, ‘*how can this be? How can anyone even think like this,*’ welcome to the world I’ve been living in for the past sixty-five years. Coming from the likes of Doreen, this don’t surprise me a bit.”

“She wants no part of her own grandson, her own blood, Shug. Man, that’s hate. That’s a toxic hate. She didn’t even seem to care if Layla was dead. She seemed more concerned about Tommy.”

Shug looked out the window and sighed. “Layla betrayed Doreen and her race and her hate when she had a black man’s baby. Tommy, that motherfucker, was her kin and her kind. It’s like that man, you just don’t see it, until you see it.”

“Doreen said you were my boyfriend too. I told her I preferred handsome men...”

Without missing a beat, or changing his gaze, Shug said, “As you should. Why settle for some ugly guy, right?”

We took the still sleeping boy and our bags and went to the room. It was a nice clean room with two beds. We all crashed into exhaustion. The boy fell asleep in Shug’s bed and woke up with me in mine. He didn’t seem to miss his mom. I found that both sad and strange. We got up early, dressed, and got some coffee and eggs in the motel lobby. The first stop was to find a place open that had some clothes for him to wear. That accomplished, Shug left us in the store but returned with a big bag full of kid’s beach toys. Shovel and pails and things to make sand molds, like starfish and clams. I thought it was odd.

We climbed in the truck. Shug suggested we stop at the beach and let the boy play for a while. I protested loudly. Shug insisted. The discussion escalated.

“I am not taking this boy to any goddamn beach, especially some goddamn beach off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. What are you, fucking nuts?”

I was pissed off; Shug knew the ghost of this place that haunts me. This wasn’t our first battle, and it wouldn’t be our last.

Shug finally said, “Jesus, Charlie, this boy has been locked in that shitty apartment for weeks. He needs some sun. Pull into that parking lot. Let him play in the sand. He’s a boy, and he needs some fresh air!”

The boy was trying to say beach and swim, or some bastardization of the words. Close enough to be recognizable. I was outnumbered. I kept hearing the words ‘*irrational fear*’ in my head. Rational or not, the fear was genuine. My palms were sweating on the steering wheel, and it was hard to breathe. I felt like I was choking. We continued on Ocean Avenue, bypassing the exit over the big sweeping bridge that would take us north to the Garden State Parkway and home. I felt physically sick.

Shug said, looking out the window, to the right at the ocean, “Parking lot E, wasn’t it Charlie? The beach right before the abandoned missile range, where the rip currents are the worst?”

“Fuck you, Shug, what the fuck is wrong with you?” I was yelling, and the boy looked upset. We stopped to pay the entry fee onto The Hook, and Shug handed me a twenty-dollar bill. I gave it to the girl in the booth and noticed it was wet from the sweat of my hands. She looked at the bill, then me, then she gave

me a brief lecture on social distancing, and told me that they were only allowing twenty-five percent capacity and it was ‘lucky’ I got here now...

“Yeah, ‘lucky us,’ was all I could manage to say as I took my change.

We drove to the nearby empty parking lot E. Most people chose to go to the closer lots. There were only four cars and a pair of motorcycles in the entire parking area. Shug grabbed the boy and the bag of toys he’d purchased earlier, and holding his small hand, they walked together over the sand. I sat in the truck, literally shaking.

Alone in the pickup, I watched them play by the surf, collecting shells, filling the bucket with sand. They were laughing and having fun.

I was lost in thoughts of almost forty years ago, that day, right here, Beach E, last public beach on The Hook. My first time back here. I remember flying into New York a few times and looking out the window and seeing this unmistakable landmark sticking out into New York Harbor. It was all I could muster not to vomit. I heard my son’s laughter, and I heard the sound of the rough ocean that day, I heard my wife and daughter. I was right back in that day at the beach. I remembered taking my boy to the water, proud that he’d learned to swim that spring at one of the local pools in our town. I remember him splashing in the water and the one big wave, bigger than the rest, much bigger, and I remember him being pulled out into the rip current, I remembered running hard out into the water, and my wife screaming for the life-guard. I could not get to him, no matter how hard I fought. The current kept pulling the boy away. I saw his head of blonde hair go under the waves for the last time. I don’t remember much else. I don’t remember getting back to shore.

I was there again, trapped in that moment that I’ve tried to pay penance for all these goddamn years. Tears of rage are running down my face, I look up, I see Shug has put a Sponge Bob life vest on the boy and holding his hands he takes him into the water.

I run from the truck screaming, “Are you fucking insane, Shug! What the fuck is wrong with you?” They are about ten feet from the shore. I dive into the water fully clothed, even my shoes. Shug pushes the boy out a bit into a breaking wave, and the warm Atlantic pushes the boy back to me and into my arms... I hold him tight; he’s laughing. He is laughing so hard I start to laugh. I let him go, as he tries to swim back over to Shug. The water pushes him back to me. I feel a life-long weight of anger and sadness and guilt leaving me. It feels like I’m breathing out poisoned air, held inside too long. For the first time in so many years, I breathe in the fresh air, and I feel the water on my skin, and it is good.

I look over at Shug, and he's smiling with eyes that betray a battle to hold back tears.

Standing there, belly-deep in the water as the boy and Shug splash the salty foam on each other, I say to him. "I am not healed, brother, but I'm better."

After about half an hour, I realize I'm still fully dressed as the salt sea water surrounds me and slowly heals me. Shug has laid out a sheet, carefully stolen from the motel, on the sand, and brought his banjo and my fiddle case down to the line where the last wave reached the sand as the tide begins to recede.

The boy busies himself with his shovel and pail, and we begin to jam on the classic bluegrass song, Taking Water.

A very small crowd gathers to listen.

It is the closest to free I've felt in almost forty years.

As we finish, the people listening clap politely.

I look to Shug and say, "Thank you, brother!"

Shug smiles and continues to pick his banjo slowly, and says, "That's what we do for each other, my friend..."

THE END

