

We were heading up E Street late that night, me and Steve, doing whatever it took to make it through gutters and tree shadows and around the parked cars without getting sideswiped by anybody driving past. We'd been playing pinball down at the Pizza Depot for hours, with that pipe organ blasting away and a million little kids running around screaming. But I swear, it was like none of that was happening.

After a while it felt like we'd really gotten caught up in the fever and nothing was gonna bring us down. Not even when that guy Len (he's the old bastard who runs the place) yelled over at us as he was in the middle of pouring out another pitcher of suds to some dude, and all because I'd banged on the glass of Royal Flush right after it burned me.

By the time we played off the rest of our games and got another look at Steve's watch, it was past ten-thirty. Okay, so we'd lost track of the time. But I didn't think it was gonna be any big deal. He was supposed to be staying over that night anyway; my dad had already said he could, even though there was school tomorrow (no doubt about it, he'd been in one of his rare generous moods). Besides, Tessa is always staying out late with boyfriends, not getting back until midnight or later, and my dad never yells at her about it. And even when he does, you can tell he doesn't really mean it and she just keeps on doing it.

Steve and I were cracking jokes about cars we passed. Ones that had seen better years (or maybe you should make that eras), along with the weird-looking houses. Seriously, you should've seen him when we came up on that one old mansion. It was built back during the Civil War and it's got turrets along the walls and all the bushes out in front are cut into animal shapes like rabbits and birds. He was practically doubled over for a minute, like he couldn't breathe.

I do have to admit though, one thing was definitely starting to bug me: Steve didn't seem to be getting the Collection at all.

"What is this now?"

So I was telling him about it. All the stuff I've found that I keep in my jacket pockets, like a hand reel that actually works--with a line and hook and everything--and a pocket knife that's a little rusty, but it still opens and shuts okay (I'd put some WD40 on the day I found it). Along with a bunch of other items, superballs and marbles and shit.

You could tell though that none of this was getting through.

"I see."

"Don't crack up--"

"I'm not."

"Yeah, you are."

And I was bringing up Diane. For the first time ever.

And right away he'd gotten this smile. Saying how he thought she liked me. A lot.

So I kept on about it. Asking if she liked me in that way or whatever (and feeling like a total dick the whole time too).

Luckily for me though, he just flashed another smile: "No, I know what you mean..."

Then he was growing all serious, looking ahead. Saying how she talked about me all the time and kept asking about stuff I'd said. He even thought I was her favorite now (especially since she didn't seem to be into that Lustgarten guy anymore).

I was just walking along, looking up at the sky and stars. I mean, the whole thing seemed impossible, the way it had happened out of the blue like that and so fast. But there Steve was, motoring along right beside me. Like it all made perfect sense and nothing could be more natural.

We finally made it up to my house. Only right before hitting the driveway I had to tell Steve about my dad and how we're not supposed to make noise whenever we come in and that whole bit. Seriously, he hates it when people make a lot of racket right as they're showing up, especially if it's late. He's always going over his accounts, even into the wee small hours, and he acts like any sound at all is gonna completely derail him.

I was just going to head around the side yard and go in through my sliding glass door. It's the same way I usually go whenever it's late and I don't want to get into another big hassle.

Only it didn't work out, not that time. Right as we were coming up alongside the porch, the front door whipped open.

It was my dad, looming large. Shooing us both in with this swipe of his arm. "Where have you been?"

He had that same look too. It's like cops have dragged me in after some all-night manhunt and I'm all slumped over and bedraggled, this total desperado. And the only thing left is to go around tearing down the WANTED posters from every telephone pole and lamppost.

"Playing pinball." He'd already known about that (I'd told him yesterday).

"And why didn't the front lawn get mowed today? Like it was supposed to be?"

Okay it's true, I'd totally forgotten about that. The weird thing too was, I kept thinking all day long that there was something I was supposed to do (only I couldn't ever remember what it was).

Actually, I couldn't have done it anyway since I hadn't been back home all

day. Steve and I even had dinner down at the Pizza Depot, a large with pepperoni and sausage, and pineapple on half (I mean, that was his idea, right?--I wouldn't ever order anything so lame). All thanks to the colossal heap of change Steve's mom unloaded on him right before he left his house that morning.

My dad was staring over at Steve now.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's staying over tonight."

"No, he isn't."

"You already said he could--"

"That doesn't matter." He shook his head, all abrupt. "You don't have any privileges around here until you learn to do your chores. All of them."

I didn't even know what to say to that. It felt like the walls were caving in, like I was getting buried under all this sheetrock. And the thing that kept going through the back of my mind was how, just a few minutes ago, I'd been cracking jokes with Steve and talking about his sister (and feeling on top of the world).

"If he can't stay over, I'll go back out too--"

"Alright."

"Maybe we'll stay out all night!"

"That's fine. That's fine."

It was like he'd been waiting the whole time to say that (I should've known I was doomed).

I looked over at Steve. "Come on--"

He had this look all frozen in place for a second, like some big weird sculpture of a guy. But finally he managed to kick it into gear and was moving along with me toward the door.

I didn't bother closing it (I figured my dad could handle that chore, right?). Then, just as we got to the lawn, I heard it shut back there.

It didn't slam or anything like that either. My dad did it all quiet and the lock was clicking into place.

I swear, I don't know how I held it back. All I could think about was putting a huge dent in one of his cars. Either that or maybe knocking the mailbox off its post as we went past. Then it would have to lay there until my dad could hammer it back up. Or until he could hire some guy to come around to our place to fix it.

We were headed for the cemetery (I figured that would be the best place to go to stay away from cops). It had started to get royally foggy too all of the sudden; it came gushing down off the tops of trees and flowed in around us like icebergs. In about two minutes we were drenched with the stuff.

Up ahead you could just make out that giant iron gate past where all the houses on E Street run out. Along with the sign saying CEDAR KNOLLS. The

gate was swung wide open too (which figures: the only place you'd be welcome around my neighborhood is a graveyard). Both sides folded back, like some huge bird about to flap its wings in a sci-fi movie.

"Don't they lock it up?"

"What for?" (I guess he hadn't thought of that.)

As soon as we made it through, he was heading off to go check out all those monuments on the side. They're a bunch of family crypts, dating back to the days of the pioneers or whatever, hewn from marble and with cast-iron gates all over the place.

My dad was actually thinking about getting us one way back when (another big LaRochelle project gone to seed). Okay, it's not exactly like I was bummed out about Steve taking off right then; to tell the truth, he was starting to get on my nerves a little.

I took a seat on one of those benches, the concrete ones in front on that little diamond of grass (it's got curbs all around and a road along each side, I guess so all the mourners can drive through). And I'd forgotten to get another cigarette off him before he left, so now all I could do was sit there and wait.

It was a real splendid view. The fog had gotten a lot thicker, so now it was nothing but pea soup everywhere you looked. Seriously, I could barely make out the closest headstones (they were just blurry little stumps).

Overhead the sky wasn't black anymore, but this pale dim color like milk. It felt cold too, a lot colder. Maybe because my hair was getting soaked (I could feel all these drips skittering down my neck from the fog). Or else it was because I was sitting on top of a slab of fucking concrete.

But I didn't feel like standing up. Like in one of those old sourdough stories about the Yukon, Jack London or whatever, where some guy gets stranded in the snowy wastes and grows all tired and numb and spaced out and starts thinking about slitting his horse open so he can crawl inside in order to survive the night (right before he freezes his poor stupid ass to death).

And that's when I saw it. Or him. There was somebody walking over by the front gate.

I blinked my eyes a couple times and squinted. Nope, I definitely wasn't seeing things. There he was, right ahead of me a ways. Moving through the fog and coming in my direction.

All of which woke me back up right away. Seriously, it was like this alarm clock going off in my ear.

I knew it couldn't be Steve; he was still off on his expedition to the side. So I figured it had to be a cop. Who else could it be?

Somehow or other one of them had snuck up and followed us in there without us knowing about it. We hadn't heard a car pull up, but that would figure.

They're always pulling shit like that, sneaking around at like five miles an hour, so slow you can't hear their tires, creeping up right behind you to spring their trap. It's so you won't have time to ditch your weed or think up any excuses or whatever (besides, they just like scaring the shit out of people, especially if it's juveniles).

So now I'm figuring we're gonna get busted for curfew and they'll call my house and wake up my dad, and--even though the whole thing was his fucking fault for kicking us out--he'll be royally pissed off and probably ground me for the rest of the century. I was thinking about trying to get away; I figured if I headed over in the direction of Steve, maybe we could both cut out and ditch the guy, doubling back around and blitzing through the gates. Or else we could lose him in the fog (amongst all the sepulchers).

By then though the stuff had gotten so thick I didn't know if I'd even be able to find Steve. It was like I would go blundering around and trip over somebody's tombstone and end up breaking my neck. Talk about a great way to die, right? Being killed by a graveyard.

So I just sat there. I didn't move a muscle for like five minutes, like some gargoyle.

The guy kept on getting closer too. And now I could see that he was moving in this kind of jerky way, like a bear up on two legs.

Okay, I felt a chill go through me right then. This slashing cold zip down my backbone. It kept right on heading toward me; and I was just trying to decide whether to make a run for it at the last minute--fleeing for my life or whatever--or else sit there and wait for whatever fate had in store.

When it came ambling out of the mist in full view all of the sudden, like a curtain had been pulled back. And that's when I finally got it figured out: I saw his arms stretched out wide like Frankenstein.

Steve let out a huge guffaw. "I freaked you out!"

"Shit, don't do that--"

"You were scared."

"No, I wasn't."

"Yes. You were." He had this all-knowing smile as he stood there above me.

"How'd you get over here?"

"I snuck around."

"I thought it was a cop."

"Oh right."

"I did."

He grinned. "I thought we came up here to get away from cops."

So just like that I was standing up (I figured I'd finally had enough of his bullshit). And right away he got locked into a classic kung fu position: one leg

like an anchor and the other one extended and ready for kicking. Just like Master Caine.

So I sat back down again. Dropping into place like a rock.

He tried flexing a foot in my direction, then came unraveling out of the whole thing. "You never do kung fu with me."

"And I never will."

He'd gotten a grin as I kept staring back up there.

"Well, I don't want to get killed."

He looked off with a mysterious smile. Then gave a single knowing nod: "You are...a wise man."

Busting out with a laugh. And slumping down on the bench next to me while unwrapping his latest pack of smokes.

"Don't be so loud."

"Why not?" He leaned back and waggled his head with it (I mean, you could tell he was going through another rebellious phase).

"It's late. We should be quiet."

He gave it a really wide scan, like he was playing it for all it was worth. "Not gonna wake up anyone here."

His grin grew bigger as I looked to him. Like he was daring me to join him in his unruly ways.

I just looked away.

I heard a laugh. "No. Bad joke."

"Yeah, I'd say so."

When I turned back around, his smile was hanging in midair.

"Do you want cops to hear us? We're not that far from the street."

"No, I don't want cops to hear us."

"Then keep it down."

"Okay." He squawked that out all raspy (still ready to crack up any second).

2

Three o'clock had rolled around and all he'd been talking about for a while was how hungry he was. He kept asking me if there was anything open that late in my neighborhood, like a 7-11 or maybe even a Denny's. But it's pretty much of a late-night desert around there, like everything else in San Sereno (seriously, it's like there might as well be a door in front of the whole place that they lock up around eleven and flip over the sign saying CLOSED).

The only thing I could think of was that Jack In the Box, but it's all the way down E Street so that was pretty much out of the question. I figured there would be cops prowling everywhere and there was no way I was gonna get busted (not if I could help it).

That didn't stop him from harping on about it though. He was doing his best to try and talk me into it too, saying how it was so late that cops wouldn't bother driving around. According to him, they would all be off scarfing up donuts or else shooting the shit with each other back at the station. Seriously, he was starting to sound like this real veteran on the force (you had no idea how many episodes of *Adam-12* it took to come up with all of that).

"What if they're eating at Jack In the Box?"

He didn't bother looking over. "They're not gonna eat at Jack In the Box. They have food back at the station."

"I thought they ate at diners."

"Not at three in the morning."

He said he would buy something for me too. I mean, just to sweeten the pot (he still had a little money left over from playing pinball).

"What if we run into one anyway?"

He gave a gigantic gawk up at the sky. "I'll buy them something too." With this ragged laugh. Like some guy stranded in the desert, all parched and in tatters (and doomed to wander the dunes). "Right now all I can think about is eating."

Anyway, I finally agreed to it (mainly just to get him to stop talking about food). And we took off. Heading back through the gates onto E Street, into this total alien realm.

Seriously, you couldn't believe how weird everything looked that late with the fog wrapped around it. The houses were curving along like they were high on some cliff, up on Mount Rushmore or whatever. And all the cars were like props from some amusement park ride. You couldn't hear a sound the whole way down except for our footsteps crunching all loud and fakey right through the middle of this huge spooky dead place.

We finally got down to Halcyon Lane. Heading past that one gas station on the corner, the place where my mom used to go because they gave out free

drinking glasses and shit for filling up the tank (don't ask me why; she always just liked to snap up the bargains or whatever). On the other side were all those medical offices in that long clump of buildings that looks like it's made out of giant Legos. Like it's supposed to be this real village of healing, Doctorland or something.

You could see the Jack In the Box lit up straight ahead. The clown bright and beaming through the mist, with the menus shining away underneath.

"There's no cars."

"That's because it's so late. We're probably the only ones still up."

We came around the side, and that's when it finally hit me. The whole place was dark. And not just the drive-thru window either but that back part where the grills and French fryers are and the room with the tables and chairs.

Only I kept right on walking. It was almost like if I just stayed moving, the lights were gonna come on any second and there'd be guys back there flipping burgers and some chick would be leaning out of that little window (asking us for our orders). But everything was sealed up tight as a tomb. Like in one of those movies right after the Bomb hits, where everything is this ghost town, with nothing but huge tangled clumps of metal wherever you look and wind blowing dust everywhere.

"It's closed." He looked like he'd come across some dead guy laying in the middle of the street back there.

"It's supposed to be open all night." I moved over to the glass door and started rattling away on the handle. Then I cupped my hands around my face and stared in at all of it, that whole empire beyond the glass horizon.

He came up beside me and was looking in there himself. "When were you ever out this late?"

"We drove by it once. Coming back from a trip." I could feel my jaw moving against the sides of my hands, only it was all slack and empty. Like I was dead. "Me and my dad. With my mom."

Finally I stood up straight, right as he did. "I guess it must've been the weekend."

We were trudging back toward the street. Only there was one last thing: right as we were coming up alongside the clown, Steve leaned back to give it this colossal kung fu kick.

Seriously, it sounded like a rifle shot, all ricocheting off in the distance like that. And you could see that whole wall of plastic shudder, like it was about to keel over and collapse. Like any second now the clown was gonna be heaving this faceful of burgers onto the asphalt.

It was pretty funny, or it should've been. Only right afterwards Steve was just looking straight ahead, all steel-eyed and lantern-jawed. As we kept on the

move.

3

We made it back up to my house. There it was, with my dad's cars circled around like a wagon train or something. Like it didn't give a fuck (like every other place up and down the block).

Then we were passing by Barnett's old place, the one where he used to live (back when we were both still in junior high). And his new one, or the one that's supposed to be his anyway. If his dad ever gets around to finishing it.

"What's this?" Steve's chin jutted out in that direction.

So I had to fill him in. All about how they've been working on it for months and months and all the snags and snafus that have come up along the way. Seriously, it's like every time you run into Barnett there's some new problem with wiring or plumbing or city planning (this real mountain of red tape).

They'd gotten the front wall finished by then, behind that huge chain-link fence. But the place still looked all abnormal. I mean, more like a funhouse than a real one. Okay, there is a front door--or a spot in the middle where you can tell one is supposed to go, all boarded up with plywood for now--but the rest is nothing but weird skinny little windows like slits of glass in rows. They're not even in there straight, but at all these crazy angles.

"It looks stupid."

"Yeah, it does." I mean, that's pretty much what everybody says. But I wasn't really thinking about it right then (I couldn't think of anything by that point).

We reached Country Club Lane and began to climb (I figured that would be the best way to stay away from cops, to head for the hills). The pavement was like this long black carpet at our feet, winding its way up through that overcoat of fog along all those houses on stilts, like a bunch of wooden storks standing there in the mist. We got onto the sidewalk, the one on that side (don't ask me how they managed it, but somehow Country Club Lane was able to spring for their own sidewalk), and continued our ascent.

All of a sudden Steve stopped dead: "How about Gary's new house?"

"What do you mean?"

"We could sleep in there." His whole face was lit up with it.

"Really?"

"Sure."

"How would we get in?"

"It's still being built. We can open a window."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah." Then he'd gotten a smirk: "How are you going to lock up a place when it's not even finished?"

"Oh yeah."

But he was already heading back down there, flying headlong like some horse bolting. I went hightailing it in his dust and finally caught back up with him on E Street.

"Is it really gonna be any better though?"

"It won't be as cold."

"It doesn't have a heater."

He stared over at me. "It's sheltered. It's got a roof."

"How would we get over the fence?"

"We can climb it." Then he stopped dead, scowling away: "Do you want to keep walking around out here all night?"

The fence wasn't that big a deal, as it turned out. We both just grabbed handfuls of chicken wire and were clawing our way across.

Then we headed around to the back, past all these stacks and stacks of wood. Seriously, it was like they had a whole lumberyard stowed away back there. I kept stumbling over shit too, kicking into lumps of dirt everywhere. There were a bunch of lights, little ones like spotlights, and they were shining right into my eyes through the fog. Like I was blind from the neck down.

Steve told me to look out for nails (it turned out his dad used to be a contractor, so he knew all about this stuff). There was a long line of windows stretching above us in back, and they were regular windows too (no more slits or any of that garbage). According to Steve, what we were standing on was dirt left over from the foundation. Once they got all that hauled away, the first floor would be right there. All of which was highly illuminating, there was no doubt about that, but all I really wanted right then was to get inside and sit down.

He reached up toward the nearest window and started pushing away on the glass, trying to get it to slide down. Then he tossed his smoke onto the ground and was shoving away with both hands, only it was no use. The thing wouldn't budge.

Steve stepped over to the next one to give it a try. To tell the truth, I didn't know why he was bothering. I figured they would all turn out to be locked right down the row and we'd be stuck freezing our asses off in the middle of a bunch of dirt clods, starving and half-dying from exposure until the sun could come back up and burn the fog off next morning. But as soon as he reached up there to push, it came open. Just like that.

He grinned back in my direction with this jab of his fist. As I hissed out an, "Alright!"

He was passing the smokes over to me, the two packs he had left, and scrambled his way up onto the sill. Then I handed the stuff back up to him so I could give it a shot.

It took me a few tries before I finally managed to get up there (actually, he

was a lot taller than me). It felt like one of those things that they're always making you do for gym class too, to qualify for the presidential physical fitness badge or whatever. I finally hoisted myself through and was hopping down to the floor.

He slid the window closed behind us. And it shut tight, like a seal.

4

We were looking around at our surroundings. Not like there was all that much to see, especially not at first (with our eyes having to get used to everything). Mainly it was lumber and sawhorses, along with tarps and flats of plywood. There was one cleared-off place in the middle and we both took a seat on the floor there. Steve had been right about one thing anyway: you could already tell that it was warmer in there, or at least not as cold. And the wood wasn't hard either, not like that concrete had been.

He said we couldn't get too settled in though. According to him, sometimes contractors got started at dawn.

I could make out a little more stuff now. It wasn't totally dark in there, as it turned out. There was this lamppost right across the street, and even with all the mist it came blazing through the row of slits high up on the ceiling.

It looked like some cathedral in there. Like having this church for your living room. It was a very bizarre arrangement, there was no doubt about that. Seriously, it was hard seeing what Barnett's dad had been thinking when he'd conjured up that whole construction scheme.

I got another smoke off of Steve. I'd started chaining to stay awake (besides, at least it was something to do).

He gave a smile after lighting his, taking in our surroundings. "It's getting pretty smoky in here."

"You think they'll notice?"

"Maybe we should air it out."

"Shit, it's freezing out there."

"I meant before we left."

"Then they'll know we were here anyway."

He shrugged that one off. And we went back to puffing away.

Afterwards we stubbed our butts out on the floorboards and got all stretched out in our jackets. I had my hands in my pockets, but it wasn't that cold (or not too bad anyway). I was looking up into the distance of the ceiling.

Pretty soon the sun would be coming up and we'd be walking down E Street, heading over to the school in the middle of all this early-morning traffic. Then we'd be over at San Sereno High, standing out in the cold of the front plaza and telling Lustgarten and Spacemonkey and whoever else was around what we'd done. All about hanging out at the graveyard to stay away from cops, then the trip down to Jack In the Box at three in the morning. And the (even longer) journey back. And finally breaking into Barnett's new house, before it was even finished.

The weird thing was, the more I kept thinking about it, the more it was starting to sound almost cool. Not just some sob story of us wandering around

freezing our butts off and feeling hungrier than shit, but more like this true-life adventure. Like we'd been living on the road and fending for ourselves, these outlaws or pirates or whatever.

He'd stopped talking. My eyes were shut, and I was laying on my back with my head feeling solid as a rock against the floorboards. I kept hearing noises too, all these pings and wrenches and shit. I didn't know what it was (I guess that's what people mean when they say a place is settling).