

The Hurting Place

a novel by

H.J. Ted Gresham

Back Roads Mercantile Publishing

Copyright © 2014 – H.J. Ted Gresham

Revised 2020

All Rights Reserved

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite ebook retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

Ted Gresham

backroadsmmercantile.shop

tedgresham@backroadsmmercantile.shop

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Follow the Author](#)

Chapter One

Yellow streaks crashed through lint-covered mini-blinds casting bizarre striped patterns across an end table, a tattered chair, a rumpled bed. George walked slowly, bending over as if in pain. He was. His destination was a small bathroom across from the sunlit window. Once there, he took care of his morning business and then scraped at a two-day growth of beard. Dull razor. Little dots of red appeared across the bottom of his chin. After a while he gave up, wiped his face with a grimy towel, and walked out of the bathroom.

He felt fur against his bare leg. "Morning, Cat." He bent over stiffly, scooped up a fuzzy gray feline and scratched its head. For a moment he looked deep into the cat's eyes, feeling a slight glimmer of affection. Then the moment was gone. He tossed the cat like a sack of meal and headed on through the door.

He walked through his small apartment, crossed the living room and continued on into his store. A small cluttered foyer and storage area separated George's store from his apartment. He drifted into the store and walked around the end of an old, tattered counter towards the front door of the store. He stared out a window as he flipped an OPEN/CLOSE sign. Then, settling onto a worn stool behind the counter, George surveyed his domain. He told himself, again, he needed to fix the place a bit. Yeah, later. Taking a deep breath, he slipped off the stool and onto his knees.

The little safe in the floor came open with a twist of the dial. George pulled a money bag out and loaded the register. No hurry. Folks don't start coming through here until afternoon. But you never know. He slammed the register drawer shut and walked back into his apartment to get something to eat. Just as he fired up the coffee pot he heard bells and his "ring me" buzzer. Bells hung from the door and a doorbell were his cue to go to work. Cursing under his breath George strolled back into the store to see a pair of eyes peering into the store from the bottom of the window. The old man slipped a slide-bolt lock to unlock the door--a chore he'd forgotten to do earlier.

"Great, a kid," George said to himself as he pulled open the door and a four-foot customer slipped by him.

"You got any sodas, mister?" The boy looked around as if he had just stepped into a dream. George's store was not exactly the usual drive-up grocery. There was only one tall, glass-doored case. It held frozen fishing bait. Just inside the front door stood an old, rusted coke cooler, the kind with the sliding lids on top.

"There, kid." George waived toward the box.

"Where?"

"In the box."

"What box?" The boy looked towards the wall where the soda box stood, then back towards George with a puzzled look on his face.

"That one!" George pointed.

"Huh?"

"Where you from?" George walked over to the chest and slid back the top. "Here." He handed the boy a cola. "This what you want?"

"Yes sir. Thanks," the boy muttered, "Dallas."

"What?"

"I'm from Dallas."

"I don't give a rip where you're from, kid." George walked back to the register. He had forgotten his sarcastic request for the boy's origins. "What else you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Oh, nothin'," The boy smiled at George. He stood in the middle of the room. For several seconds he just stood there, smiling, holding the sweating bottle of soda. "If you don't care where I'm from, why'd you ask?"

The boy had an odd look on his face that caused George to say what he was thinking out loud. "You are weird, boy," George said. He didn't expect the response he got.

"Yep. That's what mom says."

"What?"

"Mom says I'm weird, too."

"She does, does she? Well, what's your name?"

"Pug." The young boy walked to the counter and looked up toward the old storekeeper. His cheeks looked like they had been blasted with a freckle gun. The boy's nose was short and sat, slightly crooked, beneath dark, squinting eyes. He was still smiling.

"What kind of name is that?"

"My mom calls me pug. My real name's George."

"George?"

"Yep, George. But I don't like it. Kind of, well, goofy."

"Goofy, you say!" George the store-keeper sniffed. "George is a fine name!"

"I like Pug."

"Suits ya', kid. A buck for the soda."

"Here you go, Mister. Thanks!" The boy pulled four coins from his pocket. He reached up and placed them on the rim of the old register, grabbed the soda and headed for the door. "See, ya, mister."

"Sure, kid." George winced as the door slammed. "Now what is going on today, I wonder." He walked across the small store and peered through old blinds hanging in the store window. He watched as the boy disappear down the road. Where had that kid come from, he wondered. Nobody lives around here. "Pug. What a name to call a kid. What's wrong with George?" He looked at the Cat which had taken its place in the stool. Then he stepped back and picked up a broom and swept a floor that didn't need sweeping.

The day slipped by. Another busy day at Seaside Bait and Tackle. A couple of teenagers off from school stopped in to buy worms. Anonymous travelers came and went, buying colas and chips and candy. George never noticed the passing of time. Sunlight gained intensity as the day wore on and the west-facing store windows gradually took the sun's full force. George sat motionless, a bent and rumpled statue, sort-of a confused version of Rodan's Thinker. Towards late afternoon he rose from his perch. He saw a boy walking toward the store as he pulled the string on the blinds. A couple of minutes later there was a clomping on the porch outside. One eye strained against the door window. Then the door opened. It was that odd kid, George noted.

"Hello, mister."

"Hello, kid." George nodded. "Need another soda?"

"Not this time, mister."

The boy stood in the middle of the store, looking around. George imagined that the boy looked just like he would look if he were standing in a Museum looking up at Dinosaur bones.

"Can I help you, sir?" George's sarcasm was lost on the boy.

"Uh, naw. Not really. I just, I mean, Mom just wanted me to check you out."

"Check me out?"

"Yeah, check you out. The store, I mean. What you sell and stuff. Kind of a long way to town and all, and she sort of thought we might be able to make do some with what you sell."

"Hm. Makes sense, I guess."

"What DO you sell, mister?" The question was as innocent as the expression on the boy's face.

"What you mean, what do I sell?"

"Well, is this a groc'ry store, or what?"

"It's a what, kid."

"Sir?"

"A what. You know, it's not a grocery store, it's a what."

"I don't get it, mister."

"Bait, kid. I sell bait. Junk food and bait. I guess junk food is bait, too. It sure catches a bunch of highway folks."

"Bait? What kind of bait?"

"The kind you fish with. Shrimp. Mullet. Worms. Stuff like that."

"I know what worms are, but what is mullet?"

"Salt-water bait. The kind you use in the ocean."

"Ain't no ocean around here!"

"Don't be a smart-aleck, kid. It's down the road a ways. What else you want."

"You don't sell nothin' but bait and colas?"

"'Bout it."

"Well, looks like we'll have to go into town, after all."

"I guess so. Now if you don't want to buy anything, it's about closing time." George walked to the door.

"Sign says 'open to ten.'"

"Yeah, well, I'm closing early today. So...." George waved the boy toward the door. "Enough of this kid already!" he thought.

"Okay, mister." Pug walked to the door. He paused as he stepped over the threshold. "Can I come back again, Mister?"

"I recon' so, boy. Bring money. Buy stuff."

"OK, mister!" The boy bounded towards the porch steps.

George held the door open and flipped the OPEN/CLOSE sign to CLOSE as he stood there. Then he watched the boy walk down the road. When the boy stopped looking back and George was sure he could not see, he flipped the sign back to OPEN. He waited a few more minutes before turning the lights on outside. Darkness had already settled in before the parking-lot lights came on by the automatic timer. No matter. Pug was the last visitor of the day. About Nine-Thirty George hung a "Ring-the-buzzer" sign in the window, slid the bolt on the door, and retired to the apartment.

"Mmm, closing time, Cat. Close 'nuff." George dug some pan-fried potatoes out of a bowl in the refrigerator, arranged them on top of a couple of tortillas, poured on some Salsa, then stuck them into a microwave. For someone who hated modern society George sure did love his microwave. While the potatoes cracked, he reached into a cabinet and got a tall, clear glass. Ice clanked into it, followed by a

double shot of Gin and fizzing soda. Within a half hour a nice buzz in George's head kept him awake while he caught up on some television. Around twelve, the buzz gone, George forced himself to stand.

“Bedtime. Another wonderful day in the life of George.” The shopkeeper spoke aloud to the cat. He strolled toward the bedroom. “Another beautiful day...” he muttered, settling down onto the bed, “...in the neighborhood.”

Chapter Two

"What? What? What's that?" George sat upright in bed. "Who the...?" He heard a buzzer noisily buzzing in the living room. "Who the hell?" He grumbled, standing up on shaky legs. He squinted, trying to read the red letters on his alarm clock. When he saw the early hour, he muttered, "Oh, shit." Then he tossed his feet up and around and sat up on the edge bed. The sun was not yet streaking through the blinds. There was enough light, though, to let George know it was just after sun-up. Some sonofabitch was holding the button down outside the front door of his shop. George couldn't believe someone was so inconsiderate. He waited. The buzzing didn't stop. He rose again, slipped on a wrinkled, stained pair of khaki pants, and turned toward the store. In the early morning light George could barely make out two beady little eyes. They were smashed right up against the window.

"What the hell does that kid want?" He recognized the boy from the day before. George thought about going back to bed but re-considered.

"Morning, mister!"

"What's your problem, kid? Don't you know it ain't nice to wake an old man up in the morning!" George boomed over the boy's head.

"The sign said, 'Ring the Buzzer.' I just done it."

"Well, you done it. You done it for ten minutes. You nearly woke the dead. You did wake the dead. ME."

"Sorry, mister." The boy did not seemed disturbed at all by George's gruff voice.

"Well, what you want?"

"I want some what."

"What?"

"That's right, some what."

"What' you talking about, boy?"

"What. You know, you said yesterday, this is a what store, not a grocery store."

"Why, you're just a little smart-butt, ain't you!"

"You said it, sir."

"I said it? When'd I say it?"

"Yesterday. I said is this a grocery store or a what, and you said a what!" Pug smiled the smile of the innocent.

"Well...." The urge to pop the kid in the mouth rose up in George's chest. Then he thought better of it. All he needed was a lawsuit for abusing neighborhood kids.

"What you want this blamed early, boy? And don't say 'what.'"

"Worms."

"Worms?"

"Worms."

"What'sa' matter, you hungry?"

"Sir?"

"A joke, son, a joke. Never mind."

"A joke?"

"See here, boy, I ain't got time to fool with you. I ain't had no coffee yet, and life don't start without coffee."

"That's what my mom says. No life before coffee. That's why I done had mine."

"You drink coffee?"

"Sure, mister, I ain't no kid."

"Figures. You want some worms?"

"Yes. Worms. Night-crawlers. Them big ones."

"I thought you were from Dallas."

"I am."

"How you know about country worms?"

"Paw. Grandpaw. Died last year, you know. We used to fish with them on his farm. But now he's dead." The boy frowned slightly but his words were flat. "He dug them up, you know, right out of the ground. Night-crawlers. That's what I want."

"Sorry."

"About what?"

"Your paw."

"Grandpaw! Time to live, time to die. Bible says. That's what Mom read to me. Anyways, I guess it is all over now. Mom don't cry no more."

"Your mom a Bible Thumper?" George sat a box of worms on the counter.

"A what?" Pug's voice was muffled. He had his face pressed against the glass of the counter, admiring artificial baits displayed on shelves there.

"Bible thu... Does she read the Bible?"

"Some. She talks about God and all. Got the worms?"

"Sure, here, kid. Got a dollar?"

"Think so." Pug dug into his baggy jeans pockets. He slowly counted change as he placed it on the counter. "twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, thirty-two, forty two...." He counted out an assortment of change, never missing a number. George lost count himself and re-counted the change. It was a dollar, after all.

"Pretty good, kid. Good with math?"

"Yeah, pretty good. Grandpaw taught me." He reached for the worms. "Now, mister, I got a question, if you don't mind."

"Sure, I got all day, kid. I guess I can live without coffee, it don't mean nothin'. We all 'got to die someday, right."

"Right. Well, I'll hurry, mister. All I wanted to know is, where can I go fishing?"

"What you get worms for if you don't know where to go fishing?"

"Well, I, uh, where can I go, mister?"

"Let me think." George sank to his stool. He hung a heel on a rung of the stool, planted his elbow on his knee, and leaned his bristled jaw on his fist. "Well, boy, there's a pond, on down the road, that way. About a half mile. Used to be some good perch there." George pointed over his shoulder. "Just slip through the fence. I used to do that. Ain't been there in a while. Used to be good, though."

"Thanks Mister. You can get your coffee now. Bye!" The boy was out the door before George could answer.

"Thanks for permission, kid." George rose slowly, stretched, and stabbed the ON button on his stereo. The air filled with the sound of classical music mixed with a rushing surf. "Surf's up, cat."

Once he was sure the kid was gone, George went back to his apartment. He considered going back to bed but figured he'd not get to sleep anyway. "Damn, kid," he muttered. He went to the coffee pot and started a brew. He went back through the store while it was making, flipped the hanging sign to, "OPEN," and got back just in time to pour a cup.

The cat jumped onto George's lap as soon as the shop-keeper settled into his over-stuffed living room chair. George scratched the cat's head absentmindedly, sipping his coffee at the same time.

* * * * *

The day was another day like all days. The usual trickle of customers, coming and going. Toward the end of the day George sank into his usual melancholy. He was thinking again. That was dangerous.

Every time he started thinking he put down a couple too many Gin and Tonics and the next day he had a nice big headache. Or worse. But it was too late. He had already started thinking. And when he started he had to keep it up until the thinking was over. Or until he drowned it with Gin.

"Hell of a world ain't it Cat?" George looked down. He'd given up his stool for the softer chair in his apartment. His loyal companion stared innocently up at him. "I been here what, ten years? And I don't know nobody. I wish Helen were here." He sniffed. "No I don't."

He rose, walked to the store carrying the cat under his arm, and walked to the window. How many days had he stared out that window down that lonely stretch of highway? The sun was now behind the trees giving George only an illusory image of the road. Cars passed back and forth. It was getting darker, headlights were on. "Look at'em, Cat. People. Back. Forth. Back. Forth." A pickup truck rumbled by and the store windows vibrated a little as it passed. "I been seeing that truck go by for years, Cat. Who drives it? Some kid. I seen him once, Cat. Stopped in here to get some bait. Once, long time ago. Last year? Two years? Who knows? Who cares. Who the hell cares." George was soon reaching for the gin. Time to stop this thinking.

* * * * *

The morning sunlight was not being very nice to George. Freight trains rumbled in one ear and out the other. "Oh, crap, I done it again, Cat." George crawled to the side of the bed. He slid off and hit the floor with a thump. "Ugh!" With some effort he clawed at the bed and pulled himself up onto his knees. "Someday that stuff's going to kill me." He bent over the bed. "What difference would that make," he mumbled into a pillow. "Anyway, I'm already dead." He huffed and puffed his way through the morning coffee.

More time than usual passed before George unbolted the door and flipped the sign. When the sun started falling toward afternoon George walked out onto the porch that stretched across the front of his old store building. He stumbled about, watching cars pass. It was going to be a hot summer. Under the awning a big thermometer registered Eighty-Five. Hot. And it was still spring. George looked at his watch to make sure. April third. Yep, spring. "Must be that goddamned global warming," he muttered. George lost track of seasons sometimes. He wandered over and sat on the sawed-off post which stood a couple of feet above the porch. Then he swung his feet over the big marine rope that was looped around the post. He hung his legs over the edge.

George had modified his old store-front to look like an ocean-side bait stand. Rather than water, though, the piers around his doc met solid ground and a gravel drive. The ocean was fifteen miles away, over the causeway.

George thought to himself that it was hard to believe he'd been owner of Seaside Bait and Tackle nearly ten years. It seemed like yesterday when he pulled up in the drive for the first time.

Back then it'd been more like a typical old-fashioned road-side store. He'd added the porch and awning, posts and marine rope. Of course it was far from the sea but it was situated on a main route to the coast so a bait shop there made some sense. His mind started ticking off the years....

"Better stop this." He spoke to himself. He flushed all intelligent thought from his mind and stared blankly toward the road. After a time a contest began between the sun and the post, each trying to cause George more misery than the other. The ridges of the top of the worn post were creating permanent patterns in George's behind while the sun tried to boil what brain he had left. When he had had enough George flexed his back in an attempt to jump from the post. His pants snagged and he lost his balance. He fell in a dusty heap beside the wooden stairs. "Sonofabitch!" He muttered. Then he stood and clomped up the steps back into the store.

As he retreated to the cool of the store George realized he had not seen that kid, Pug, all day. He wondered if the boy caught any fish. George's eyes swept back along the highway half hoping to see the boy. He wasn't there. He never showed up at all that day. About Ten George closed up and retired. He lay for a long time in bed, awake, holding his hand on his throbbing head. This hangover had been a lovely one! Early in the morning he slept. And dreamed. He saw the kid skipping down the roadway with a fishing pole in his hand, swinging a couple of perch on a stringer. The boy playfully bounced along, watching bugs buzzing in the summer heat above his head. Then the boy looked up and George caught a glimpse of his face. It wasn't the kid at all. It was himself. Except there was something very strange. He had a smile on his face.

Chapter Three

"Good Morning, Mister." Pug was back. He slipped through the door as soon as George unlocked it.

"Good Morning, Kid." George walked over to the stereo and stabbed the ON button. He Shuffled through a stack of CD's, picked one, dropped it into the machine and pressed the PLAY button.

"Who's that, Mister?" the boy asked when the music started.

"Who?"

"The music."

"Glenn Miller."

"Who's Glenn Miller?"

"A band leader. Big Band."

"Big Band?"

"For a smart kid, you don't know a lot, do you."

"What you mean, mister?"

"Nothing. Big Band, it's a kind of music, lots of brass," George saw a blank look on the boy's face, "brass, you know, horns. You know what a trumpet is, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes sir! I know what a trumpet is. They play them in High school bands." Pug glowed, finally understanding at least a couple of words George was speaking.

"You catch any fish the other day?"

"Naw. That pond wasn't there. I looked, couldn't find it."

"Sure it is, back that way, on this side of the road. You looked on the wrong side."

"On the same side your store is on, right, Mister? Wasn't that what you said?"

"Yes."

"Well, no it ain't. I looked. I sure walked a long way, and never found it. Looked on both sides."

"Well, I don't know. It surely didn't get up and walk away."

"I don't know, mister, but I didn't find it. I couldn't get through the fence. Too big."

"Just a barbed-wire fence, just step through it, boy."

"No sir, it is a big wire kind of fence, with little squares in it. Like a dog fence or something."

"Well, I guess I ain't paid much attention. Somebody must have put up a new fence."

"Maybe so, Mister."

"Want a soda, boy?" George walked over to the chest. He slid back the lid and reached in.

"Naw, uh, no sir. I got no money."

"OK, kid, I'll buy."

"Thanks!" The boy smiled a big smile at George. A big, annoying smile. The boy was growing on him and he didn't like it. He regretted offering the soda.

"Yeah, right." George handed him the cola and then returned to his perch behind the counter. The boy was quiet for a while, sipping on the drink and wandering around the store. He looked over everything, drinking it up like the soda. George watched him. Cat peeped around the counter, sniffing the air.

"Mister, you got a cat!"

"What of it?"

"What's his name?"

"Cat."

"No, what do you call him?"

"I call him Cat."

"that's terrible, Mister. Animals ought to have a name!"

"Why?"

"Well, they ain't nothin' without a name."

"Sure they are, and that cat is surely something. Besides, he has a name, and it is Cat."

"You must not like it very much, not to give it a name. Keep it around for rats or something?"

"Well yes, I like it! Him. He's a him and his name is Cat. I just about like it, him, better than anybody else. I ask him what he wanted to be called, he didn't answer, I called him Cat. What's wrong with Cat? What about Cat Stevens."

"Cat Stevens? Who's that?"

"A singer. Forget it. I call him Cat. And he's my best friend."

"Best friend?" The boy looked up from the floor where he was sitting, scratching Cat's stomach.

"Ain't you got no other friends? I mean, like, people friends?" The boy had the saddest look on his face George had ever seen.

"Don't you have somewhere to go, boy?"

"Not really, Mister."

"Oh."

"Do you have a name, Mister? Or is it Mister, like your cat is Cat?"

"You really are weird, kid."

"I know. I like being weird. Ain't no fun being normal. Do you have a name?"

"I got a name. But you don't like it."

"I ain't never heard it."

"You've heard it. My name's George."

"No, that's my name."

"Well, George, I know, you told me. You have a copyright on it? I don't think so. Besides, I had it before you. My name's George."

"Really, mister? Really? Your name's George?"

"Yeah, kid, it is. Here," George pulled out his wallet. He slipped his drivers' license out and pointed at his name. The boy looked at the license, then back at George, then the license.

"You are old, mister." George choked on his coffee.

"What's the matter, mister?"

"Nothin', boy, no-thing is the matter." George put his stone-face back on.

"Well, I sure can't figure you out, Mister. Should I call you George?"

"Call me whatever you want to call me."

"Hm. If I call you George, I might confuse myself. Besides, George is such a, ah...."

"Goofy name. I remember."

"Sorry, Mister. I didn't know your name was George."

"No problem."

"I know! I'll call you Pop."

"I don't know. I don't know about that. I ain't nobody's pop. Ain't you got a pop?"

"Naw, just a Mom."

"What happened, I mean, well, never mind."

"It's OK. He went away a long time ago."

"Sorry, kid."

"That's OK, ...Pop." George wanted to tell the boy not to call him that, but he didn't.

"Here." Pug picked up George's license. He held them up to George, "Here, you better put these up. Mom says we lose things if we don't keep them put up." He took one last glimpse of the picture before handing them back.

"Mis... ah, Pop, you are looking older than this picture."

"It was one of my better days, kid. And I ain't shaved today."

"I'd like to grow old someday."

"Don't rush it, kid. You'll get there soon enough."

"Nah. I better go, Mom might be worried. See you, Pop!" The boy hurried out the door. George followed him outside, pausing just past the door. The boy turned and waved at George, who lifted his hand in the semblance of a wave in return. He wondered what strange ideas that boy carried in his head.

Just before he drifted to sleep George decided that tomorrow he would go looking for that pond. Maybe he'd catch a perch or two himself. After all, he ran a bait-stand and never went fishing. "It ain't there." that's what the boy said. How silly.

Chapter Four

"Well, where'd it go?" George walked back and forth along a six-foot wire fence, looking for the pond he'd told the kid about. "I know damn well there is a pond here somewhere." He was speaking to himself, walking back and forth, showing a great deal of frustration. In one hand he held an old two-piece cane pole. In the other he carried a small cooler and a box of worms. He stomped the high grass along the fence. On the other side of the fence the grass was tall, but not so tall that he could not see over it. After a while the frustrated fisherman walked out to the roadway, dropping his fishing supplies onto the ground. He looked up the road one way, then another. This had to be the place. Leaving his gear on the side of the road, he walked back to the fence.

"What the heck," he mumbled. Then he stuck a foot in the fence, about two feet up, and tried to pull himself to the top. It didn't work, the fence wobbled too much. He moved over next to a post and tried again, this time not starting with his foot so high. The wire cut into his hands as he pulled, but he made it up high enough to see over the top of the six-foot post. He held on for dear life and peered over the fence. Then he spotted what used to be the pond. It was there, but much lower than he remembered. And it was covered with moss. No wonder the kid didn't find it. So much for that," he mumbled. He pushed back and jumped away from the fence. It was farther down than he thought. His knees buckled when he hit the ground and he fell into the grass with a thump. The exhortations he made were not pleasant to the ears. It took George several minutes to get up. He half crawled back to the road, picked up his things, and headed back toward the store.

* * * * *

"Where'd you go, Pop?"

"Looking for that pond, boy."

"It ain't there."

"It's there, just covered over. I reckon' it has been longer than I thought since I been fishing in that pond. The pond was low and covered with moss." George pulled a hand-written "Gone Fishing" sign from the window and tossed it in the trash.

"Throwing it away, Pop? Ain't you ever going to go fishing anymore?"

"The pond's no good."

"It ain't the only place in the world to go fishing, you know."

"May as well be. I got to mind the store. I can't go off fishing."

"Ain't no big deal, this store. You can go fishing, Pop."

"Why you want to call me Pop? And what you mean, no big deal? Seaside is a real big deal. Big deal to me. Kid, you got a way of speaking your mouth and making people want to shove something down it."

"Sorry, Mister. Pop. I just mean, Mom says people ought to do things, not wait. Your store'll be here, but the day is going to go away, really fast. You know what I'm sayin'? You got to do things. Life will be gone 'for you know. Can I still call you Pop?" He looked hurt by what George had said.

"Philosopher ain't you, kid?" George eyed him. "Call me whatever you want."

"Thank you! Thank you, Pop!"

"Sure. Now, what can I do for you, kid? What you comin' for today?"

"Oh, nothin'." Pug walked around the bait-stand, fingering dusty reels hanging on the walls. He was quiet. It unnerved George.

"What you doing, kid?"

"You ever sell any of these things?" He either hadn't heard or ignored George's question.

"Sell what?"

"These reels?"

"Of course, that's what I do, isn't it? Sell fishing stuff?"

"Yeah, but, all the bait stands I went to with Grandpaw, he's dead now you know, all the bait stands I ever been to had new, shiny reels, and lots of pictures of catches, and fish scales all around outside. And they were on a lake, or down'ta ocean. And they had big men walkin' 'round the place, hangin' fish on hooks and stuff. How come you ain't got none of that here?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask so many questions?"

"I wondered why someone would put a bait stand so far from any fishing hole."

"It's a good place. I got it cheap. What you want me to say." George looked at the boy.

"I don't know...." the boy's voice faded, losing interest in the conversation. After another long silence he suddenly looked up at George.

"I' been thinkin'," Pug went on. "I been wonderin', Pop, could I, I mean, I'd like to be, uh, would you mind if I was your friend?"

"Hm?" George had slipped into his ordinary slump and was almost asleep. The boy's words startled him.

"I'd like to be your friend."

"What for? Ain't you 'got no friends, kid?"

"Not since we moved."

"I don't know, kid." The boy stood for a minute, waiting for George to say more. Then he grew impatient.

"Well, can I, Pop?"

"Can you what?" George had already forgot the conversation.

"Be your friend?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Great, Pop. Here," the boy held out his hand, "Shake on it. That'll make us real friends."

"How old are you, Pug?" George didn't notice that it was the first time he called the kid by his nickname. The boy did.

"I'll be twelve in a few months."

"I thought you were at least a hundred!" George's hand swallowed the boy's small fingers in a brief handshake.

"Naw, Pop, naw! I'm not a hundred!" The boy giggled.

George's mouth curled into what most would think was a grimace but the boy understood. George was smiling. Or as close as he could come to one.

When things were all closed down for the night George followed the well beaten path toward his apartment. He continued his habit of walking to the cabinet where the Gin and Tonic waited. He had the top of the bottle against the rim of a glass when he decided not to drink. It was just an impulse. Instead, he walked back through the store and out onto the porch where he settled down to watch the stars. Something was happening to him which scared him half to death. He had a friend.

George went to bed totally sober for the first time in recent history.

* * * * *

Next morning, George rose earlier than usual. He cooked a hearty breakfast, ate it, and took time to clean the dishes. The morning was unusually cool. George opened the door leading outside from his apartment, propped it open and locked a hook on the screen door. Then he drifted through to the store and propped open the front door. A gentle breeze drifted through the building. After setting up his cash register George settled onto his stool. He made frequent trips to the front window, looking up the highway.

Just as the sun's rays began to creep into the front door, George gave up on the fresh-air idea. He closed the doors and turned on the air conditioner. The store had been quiet. So very quiet. When darkness began to fall George walked out onto the store's porch and stood, staring up the highway. When he turned to go inside the night was very dark. He locked the door, flipped the sign to CLOSED, and walked back into his apartment. It never occurred to him as he sat undressed for bed, nibbling on a piece of cheese and sipping a beer, that he had not uttered a single word out loud, all day.

* * * * *

"Morning, kid." George closed the door behind the boy. He sniffed his runny nose and held a hand to his left temple. It didn't help. Two days George had stared out the window up the highway. The third day George spent nursing a bottle of Gin. The buzzer woke him up this morning.

"Morning, Pop." Pug came banging into the store.

"Where have you been, kid?"

"I been to the doc... I been with my Mom." The boy looked up into the older man's wrinkled face. "You don't look so good. Why is your nose so red?"

"I'm training to be Rudolph."

"NAW!" The boy laughed.

"What you been to the doctor for?"

"I, uh, oh, same ol' stuff. "

"You OK?"

"Oh, yes, fine." The boy didn't look fine. He looked a little pale. "Mom says ever'thing will be OK someday."

"I'd like to meet that mother of yours someday."

"Really? Why don't you come to dinner?"

"Yeah, right."

"No, really, mom said I could bring friends home if I want."

"I don't think so, kid. You need something?"

"I want to buy a cola!" Pug was proud to present a half-dollar coin and two quarters to George.

"Why, that's a Kennedy Half-Dollar! You ought to keep that. It'll be worth something someday. When you grow up, it may be worth a fortune."

"Naw, I want to buy a cola. You've already bought me two. It must cost you a awful lot. Mom said I should pay for my own drinks."

"I get them cheap." George looked at the outstretched hand holding the coins.

"But mom said...." He shook his hand.

"Fine, kid, you buy. And I'll have one on the house. How about that!"

"Great!" Pug smiled. George took the coin and slipped it under the money tray in the register. He closed the register and walked around the counter. With two sodas in hand he held the door open for Pug, who followed. They walked outside onto the porch. Pug took the soda from George's outstretched hand and sipped it. He sat it gently on the porch beside a post and stuck his legs under the rope, hanging them off the edge. George took a perch atop a post. They sat there in silence for some time. George thought how nice it was to have company who could talk back, even if it was a kid. He looked toward Pug. The boy had a sad look about him when he thought no-one was watching. What is in that little head, George wondered.

* * * * *

A bright red truck pulled up in the parking lot. Two men got out and approached the pair on the porch.

"Howdy."

"Hi." George eyed them. "What can I do you for?"

"Interesting place you got here. Looks like it belongs down the road about twenty miles."

"Yeah, well, cheaper real-estate here. Can I help you?"

"Maybe. Been one hell of a season down on the coast. Ever'body out of bait. We were headed back home when we remembered your place. You got salt-water bait?"

"Well, sure. It's a bait-stand, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but, a long way from the coast."

"What can I say, I sell bait." George rose and stretched and led the men inside.

"So you say ever'body is out of bait? How can that be? Ought to be plenty."

"Well, they'll be stocked up tomorrow, probably. But I can't wait until tomorrow. What you got."

"Tomorrow may never come, Mister." Pug was looking up at the stranger. He'd followed the men inside.

"That's right, boy. But my tomorrow will surely bring a time-clock. I got to go back to work." The man looked up at George. "Your boy?"

George looked at Pug, who looked at the floor. "Hah!" George exclaimed. The idea was so absurd. But when he looked at the boy, he noticed a hurt look on his face. "Uh, well, no, Pug here's just a friend." Pug looked up at George with a twinkle. George winked.

"What kind of bait you got?"

"It's frozen. Fresh tanks gave up some time ago. I got Mullet, Shrimp. Let's see." George walked to the freezer. The truth was George had given up on the fresh tanks. He scraped frost from the top of plastic containers. "Yeah, Mullet, Shrimp, and look here, some squid." George held a box where he could read the label. "I'll be damn. Squid. Didn't know I still had this stuff."

"Sell a lot of bait, I take it," the man rolled his tongue in his cheek.

"Well, not in a while. What you need?" George didn't appreciate the man's attitude.

"Oh, how you got the Mullet?"

"Finger Mullet, and big stuff. Small shrimp."

"Give me one of each. Two of the shrimp."

"Fine, just fine." George tried hard to give the man an adequate "thank-you-for-shopping-here" smile.

George rang the men up and took their money. As they were leaving George ask, "Good fishing, these days, hm?"

"You bet. I don't think I've seen so many waders ever. Say, I might send some fella's up here for more bait. You just might have a boom in business until the boats get back to the bait stands on the coast. Nobody expected fish to be hittin' like they are."

"Well, great. Tell 'em I'll stay open late. I'll do that, let folks know."

"I will. Thanks again." George and Pug watched the men drive away. Then they settled back to their previous places on the porch. George looked up at an overcast sky. His favorite kind of day. Gloomy. Made it nice to sit outside.

"If they're biting as good as all that I ought to go m'self." George was thinking out loud.

"Sure. You ought to go."

"I should go." George actually seriously considered it. Why not?

"Could I go?"

"I don't know. What about your Mom?"

"She'll let me."

"I mean, may not be a good idea... out in a boat and all, dangerous."

"I'm, um, I'm OK and all with boats, if Mom says I can, can I go?"

"Well, let me think about it." If the boy went it would mean George was going to go for real. He hadn't done anything for real in a long, long time. He had planned. Even once, had his suitcase all packed up, plane tickets, all the way to Florida. Real vacation. But every time he started thinking. And thinking stopped him. At least the results of thinking. Who wants to fly with a hang-over?

Of course, he did have that boat out back. Used to take it to the coast to catch fresh bait. Gave that up. He could pull the net racks off it, and, well, it might work. Oh, but the kid. He shouldn't take the kid. A big responsibility, taking a kid in a boat. No, not a good idea. George was quick on the way to talk himself out of it when another truck pulled up.

"We hear you have some bait."

"Well, I have some." George rose to his feet. Pug followed like a puppy. By the time the people from the first truck entered the bait stand, another vehicle had pulled up. Suddenly Seaside Bait and Tackle was awash in customers. George pressed Pug into service and dug out all the bait he had in his store. He sold all the frozen bait and some tackle and even a few artificial baits. He even sold some earth-worms though he sure didn't know what a salt-water fisherman was going to do with them. Lots of people said they'd be back, that they hadn't seen a place quite like his store. George thanked them and sent them on their way. After all the bait was gone he took some paper and drew a big sign that said: OUT OF BAIT! He stuck it on the wall outside with tape. Then he sat down on the steps. Night had fallen and he hadn't noticed. He was exhausted. But it was good. Pug sat beside him, and he realized that the boy was still there.

It was much too late for him to walk home.

"Jesus H. Christ, boy. Your mother will be having fits! You've been here all day!"

"It's OK, Pop. I called her a while ago. I said you were having lots of customers and needed some help. She said be careful. I guess it is a little late, though."

"Sure is. Too late for you to walk home. How far is it, anyway?"

"Mile or two."

"Well, let me lock up, I'll take you home."

George pulled his keys from his pocket. "OK, kid, let me lock up." He flipped the sign to "CLOSED" and slid the bolt. Then he walked through the store back into the apartment. He turned around to see that the boy was still in the store. "Well come on, if you're coming!"

The boy hesitantly came through the storeroom and stepped into the apartment. "Wow, Pop. You live here."

"Well, yeah, I live here. Come on." George led the boy outside through his apartment door.

Pug stood staring up at the night sky. "Ain't like Dallas, out here."

"Sure not, kid."

"All the millions of billions of stars. Mom thought it might be good for me to be out here. That's why she moved."

"Yeah? I been meaning to ask you, what are you and your mother doing way out here?"

"When Grandpaw died he left Mom some land out here. And a little money. And so, she got a trailer house and parked it out on Paw's land." The boy paused.

"Thanks," Pug said as he slid into the truck seat when George held the door open. He waited for George to walk around and get in the other side. "Well, then, she got this trailer house, see, and we moved here."

"Buckle up there. Which way, kid?" George had some idea as he'd watched the boy come and go often enough now.

"That way." Pug snapped the belt. He was almost too small to fit under the belt. Then he pointed down the road as George pulled up to the highway. George drove while Pug rattled on about stars and planets, the kind of stuff any boy talks about when he's tired and happy. The boy pointed George down a narrow trail hardly wide enough for any vehicles. It is a good thing, thought George, that he was driving a truck. A four-wheel drive SUV loomed in front of him and he swerved to the right. It was a new model, all shiny in the starlight. There was a new moon so George could make out only a hint of a mobile home beyond the SUV. The door opened and a slender woman was silhouetted in front of a glowing lamp.

A light come on beside the front door. It lit up a small porch with a short guard-rail around it and steps down to a dirt walkway. George got out and walked around to let Pug out but the boy was already running toward the house. Feeling nervous, George approached the house.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mister."

"You say that just like your son."

"What's that?"

"Mister."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't mean to keep your boy all day."

George walked up to the foot of the steps. He was looking up at the woman.

"Pug called. He said you were having a lot of business today."

"Yes, the damndest, I'm sorry, darnedest thing. Must be some good fishing down on the coast. It's very unusual for all the bait stands to be out of bait at once. Don't know if it's ever happened before."

"Well, why don't you come in for a second?"

"I better go."

"No, come on in. Just a minute."

"Well, if you're sure. You can't trust fella's these days."

"I trust you. Pug has told me a lot about you."

"He has? I guess we been striking up a bit of a friendship. Not many folks about, you know."

"Tell me about it. I'm used to Dallas. You know, bustling city, all that." Pug's mom stepped back to let George enter. Inside, she turned to face him. He saw she was attractive, with red hair and the same explosion of freckles Pug had. He was his mother's boy. She also had the same piercing eyes. They made George even more uncomfortable. He hadn't been in anyone's home for, well since, not since, he thought, since Helen.... Suddenly he really wanted to leave.

"I really better get back." George felt probed the woman's eyes.

"My name's Iris."

"Iris." He said, "Well, Iris, I hope you're not upset I put your boy to work."

"He was in seventh heaven, I assure you. I just thank the Lord Pug has someone to talk to. I worry about him."

George smirked, as close as he could come to a smile. "Oh, I'm sorry, my name's"

"George." Iris smiled. "Pug told me. I know quite a lot about you, George."

"Really?" George thought, lady you don't know the half of it. "I know some things about you, too. Pug thinks a lot of you. And you must be... excuse me. I'm being presumptuous. I better go."

"No, what were you going to say?"

"Just that, you must be quite a good mother, to have taught your son so well."

"Thank you, George." George noticed just a slightly darker tinting of red on her face. He knew his face was red. It was on fire. "I have to go." He side stepped and slipped around to the door. "I'll see you, Pug."

"Thanks, George, do you mind if I call you George? I never get to call Pug George."

"It's a goofy name, I know."

"Pug thinks so. I like it. It's my father's name."

"Well, I don't mind. I'm kind of partial to it myself."

"Good. Thanks, George."

"What for?"

"For, well, bringing Pug home." George knew she was going to say something else but didn't. He wondered what. Pug followed him to the truck.

"Say, Pop."

"Pug."

"I wanted to thank you, too."

"It was nothing, I needed help. One heck of a day, wasn't it?"

"Yep. But, I wanted to thank you for what you said to those men in the red truck."

"What was that?"

"Thanks Pop." Pug turned and ran into the house. He waved goodbye as his mother closed the door. George stood there trying to remember what he'd said. Then he returned home and fell into bed exhausted.

Chapter Five

George sat looking down the highway in the direction Pug always comes. Funny how he thought “always comes” since the boy only showed up for the first time a couple of weeks ago. George was up earlier than he usually was, and with no hangover. Amazing, for him. The breeze was still cool. The bait-keeper walked to the roadway and turned toward his establishment. The early-morning sun cast its bright yellow glow upon his face as he looked back toward the building. Wrinkles around his eyes and mouth were distinct, in a pattern which made him look older than his forty years. George looked a thousand years old. And he felt it. Ten years of heartache and seclusion had been rough on him. George was a man who could no longer, would no longer, face a world which he believed to be full of nothing but cruelty.

But now this kid had messed things up. George liked who he had become, the cynic, the old man who went to bed with Gin and The Late Show and crawled out of bed aching all over. This lifestyle suited him just fine. George had honed his gruff manner to a razor edge. He’d molded his anger into a statue, his grief into a golden calf, worthy of worship. But some little almost-twelve-year-old kid was trying to melt that calf. Well, the kid wasn’t going to do it. George did not deserve happiness. He did not deserve a friend. He was still alive and was too much of a coward to do anything about it. To hell with the kid, George thought. He stomped back into the store, fashioning a new golden calf as he went.

* * * * *

“There’s the buzzer, Cat.” George listened. The door buzzer was playing a tune. “What is it, you suppose?” He sat his coffee on the table and walked through the store to the front door. There were those eyes. Kid’s eyes. Plastered against the window. George flipped the lock and turned the knob. Pug fell forward, losing his balance. He had been putting his full weight on the door.

“Oops.” The boy stumbled inside. “Well, Pop. Are you going to open?”

“What for? I’m out of bait.”

“Well, you have colas and things. Won’t you lose money?”

“What’s money, kid?” George was distant, and cold, toward the boy.

“Uh, well, money is money.”

“Such tremendous logic you have, kid.”

"What do you mean."

"Never mind. Money ain't nothin'. Besides, all the sodas and chips in this place ain't hardly worth anything."

"Aren't you in business for money?"

"Am I in business?" George shot back.

Pug wasn't sure how to deal with George's sudden meanness.

"Am, uh, I still your friend, Pop?"

"What?" George looked down at the boy. "I ain't got no friends." The words sliced through the boy. His expression was so painful, George backtracked. "Oh, sure, kid. You're my friend. Though I don't know why you'd like to be a friend to an old drunk like me. I just, I ain't having a good day, that's all."

"Why not?"

"I ain't got no inventory, for one thing. Sold all of the blame fool stuff yesterday. Was an idiotic thing to do. Now I ain't got nothing to sell. And, well, and, doesn't your mother have something for you to do?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry you are having a bad day. Maybe we can make it better. Let's go get some more bait."

"Ain't that simple, kid. The kind of bait I need, you have to go catch. Well, most of it. It'll take a while for the stuff I ordered to get here."

"Well, let's go catch some."

"Ho, ho! I don't think so. You fall in, drown, boom, it's all over. Your mother would kill me. I'd kill me. No, ho! I don't think so. Besides, I don't feel like it."

"But, but, you got to have bait." Pug looked around at the barren store. "You just got to. Or you can't stay open, and if you ain't open, I can't come and help, and, and...."

"Who said you could come and help?"

"Well, I thought, yesterday, I thought, don't you want my help?"

"Don't need anyone's help. Nope. Just me. And Cat."

"I don't understand."

"Nothing and nobody, kid." George opened the door, "ain't you got something you can do?"

"Well, I, uh, guess so."

"Well, you better do it. See you later, kid. I'm closed today." He held the door back as Pug walked past with his head held down. George could not see his face. The more, the better, he thought. He

eased the door closed behind the boy. Then he listened as Pug tromped across the porch and down the steps. George's problem was, he'd been thinking again. And in the morning. Looks like a Gin kind of day coming. He reached up for the ON button on the stereo, caught himself in mid reach, shrugged, and with one last look out the window of the store he turned and headed for the apartment.

"Some life, Cat." George downed the rest of his coffee, now cold, with one gulp. Then he went to the cabinet and took down the Gin. But something stopped him. This was getting to be a habit. He felt horrible, throwing that kid out like that. It really was a stupid and selfish thing to do. What had the kid done besides try to be friends? But George didn't need friends, did he? But the kid deserved better. He had to make it up, and he knew just how to do it.

* * * * *

George's truck bumped along the rough road. He was wondering how he would ever turn the rig around with the boat on the back. Pulling up in front of the trailer house, George stopped and got out. He walked up to the steps and started to climb them when the door opened.

"Hello, George."

"Hello, Ma'am."

"Iris, please, call me Iris."

"OK, Iris. I'd like to borrow your boy. Pug."

"Pug's the only one I got."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Lord have mercy, George, don't call me 'Ma'am.' Makes me feel old."

"Sorry."

"Oh, never mind. I am old, I feel old," Iris chuckled. She had a pretty smile, George noticed.

"Not hardly," George muttered before he could stop himself. The woman could not be a day over 30. "Um, I mean," he stammered, "well, could I borrow the boy? I need to get some bait, see. I'm all out, and a bait stand ain't much without bait."

"I would think not, George. How long will you be gone?"

"Most of the day. Probably be back late tonight. Have to leave the water before dark."

"You going on that thing?" She motioned toward the boat.

"Ah, yes. See, I have to try to go catch some bait. Would it be all right? I mean, I can go on, if you...."

"No, no, Pug has been in a boat lots of times. Dad used to take him out. Just, not one quite that big."

"It's a safe boat, ma'am."

"There you go again."

"Sorry. Iris. It's a safe boat."

"Well, I'm sure Pug will just love it. I know he will. Except, I haven't seen him all day. Not since early this morning. I thought he was with you."

"Uh, well, he came by the store, and then left." George leaned against a hand-rail. "Fact is, Iris, I was not very nice to him this morning. I am afraid I wasn't in a very good mood, so I sort-of sent him packing."

"You did?"

"I did." George didn't want to look her in the face. He straightened up and started for the truck. "I probably done messed up too much. I'm good at that. I better go. Forget I came by, and don't tell Pug, it'll just disappoint him." George walked quickly to the truck. Iris ran after him.

"Wait! It's OK." She hurried up to him. "It's OK. Everybody has a bad day. Pug will be all right. I know him. He's had to deal with some pretty bad things in his short life. He'll get over a little thing like this morning."

"You think so?"

"I know so." She smiled. "Why don't you sit down there under that tree and I'll bring out some drinks. How about that? We can wait. Pug should be along soon. Do you have the time?"

"I suppose so..., you think it will be all right?"

"Go on, I'll be right back." It was an order. George obeyed. Iris went into the house.

While she was gone George looked around. It was an isolated place but someone had obviously been doing a great deal of work. A neat, square yard was blocked out and tilled. Grass was sprouting. There were a couple of flower beds with a profusion of colors. The trailer home was typical white with brown trim, placed solidly on blocks. George never believed one of those things could look homey. This one did.

"Here you are!" Iris approached with a tray holding a pitcher of lemonade and three glasses. "Pug will be here soon. Hope you like lemon-aide."

"Sure, love it." It's my ulcer that hates it, George thought. But lemon-aide's no worse than, well....

"Where do you think the boy went?"

"I imagine he went to his hurting place."

"His what?"

"His hurting place."

"What's that?"

"Well, when I was a girl and I'd have some kind of disappointment or hurt, I'd go to a secret place. I was raised in the country, up in East Texas. Anyway, I'd always go to this secret place. Only when I was unhappy. If I was sad, I'd just cry. If I was mad at someone, I'd box the air," She leaned back and swung her arms, "and punch their lights out. Whatever the problem, I'd get it over with, then go back home, all worn out, and happy."

"I could use a place like that," George muttered, not realizing he'd said it out loud.

"What?"

"Never mind. Nothing. Go on."

"Well," she looked at George out of the corner of her eye. She wondered if he was hearing anything she was saying. "As I was saying, I told Pug about my hurting place. So, when we moved out here, he went right out and found one for himself."

"Why here?"

"Well, in the city, hard to find a quiet place, a place to be alone, you know."

"Yes. I suppose so. But I meant, why did you move here?"

"Oh, inherited land, get away from the city, like that," her answer was evasive, "Anyway, He went right out and found a place. And that's where he is, I am sure of it."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No. It sure took him long enough to find it. He's described it to me though I doubt I could find it. The day he went to find it, I remember," She was just talking, forgetting she had a listener, "He was gone almost all day. I worried that in his condition he'd, well, I mean that I worried he'd fall or something. He's a young boy, you know." She looked toward George, an inquisitive expression on her face.

"Sounds a little dangerous...." George caught himself. He was about to say, "dangerous and irresponsible to let a boy off without knowing where he went."

"Oh, well, I kind'a know," Iris said, understanding what George meant."

"I'm, um, it's not my business to tell you how to...."

"No, it's OK. I know about where it is and he promised he'd not leave the property. So I could find him easy enough."

"Still," George said, "you're very trusting."

"Pug's a trustworthy boy. He's special." She sighed.

"Go on, you were saying?"

"Yeah, OK, so, Pug came back, all scratched up, with a big bruise on his knee. He said he fell in a hole. I almost didn't let him go out again. And now he's been going out there for several weeks, whenever things get rough for him." George wondered how things could get so rough for a small boy like Pug. Iris continued. "Hm, I remember the first day he went to your store. He came back, then slipped out again, was gone for some time. He said he was going...." Iris stopped, looking embarrassed. She remembered who she was talking to. "I'm sorry, I am just rambling on. I am sure you don't want to hear about us. What about you, George? How long have you owned the store?"

"Oh, there's nothing to tell. I bought the store about ten years ago. Just to get away, you know, nice down here near the coast. Kind of a dream of mine." George was quiet. He was not going there. If he told Iris about his past he'd start thinking and that would be very bad at the moment. He took a deep breath and let it out, exhaling the thoughts that hovered in his head. Then he looked at Iris, "Tell me, what did you start to say?"

Iris looked confused. She saw that George didn't want to talk about himself. But she'd forgotten what she had been saying. "What was I saying?"

"About when your boy went off to, what did you call it, a 'hurting place?'"

"Oh, yeah," she smiled, "Um, well, it's kind of, well, private. Pug would be upset if he knew I told you. I forgot who, I mean, I was just rambling on."

He looked into her eyes, those piercing eyes. She turned quickly away.

"It's just that," She said reluctantly, "Pug came back from your store about the middle of the morning. He was all excited, telling me about our neighbor. Then he," she looked up, "You don't want to hear this, it's just a boy talking."

"No, I do."

"He came to me, and said, 'Mom,' and I said, 'Yeah Pug?' He said, 'can you go to your hurtin' place for someone else?' I said, I guessed so, and ask why. 'Well,' he says, 'I'd like to go for that man at the store.' I said why, and he said he thought you were hurting and he wanted to help." She sat silently. George coughed. Neither spoke for a while.

"It was a bad day, I suppose," he muttered after a while. George was uncomfortable but not sure how to get up and leave without being rude. He leaned back and his bones popped. Iris looked around at him and smiled.

"Sounds like you are coming apart, George."

"You don't know the half of it." He stood and stretched.

"Hello, Pop!" Pug was walking up the driveway. "What you doin'?" He was looking over George's boat. "Going to get some bait?"

"Yep. I came to see if you could go along, if you want."

"Me? You want me to go? Wow! Hey, mom, can I go? Can I?"

"You don't really want to, do you?" She grinned at her boy slyly.

"Are you kidding? Can I?"

"If you'll be careful." Pug's whooping drowned out whatever else she said. Iris looked pleased. George just hoped he wasn't biting off more than he wanted. He had a habit of doing that, like his half-painted living room. All his fervor of the first day he thought of painting faded by the second day. He wasn't used to being around people. And here he was going to drag some kid off on his boat. He already regretted it.

"What do I need?"

"Get an extra change of clothes." George looked at Iris. "In case he gets wet. And a jacket if you have one."

"I do! And I have a life vest, too. Grandpaw gave it to me. Yes!" He rushed off. George walked toward the truck.

"Thank you, for letting him go." George said it, but he did not mean it.

"I should thank you, for asking. He won't, doesn't get the chance often to go with someone." She smiled and gave George the worried mother look. "Please, George, take care of him."

"I will ma'am. I mean Iris. I will." George walked around the boat, checking the straps holding it to the trailer. He looked behind him, mapping out his exit. If he did it just right, he could jack-knife the trailer there, and pull up there, and he just might make it. He occupied his mind with turning around. In effect, he dismissed Iris. After a while, he looked around and she was gone. He knew he had been rude, but, well, that was life.

* * * * *

"Oh, wow! This is going to be great, Pop." Pug leaned forward, straining against his seat belt. He was having trouble seeing out of the cab of the truck. He seemed a little small for his age, George thought, glancing over at him. George drove toward the coast without speaking. When they got close George explained what he wanted Pug to do. They unloaded the boat. George parked his truck, locked

it up, and they shoved off. The way Pug scampered around on the boat George thought the boy must have been a river-rat in a previous life.

The water was choppy but George managed to gather almost enough with his effort to refill his bait shelves. As dusk approached, George pointed the boat toward shore. "Well, kid, so how'd ya like being my helper?"

"It's been great! Just great!" Pug yelled, more to himself than to George. He was in the front of the boat, letting the spray splash him in the face. He was a sight, too. He was filthy from head to foot, looking like he had wallowed in the bottom of the boat. George didn't look much better. But the day had been OK. George wouldn't let himself say fun. Not even think it. The drone of the outboard was soothing. Vibrations of the boat helped his aching muscles. The salt breeze smelled and tasted good. He had forgotten how good it could be.

George started thinking about the day that had just passed. With Pug he just might have the kind of help he needed to make something of Seaside Bait and Tackle. It wasn't such a bad idea. Sure the kid was young but then he wouldn't have to pay him. The boy would do whatever and think it was fun. And the boy was, George admitted to himself, nice to be around. Maybe it was time he quit being such a Gin-headed fool.

As they grew closer to land seagulls discovered George's boat. One or two took a dive down and plucked bits from the nets, now drying as they hung limp from their framework. That was cue for half the gulls on the Gulf Coast to crowd above the boat. "Damn scavengers," George growled. "Go! Get the hell out of here!" He waved his hand at them.

Pug laughed loudly. He started to toss a little fish at them but George quashed that idea. "STOP, boy! We'll never get rid of them!"

"I love them!" Pug waved at them, nearly falling off the boat in the process. They seemed almost as attracted to him as they were the bits of fish clinging to the nets. "I'm going to be one one of these days!"

"Not much ambition," George shot back.

"I will!"

George struggled to steer the boat, stow the nets and keep the birds at bay all at once. Pulling back on the throttle, George yelled for Pug to look up. When the boy turned around, George pointed to the bow-line. Pug shook his head. He had done this before, George thought. Pug crouched in the front of the boat, dutifully waiting for George to turn into the dock. But George mis-judged the distance and the corner of the boat rammed the dock. Pug had been watching the gulls instead of the dock. The boat

stopped solid when it hit the dock but Pug kept going, right over the end of the boat, letting out quite a yelp as he went.

"Oh, hell!" George was scared to death. All he needed was a drowned kid on his hands. He rushed to the front of the boat. When he got there, Pug came bursting to the surface, still clinging to the bow-line. The boy grabbed hold of the front of the boat. George reached down into the water and grabbed Pug by the shirt collar and the seat of the pants and hauled him over the side like a fish. The boy was laughing. He was laughing so hard he was choking. "Oh, damn, kid, are you OK, kid?" George pulled him around so he could look him in the face, since he didn't answer. The boy was giggling too much. George trembled, but a tremendous relief swept over him. He burst into laughter, real laughter, for the first time in a very long time.

* * * * *

"Iris, he's fine, just fine." George stood next to his truck. He held his cell phone up to his ear. "Just got a little dunked. I got a room at a motel right here near the water. It's the only place around here he could get cleaned up. He is in there now. I didn't think it was a good idea for him to make the trip back soaked and messy. He could change in a restroom but he needed a shower."

"Oh, well, OK, George," Iris said, "I don't think that would be good for him to come home wet. It's a good thing you thought of extra clothes." Fear coursed through Iris at what might have happened. But it hadn't. She had to learn to let go a little, she told herself. She noticed a different tone in George's voice. She recognized that he was probably getting as much out of this trip as Pug was.

"I believe in Murphy's Law, Iris."

She caught herself before she blurted, "you probably wrote the book!" Instead, she asked, "When will you be back?" She was far more worried than she that she let Pug go with George. She didn't know George well at all and Pug wasn't in the best health.

"Umm, well, umm, listen Iris, I wanted to ask something," George stammered. "You see, well, I already have that room, and, well, if it'd be OK with you, I'd like to stay over. I mean, you know, we've both put in a full day and I need to go back a little while, in the morning. My nets are all over the place and I am too tired to clean and stow everything. It'll save me a lot of time and effort if I just leave the boat in the water and stay here. I know it is asking a lot."

"It's, umm, OK, I guess." Iris wanted to tell him no, come back now, but she knew Pug would be disappointed and he had so little chance to have any fun.

George sensed her hesitation. He'd beat the idea around in his mind, too, but he needed to make another run out and he really disliked the idea of stowing his gear in the dark. After a pause, he said, "You are sure?"

"I'm sure." George wished he could see her expression. "I'm sure, George," she repeated. He thought he heard her take a deep breath. "Take care of my boy. Tell him that I love him."

"Ah, OK. I'll watch him. I'll make sure he stays in the boat tomorrow! We'll see you about noon, tomorrow."

"Yeah, keep him in the boat," she said with a chuckle. "Noon, then." George said goodbye, made sure his truck was all locked up, and went back to the motel room, knocked, and entered. Pug was sprawled on one of the beds, sound asleep fully clothed. George eased back out the door, secured it and went in search of coffee. Had someone told him three weeks ago that he would be on the coast fishing with some kid he would have said they were nuts. But here he was. With a cup of thick and bitter coffee from the motel lobby he went back to the room, cleaned up, and settled into the other bed. It was the first time in years he had been away from Seaside Bait and Tackle for more than a day. Cat would be going crazy. George was sure he was himself already there. He leaned back and went to sleep.

* * * * *

"Oh, God, where am I?" George lay in the bed staring at the sparkly ceiling of the motel room. He was afraid to move. Then his senses slowly returned. He sat up. On the other bed Pug lay, still in his clothes, still asleep. George stood. Out the window he saw the first gray streaks of dawn were showing through a coastal mist. Sea Gulls screamed their incessant scream. Morning must be going on somewhere. Looking back at the boy he wondered if he should wake him. How could he have become so fond of a kid so quickly, he asked himself. An exceptional boy, for sure. He'd be president someday. George was sure of it.

"Hey, kid. Hey, kid. Hey, Ge-o-r-g-e." He shook the kid by the foot. It was as close as he could come to touching him. No response. George shook the bed. "Hey kid, wake up! You going to sleep all day?"

"Hmm?" Pug looked as disoriented as George had been.

"Where's Mom?"

"Not here, kid."

"HMMMMMMMM." Pug squirmed and stretched. His jaw moved back and forth. "Pop. What you doing here?"

"I'm your fairy-god-father. Get up, kid."

"I had this dream, and," Pug sat up. "It wasn't no dream. We are in a motel room!"

"Very good."

"We are in a motel room!" Pug still wasn't sure. "I remember, I got wet. What time is it? I fell asleep."

"You are getting better all the time, kid. It's morning. Your mom says she loves you." There. George said it. That word. Love. He just spit it out, like, hey, have some coffee, sugar, want some toast, your mother loves you. That simple. It was simple for everyone except George.

"We spent the night?" Pug was stretching. He looked like he was trying to grab hold of the light fixture.

"You'll never get it, kid. You ain't tall enough. We spent the night. We are going out in the boat again, if you think you can stay in it this time."

"I can, if you don't put on the breaks." Pug grinned.

"Let's go get some breakfast, kid."

"Alright Pop." Pug had a look of adoration on his face.

"Awe, comb your hair!" George turned and left the room.

* * * * *

"All packed?"

"Best we can do, kid."

"Won't this stuff spoil?"

"It'll keep. What's the matter?"

George saw Pug wince and hold the side of his head.

"It's nothing, it'll pass."

"Got a headache, kid?"

"Yes, a headache. I get them sometimes. I'll be fine."

"Well, I got some stuff in the glove box."

"Thanks, it won't help. Mom's got some medicine. I'll get some at home."

"OK, kid." George watched. Pug was squinting and pressing his hand against his head with such force his knuckles were white. "Say, kid, you going to be alright?" George was worried. Maybe the boy hit his head when he fell out of the boat. "You hit your head or something?"

"No, it has happened before. Let's just go home."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." He squeaked it out. George watched him stumble around to the side of the truck. He got in and opened the door for the boy, reaching across the cab. He had to close it too. And buckle the belt. Pug was panting, holding his head.

"I think you need a doctor, kid."

"No," he whispered, "take me home. I got some stuff there."

He curled up. George didn't like it, but he headed up the road toward home. He watched Pug from the corner of his eye. The boy was obviously in a lot of pain but was taking it well. Most kids would have been crying. George noticed Pug's eyes were moist but he wasn't crying. He sped along toward home.

After what seemed like an eternity George turned down the lane to Pug's house. He winced with every bump, knowing that the kid felt them. It was now George's turn to feel someone else's pain. Coming to a halt beside Iris' SUV, George rushed around the truck while yelling for Iris. She was out of the house by the time George had unbuckled Pug and scooped him up. He carried him toward the house.

"Oh, no, another one. I was hoping it wouldn't happen so soon." She stood at the door, first reaching toward the two approaching her, then shaking her arms as if she was trying to find something to do with her hands. "Ah, take him in there. Down the hall. first door, right, there, put him on the bed." George lowered the moaning boy onto his bed. Iris moved past. George was surprised to see she was carrying a hypodermic needle. She expertly wiped Pug's arm and gave him a shot. In a few moments he relaxed a little. He was either passed out or asleep. George silently shuffled toward the door. He went outside and stood, waiting for Iris. In a few minutes she slipped out the door and closed it behind her.

"Hell of a migraine."

"It's not exactly a migraine. He'll be all right." She was evasive. "Did you get a lot of bait?" She looked worried but was apparently trying to make out as if nothing had happened. "How did your trip go?"

"Fine, we got a boat load. What's wrong with the boy?"

"He has these, headaches. He'll be all, he'll be fine."

"What kind of headache requires a shot?"

"His does. Pills don't work. Let's sit under the tree, shall we?"

"Um... OK." George didn't want to stay. He now wished the boy had not come along. He felt responsible and was afraid of what Iris might do. "I, um, I'm sorry. How long has he been having these headaches?"

"Not too long. A few months."

George looked at her suddenly. "The other day, he said he was sick. The headaches?"

"Yes, it was." She paused, as if that wasn't all.

"What causes them?"

"He fell, about six months ago. At my father's place. I was there putting things away. My father had just died, and I had to take care of things. He was playing, and he fell. In the barn."

"How long before he's over it? He get a concussion or something?"

"Did Pug have a good time with you?" She was avoiding George's questions.

George wondered why she was changing the subject. "Yes," he said, stumbling over his words. "We, um, really had a good time." The words he spoke sounded foreign to his ears. He didn't have fun. He hated fun.

"So tell me more about how he fell out of the boat."

"Yes, well, it was my fault." To himself, he said, "here it comes. I'm in trouble now." George was watching the door of the mobile home as he spoke. He kept wanting Pug to come busting out. "He, ah, I cut the engine, and cut too sharp when I was coming into the pier. I sort-of hit the pier too hard. The boy was watching those damned birds so when the boat hit he just flopped out." He felt guilty. "It's my fault, I hope I didn't cause...."

"Oh, no, George, don't think that. No, don't think that at all. I'd never blame you. It just happened. Sounds, um, kind'a funny."

George looked sheepish. "Well, yeah, it kind'a was. He went over the end of the boat and I scrambled up to get him. I thought, 'damn, I already killed the kid!' I was so scared," George looked off, staring at nothing, recalling the story. I yanked him up out of the water. He was making weird sounds. I thought he was drowning. But come to see he was laughing for all the world." George paused. "Damn, sure... I'm sorry, my mouth sometimes, darn sure was relieved."

Iris looked at George with a grin. "Sounds funny. Too bad you didn't get it on video!" She joked. "And don't worry about your language. I've heard worse."

"Yeah," George chuckled in spite of himself, "I don't, ...I haven't laughed like that in a long, long time."

Iris turned and looked George in the eyes. She could see it.

He knew, she could see, way down where others could not see. No-one else had ever looked. Not like she looked. And not like her son looked. Both of them were different, somehow. George turned away.

"Well, then, I'm really glad Pug had a chance to have fun."

"It was all fine. If it wasn't for those damn birds. They sh... crap all over my boat, get in the way of the nets." He almost frowned, "your boy wasn't much help there. He seems to love the things."

"Seagulls?"

"Yeah, damn rodents with wings."

"Oh, yeah, he loves them." Iris looked up at the sky. "He says he feeds them at his hurting place."

"We're a ways inland for seagulls," George said skeptically. "He said he would be one someday." George paused, hesitating. "You have a remarkable boy. He'll be president someday."

Iris sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

George saw her lip quiver. "What is it?" he asked. A shadow moved across her features.

"He, ah, my little boy,..." She stammered. She looked toward the house. She shook as if she were chilled. But the air was hot. There were tears in her eyes.

George stood. He was beginning to understand. Some of the things the kid had said and the way his mother looked now, he didn't want to know. "That's fine. I, you don't have to, I don't think I want to hear this." He turned toward the truck.

"My little boy will never be resident," she blurted suddenly. "He'll never, ah... never be president of his senior class. He'll never even be in High School. My son, he's going to, ah, he's going to die." The word was spoken so softly George almost didn't hear them. He coughed, loudly. He couldn't clear his throat. The stone-cold expression on his face did not show the sudden storm that had erupted inside him.

"I have to go." George turned to Iris. She was standing limply.

"My little boy is going to die...." her voice trailed off.

She stood, walked to him and lifted her arms around him. Then she sank her sobbing face into his shoulder. He stood there. One of his arms rose to almost an embrace. The other hung limp. Had she seen his face Iris may well have ran quickly into the house. All the color was gone from his face. He

looked as if he'd chiseled from granite. The moment passed. Iris awkwardly moved away. George let his arm drop.

"I have to go." He walked to his truck.

Chapter Six

"Shut up. Shut the hell up!" George held his head. "Shut up! Go away! Leave me alone! Goddamn Sonofabitch, go away!" The door buzzer was going on and off, on and off. Someone was banging on the front door of the store. George slid off the bed and onto the floor. He slowly pulled himself onto his feet. His hair was matted, his clothes crumpled, he smelled. With one hand on the top of his head, the other sliding along the wall to steady him, George worked his way toward the store. The buzzer was incessant, zinging through his head like a giant fly, ready to eat him.

"Go away," he squeaked. He stumbled through the door into the store, hitting the floor hard. For a few seconds he lay in a heap. Not willing or wanting to get up, he crawled around the counter. There were those eyes. Those beady little eyes. They were peeping through the door.

"Mister! Pop! Hello! Are you in there?" George yanked his head back before the boy saw him. "Mister, hello! Hello mister!" The buzzer rang with each word the boy spoke:

"Mister..." Buzzzz; "Hello..." Buzzzzzz; "Hello...." Bzzzz. George slumped against the back of the counter, out of Pug's sight, and kept still.

"Go away, go away, go away...." he mumbled, moving his head from side to side. Eventually the boy gave up. Silence. George clambered onto his knees. He looked over the counter, making sure the boy was not still looking into the store. He stood. Very carefully, he tiptoed to the front door. Pug sat on the steps, looking away. "Go away, kid, go away and, and, go on off and die." George whispered.

The boy looked around, as if he had heard, though George knew he could not have. He ducked anyway. Then he went back to his apartment. After the boy had gone the telephone started ringing. It rang and rang and rang. The bell echoed through the chambers of George's head like screams in the hallways of an asylum. It rang until George could take no more. He lifted the handset, holding it to his ear. It was Iris.

"George? Are you there? George? Who is this? George, have you seen...." He hung up. Back to the cabinet. Gin. straight. Not much left. Keep it up. Stay numb. Why the hell did that kid have to, why did he have to show up here. "All the Gin Joints in all the world, and she has to walk into mine...." You are hallucinating, George, he told himself. He fell across the sofa. Pointing it like a lethal weapon he fired the remote at the television. "Play it Sam... If she can... take..." The sound faded but thought continued: "I can't take it. I am a worm. Low, slimy worm, just stick a hook up my ass and throw me in

the water. Be done with it.” George moved his head back and forth, side to side, watching the room spin round and round.

“How stupid can I get? You’d think I’d learn. I can’t care. Not about nobody. Nobody. They die. Die. Helen, oh Helen.” He spoke out loud to no-one in the room. His head fell. He sank into oblivion. Visions of a happy kid drifted in front of him. Pug, waving from the front of a boat. Pressing his eyes against a window. He could have cared for that kid. Good kid. Then, there he stood, straight and tall, twenty, twenty-two years old. President Pug. How do you do. You look gaunt, Mister President. Oh, your face, Mr. President. Oh, God, your skin. Your skin, Mister Pres.... President Pug, his face shrunk, skin falling away, bone, just bone, Pug melted into a tall skeleton. A tall, white, three-piece-suited skeleton. Then the bones crumbled. Frump, a heap of bone and fabric. Empty sockets staring endlessly.

Now the sockets were in a head in a box. A box. A casket.

Now it was a face. Long, flowing hair, dark, lovely hair. A face, beautiful, but pale, white, so, so white. No smile, no sparkle in the eyes. Gone. “Oh, God! Helen, Helen, where are you when I need you.” George curled up into a ball. “Why didn’t you tell me, leave the kid alone.” He would not be dying... It is my fault... my fault... Darkness. Black, ugly, safe, darkness. George’s hallucinations faded into nothingness. The strangest part of all was how the kid managed to break through George’s iced in heart in the first place. But he had and it was now too late. George was a goner.

In the kitchen Cat dug through an over-turned trash can looking for something to eat.

* * * * *

The smell woke him. He’d never smelled such a bad smell. George opened his eyes. Shafts of light sliced through his head. Eyes shut. Eyes open, only a squint. “Oh, yesssss...” He hissed. He tried to sit up. He was on his couch. He pulled at the fabric covering trying to get upright. The fabric slipped. He fell back. “Ugh.” Again. Fabric tight this time. He sat up. “Oh, yes, yes, I am sure I have a head. I feel it, do I feel it. Shit.” He looked down. His hand was molded around the television remote. His fingers wouldn’t move, just clung to the thing. Numb. Slowly he started moving his fingers, both hands, more and more. And his toes. It took a few minutes but he regained the feeling in his hands and arms. Then he wished he hadn’t. “Oh, yes, God! Yes, I have a body too. Head and body, perfect, painful harmony. How sweet.” Opening his eyes wider he spied the cat in the middle of the floor chasing his tail. Round and round and round. George swayed, wider and wider, watching Cat spin. The spinning moved from

the cat to George's head, then his stomach. He bolted for the bathroom, knocking over a dining chair on his way. Not turning fast enough, he slammed into the bathroom door. Then onto his knees over the toilet. Heaves. Breathing heavily he reached up and flushed. Fleeting he thought about shoving his head into the water and ending it all. "Goodbye cruel world!"

"What the hell is that smell?" George pulled on his shirt, holding a fold up to his nose. Wheww! But that was not it. He was bad, but not that bad. He held his nose in the air and sniffed, following Cat's example. Outside. It came from outside. George stumbled to the kitchen and fired up the coffee pot. He spilled coffee grounds all over the counter and water on the floor but he managed to get enough in the right places to start a brew. "What is that smell?" George started for the back door. He halted. He was remembering. The kid. The buzzer. The phone. He crouched and shuffled quietly toward the store. Carefully he approached the windows. No one outside. He walked to every window, making sure that kid wasn't hanging around somewhere. Nobody. He went back to the apartment to the back door and stepped outside. The sun was bright and very hot. He held his hand over squinting eyes, sniffing. The boat. The damned bait. He walked over. "How long have I been out of it?"

His watch was not on his arm. "What day is this?" He hesitantly lifted the lid of an ice-chest, still sitting in his boat. Then he slammed it. "Ugh!" He gagged, feeling the urge again, but holding it off. Now he remembered. He had driven straight home and crawled right into a bottle. This stuff looked like it had been baking for a week or more in the sun. He'd have to bury it. Shuffling back toward the door he wondered if he could dig a big enough hole just to drop boat and all in.

"Emm, them Colombian Beans," George purred, holding a cup of coffee to his lips. It looked like syrup. Tasted worse. But it was coffee. He rose and poured a third of the drink out of the cup, added water, put the new mixture into the microwave. He burned his lip on the result. And it was still horrible. "What day is this?" It was still worrying him. Unable to locate his watch anywhere he stared at a calendar hanging on the wall. "Which one of you numbers is the right one?" He stood and fell against the calendar. "Which one? Come on, fess up!" He tapped on the wall. No answer. "Hello?" He held the telephone to his ear. "Hello?" Closing one eye, he took aim with the other and pushed Zero. "Operator, what day is this? No, I mean the date. Really? You sure? Thank you, operator." He put the phone back in its holder.

"Hello, Cat. Where the hell are you? You know what day it is? I been on a five-day bender. No wonder I'm starved." George went to the cabinet. Tuna fish. That was all. He took down two cans and opened them. One he ceremoniously dumped on the floor. "Here Cat. You got to be starved too." The other he carried to the table. From a pantry he pulled out a loaf of bread. Just before he bit into a slice

he spotted a little green coloration around its edges. There was that urge again. He puffed his cheeks, moaned, and clenched the table. His dinner was canned tuna and coffee. He wondered why he didn't just die. This kind of stuff should have killed him long ago.

* * * * *

A clothes pin stuck from George's nose. He carried first one, then another, ice chest across his back yard and toward the hole he had dug. He hoped the hole was deep enough. He was dumping a year's stock—considering his current volume—into that hole. After he covered the mess up he took the chests to a shed and soaped them down. He sprayed them with spray disinfectant, dusted them with baking powder, poured bleach on them. They still smelled. Giving up, he left them open in direct sunlight. Next, he unloaded the boat, jacked the front of the trailer high in the air, and scrubbed the inside of the boat with an old broom and scrubbing powder. It still smelled too. But at least not as bad. He went back into the house.

"Hello? This Saltwater Supply? This is George, at Seaside Bait and Tackle. What? Seaside Bait and Tackle. Seaside BAIT AND TACKLE. I need some stock. What? Yes, I have, it has been a while. Need it delivered. Coastal Highway. Yes, come b'out thirty miles... What? You don't deliver that far? When did you stop? Well, fine, the hell with you too." Now where would he get new stock for his bait store? He decided to go into town and pick up a few things at the carry out wholesaler.

"Later, Cat." George pulled the door closed and listened for the lock to snap. He looked around. There hadn't been any sign of the kid but he was afraid the kid would show up. Bad enough the boy would haunt his nightmares. He never wanted to see him again.

"Screw it!" He exclaimed, as he slammed the truck door.

It was real hard to keep from thinking. The truck's engine droned. Tires whined. Hot blasts of air slammed his left cheek from outside the truck through the open window. For amusement George counted the power poles passing alongside the road.

* * * * *

It was a ridiculous precaution. George backed his truck up to the back door. He lugged supplies all the way through the apartment and into the store. All windows were covered by closed blinds. A couple hours passed before everything was put up. In another two hours George had his apartment in a

more acceptable shape. The last thing he stowed away was a new stock of Gin, bottles clanging loudly as he stood them on the shelf. Why he bought the stuff he didn't know. He sure didn't need another five-day blitz.

Duties complete and all washed up the bait-keeper settled down at the table with some acceptable coffee, a crescent roll, and a newspaper. He scanned every column like he used to do years ago. He was feeling pretty good now. All cleaned up, stock in place. Tomorrow he would go catch some saltwater bait. Then back in business. He planned to put up a sign saying "Back on the planet." That would attract attention. Maybe he could replenish his bank account. And it was true, too. He was back from the never-never land of people and heartache. He hadn't even said "Helen" one time. The wound was sealed again. People die. She died. That's that. It's a cruel world.

"Just you and me and dead fish, Cat." George reached down to scratch his best friend's fur. The paper was holding only half of his attention. The other half of his mind planned the re-opening his of store. Seaside Bait and Tackle would rise from the ashes like the phoenix. Only one very tiny part of his mind held a dread that the first thing he'd see opening day would be those little eyes peering through the door.

The phone rang. George's old answering machine worked fine, taking the call George did not want to take. The caller hung up without a message. But there were messages, he noticed.

"Beep. George? Are you OK George? Pug said you are not open. Call, George." That was the first message. There were two similar messages. Then a fourth: "George, I don't know where you are. Pug is in the hospital. Houston. I..." Iris' voice trailed off. The machine clicked. No more messages. George stared at the machine.

"What does that have to do with me? Hey, Cat? What? Just tell me!" It had nothing to do with him. Kids die every day. The world is full of dying kids. And dying grownups. People die. "Awe, hell." George walked into the kitchen and reached up onto a shelf. He took hold of a bottle, held it up in salute, then twisted the cap.

* * * * *

"Good day for fishing, Cat!" George peered outside. Overcast and misting rain. "Lovely." He slipped a cap on his head, swatted at the cat, and left. The truck roared to life. Heat from the engine came through the firewall. George was soaked with sweat. He couldn't let the window down very far, it was raining. But the heat won. The window came down. By the time he pulled up at the boat ramp

George was soaked with sweat and rain. It felt good, though. Some of his headache was seeping out his hair follicles and being washed away by the rain. George took off his hat and let huge drops pound him. Only a little, then it was too much. He put the cap back on. Hot, sticky Texas rain. "Lovely. Just lovely."

The boat slid easily off the trailer. He pushed it backwards, holding the bowline. Slowly it drifted away. With a sideways jerk of the line it moved from the trailer and headed for the bank. It was too heavy to snug up on the bank so George stretched the line and secured it to a railing beside the ramp. He got back into the truck and drove it to a parking space. Half an hour later he was in the shallows scooping up bait fish.

When the chests were full he decided to catch something to eat. In a nearby fishing spot he cast a line. Three or four tugs, and a fish. The day was going well. "Just me and me! The way I like it." He headed back. Dusk was settling in. He approached the same pier he'd slammed into a few days before. All day long he had done his best to push memories of that day out of his head. Here came the ultimate test. He approached from the same direction. Engine cut, turn, wham. George went sprawling forward. He landed on his face in the middle of the boat, twisted between two ice-chests and tangled in a net. "Mother fucker, I am never going to learn," He grumbled. He pulled himself back to his seat. When he looked forward, there he was. Pug, sitting on the front seat, holding the bowline, soaking wet and giggling. George shook his head. He looked back. Nothing. "That's not a damn bit funny. Not a damn bit!" He scowled.

* * * * *

"Back on planet earth? Where you been? Mars?" The customer grinned stupidly. He motioned at sodas and chips on the counter, implying he wanted to pay.

"You would not believe, fella'." George rang him up.

"Tell me about it."

"Some other time."

"Well,"

"Thanks. Come to see us again." George dismissed him. His new idea had brought a few people back into the store but it had also pulled a few weirdo's out of the woods, too. George walked to the door to see what kind of spaceship the customer arrived in. As they pulled away a Four-by-four passed. It was the SUV. It was her. Iris. She was alone. Looked alone. Maybe the kid was lying on the back seat. Maybe. Maybe I ought to mind my store, George said to himself. He turned back. Then he looked

at his watch. "Close enough." He flipped the OPEN/CLOSED sign, slipped the bolt in the lock, went back to the apartment. He laid out a sandwich and reached up onto a shelf. There was a clanking of bottles. "I'll hate myself in the morning." Of course. He hated himself every morning and kept it up all day.

* * * * *

"George, maybe you don't give a shit but anyway, Pug is not doing very well. He still asks about you. Don't know why. If you're ever going to grow a spine you might visit him. You are about his only friend. Sad, huh?" George clicked off the machine.

If he believed in a god George would thank him for the invention of answering machines. They are pretty old-fashioned these days but he loved his. It kept him isolated.

"She's pretty smart-ass," George said to Cat. "What's that damn kid to me?" Try as he might, though, George found dismissing that boy from his mind totally impossible. He still didn't know why. Maybe it was because the boy reminded him of himself. Maybe the boy seemed like the kid he and Helen always wanted.

The world is going to hell quick, George thought. He sat, looking at the cabinet. "No, stupid. You have a store to run." On impulse George picked up the telephone. "Operator, give me Houston information." He dialed a number. "Hello, I want to order some flowers. I don't know, you pick them. Credit Card. Right. To a little boy, Pug, no, his name is George. Like mine. In a Houston hospital..."

* * * * *

Click. George stabbed the button on the stereo. Music filled the store. George turned it down. "Surf's up, Cat. It's going to be a pretty good day." He reached over and scratched the cat's head.

"You open?"

"Yeah, just hadn't made it to the sign yet."

"What kind of bait you have?" The customer looked around the store.

"What kind you need?" George walked to the Freezer.

Chapter Seven

A vehicle pulled up in the parking lot. George heard gravel crunching under tires. It sounded like it stopped quickly, sliding. He wondered who was in a hurry today. Crossing to the door, George saw a red SUV parked close against the front steps. He slipped the bolt in the door just as the knob turned. He forgot the OPEN/CLOSE sign. It was her. Iris. Suddenly George was struggling with his breath.

One step inside the store and she stopped. Half a second she surveyed the bait-stand, then her fiery eyes leveled on George. He opened his mouth to speak but there were no words. His mouth hung open.

"Pug got your flowers." Her voice was flat, even, unemotional. The sort of tone a jury foreman uses when he says, "We find the defendant, guilty."

"Good."

"What kind of a man are you?"

No answer.

"Get a dying boy all pumped up, let him call you Pop, then desert him."

George shrugged.

"Well?"

"I, uh..."

"What? Where do you get off...." She is angry, George thought. It was an understatement.

"Uh, I'm sorry?"

She ignored his words. "... you just send a bunch of flowers like...." She searched the air for something to say. Her face was so red her freckles were barely visible.

"How did you know? I sent them, I told the lady, I told the florist not to...."

"From George to George."

"That's what it said?"

"That's what it said."

"Oh."

"Yes."

George stood facing her, hands limp at his sides. Her hands were defiantly plunged into jean pockets. Neither of them said anything until he could bare it no longer. "Want some Coffee?"

"What?"

"Coffee."

"You, you are a pathetic drunk, too selfish to give a damn about anyone but yourself." George wished he'd kept his mouth shut. She had started now and was going to finish. "You," She looked up, "I brought my son here to this part of Texas to let him die with a clear head, a clear heart. Here, away from lousy influences, and what happens? His head gets all screwed up by an old selfish, self-centered bastard. I thought I had explained away your existence. He was fine. Then those flowers. Lilies, of all things. Lilies. Like he's already dead."

"I told them to pick something appropriate." George shrugged. "I'm not very good at those things."

"Well, they sent Lilies. And you're not good at a damn thing, apparently. But drinking." A fly buzzed around her head and she seemed distracted.

"I...."

"I brought my son here to find out about life, living, more than the hateful, self-centered jerks in the city. But they can't be gotten away from. He doesn't need any more heartache....," her words faded as she lost strength to continue. Hanging her head, she slumped back against the door. She sobbed, her shoulders shaking. George stood in the middle of the room, stone-faced and silent. "I've prayed, Oh how I've prayed. He's just a little boy. He should not die!"

George's mouth formed words, but nothing came out. He'd been out of touch with people for too long.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"You said that. No, I don't want any damned coffee!"

"A soda?"

"No!"

"Can we go sit and talk?"

"Ah, well, ah, OK. Let's talk." Her words carried such sarcasm they dripped rather than flew from her mouth. She flipped her hair out of her eyes with a deft twist of her hand. "Talk. Right."

"You sure you wouldn't like something to drink? Soda? Coffee?" George had not a clue about how to handle this situation.

"Goddammit George, are you nuts? What's with you? My boy is dying and you want to give me a drink?"

George sucked in a breath. "Look, um... Iris," he faltered, "I don't, I mean, look, I'm sorry about your boy. I am. But I don't know what the f... I mean what the, um, what to say. He is a good kid. I

liked him... like him. But..." his voice trailed off as he looked at Iris' face. Color was slowly draining away. "I'm just not very goddamn good with people. I'm just a lousy old bastard who lives in a bottle. I'm not the kind of friend your kid needs."

"Of course you are not," Iris said, more calm now. "But for some strange reason you turned into one. You're not the first man who smelled like booze and looked like shit Pug has ever known. He doesn't notice such stuff. He has a way of getting beyond that." She wasn't really talking to George anymore. She was recalling a memory. "He sees something else."

"Do I really look like shit?" George was a little hurt by that remark. He had always played the bum, fashioning his wardrobe on Bogart at his scruffy best. But shit seemed a little harsh.

Iris lifted her brows. She looked a little embarrassed now. Color came back to her features. "Well," she said, looking at him with her head lowered and eyes raised, "maybe only on good days." She smiled. The sun came out in George's store.

"OK, then, George, where's that soda?"

"Good." George walked over and slid the top back from the chest and pulled out a drink. Then another. He slid the cover back.

"That's an antique." She was eying the soda chest.

"My store's an antique."

She looked up and around. "It is, isn't it?"

"Would you like to go back to the kitchen and sit at the table?"

"Kitchen?"

"My apartment," George waived his hand toward the passageway.

"Apartment?" She looked blank.

"Forget the apartment. Let's go outside." He walked to the door and held it open. She passed. He handed her the soda. He pointed to the edge of the porch, indicating a place to sit. A car pulled up. Someone got out.

"You open?"

"What you need?"

"Cola."

"Sorry, Out. Closed today. Owner sick. Come again, please."

The man looked unhappy but got back into the car. George looked around and saw that the sign still said closed. He found a perch on the top of a post near Iris. She was staring down the highway lost in thought. They sat there for a very long time without any conversation. Then George stirred.

"How is he?"

"What do you care?" Her words snapped at him. But there was less ferocity in them than they sounded.

"I just... Um...." George took a deep breath. His throat felt tight and there was a slight quiver in his breathing that really annoyed him. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry." Iris muttered, "I'm sorry, George. He's not good. Not good. Pug's not good." She paused a minute, then added, "And you're no help."

"Thanks," George shrugged.

"What?"

"Thanks for reminding me."

"You're welcome." She looked at him. Her lips stopped just short of a smile. Her eyes were moist.

"He's not good?"

"It will not be long."

"That short a time?"

"That short."

"I'm sorry."

"What good is... Thank you. So am I." There was silence for an eternal moment. George finished his soda, dropping the empty bottle to the gravel. It clanked.

"I don't know. Nothing makes much sense, not anymore." She was talking to the breeze, not to him. "I moved down here, put this trailer here, hoping that Pug's last days would be as simple and happy as possible. Here, out in the middle of nowhere, no people, no hassles. Dad left me some money so I could spend time with him. But you know what?" She turned towards George suddenly and looked him in the eye, "You know what? I THOUGHT GOD WOULD FIX PUG AND HE WOULDN'T DIE!" She flung the words out in a circle as she stood and walked down the steps. She stood in the middle of the gravel lot looking for all the world like a willow tree.

"And this land. It was a dream of his, this land. Dad's dream, it was. He loved this land and he loved Pug. He wanted to move here, be closer to the ocean. Build a house, all that. He loved whiskey more. He was only Fifty-Two. He got the bottle and the fried liver. I got the land and a dyin' boy."

Now George understood who else was the drunk who looked like shit.

Iris sucked in a long breath, looking upwards at a white cloud passing in the otherwise blue sky.

"What's the deal?"

"God dammit this is bullshit!" she stomped her foot. "My boy is dying and all anybody can do is talk crap about love and God and send stupid-assed flowers!" Taking a breath her voice fell only slightly. "I should be there, too. I should be there instead of here trying to talk another don't-give-a-damn drunk into giving a damn. How stupid is that?" Her face showed resolve. She stuck a hand in her pocket fishing for keys.

George looked around to see if anyone was watching. A tinge of fear streaked through his mind telling him if someone heard this woman screaming he might be accused of something. But the thought passed as quickly as it came. He looked at the wilted, shrunken but still very attractive woman standing in his lot, looking up at a cloud with such an expression of pain. Her eyes were filled with tears which ran down her cheeks. "Life sucks," he said.

Slowly she looked around for the source of the words. Squinting now in George's direction, she said, "What?"

"Life sucks."

"No," She had forgotten he was there. "No, life is precious. That's your problem. Life is precious. It's what most people do with and in life that sucks. Life is beautiful."

"Come on," George said, "life is cheaper than, than," he searched his head for a word, "cheaper than shit. That's all. We live, we die. People live, they die. Goddammit, that's the way of the world." George stood. "Either we get all fucked up about it or we just get over it."

"I see you get over it, George the drunk. You don't get over life, you just pickle it." She looked at him. Her eyes probed his. He knew she knew. Just like before. She could see. But suddenly what she'd said in all seriousness sounded so absurd they were funny. She laughed.

George laughed. "I like pickles," he said, not entirely appropriately but because he could think of nothing else. The moment passed.

"I, um..." George forced himself to look into her eyes, "I am sorry. If there's anything I can do...."

"You know life is priceless. Anyone who's lost someone knows life is priceless, George."

She had seen it. George knew then Iris possessed the same talent her son had, the ability to look right through a pair of eyes and into a heart. "Never mind." He looked away. He felt chill, though the temperature was in the nineties. "Why are you here?" What Iris had said that she should be with her son, made him curious.

"To ask a favor."

"What?"

"I would like for you to visit Pug."

“Ha! No way, lady. No ma’am.” It was a thought, not spoken words. “I’m doing just fine as a dead fish.” Without saying anything aloud George stood and walked to the edge of the porch. He stared down the highway, speaking over his shoulder, “I’m sorry the kid, ah, your boy is dying. I really am, as much as I can be sorry about anything. But I can’t.” His words landed flat on the gravel. The chill grew stronger even as the sun was quietly turning his arms a darker red.

Iris didn’t respond right away. She must have been choosing her words carefully. What she said after a pause took George by surprise. “You feel too deeply, George.”

Silence. Not even the heat of the sun could affect the chill in George’s blood.

“I don’t feel, Lady.”

More silence.

The words George said were spoken quickly, without any thought attached. George had expected her to castigate him, scream at him, or something.

“You feel too deeply. You are always going to. No matter how deep you sink into that bottle you’ll never escape it. Someone as old as you, I’d have thought, would learn to overcome pain, not try to drown it. You’ve been hurt, I can see that, but I’ve never seen anyone wallow in it, relish it, like you.” Her eyes burned holes in his head. He could feel them on him, though he did not dare look.

“Who are you, lady?” George shouted, infuriated. “Who are you? What do you know? Life ain’t worth nothing. Who the hell are you!?” George was shouting. He paced. Then he pointed his finger toward her. “Let me tell you, Lady. You and your God-damned ‘life is precious,’ crap. You’re right, I know what it is like to lose. I lost the only, the..., I lost her, and it was my fault. I killed her.” He was not making much sense to Iris, or even to himself. But he went on. “Helen, was all I ever... she was everything. It was my fault. But sure, we have friends, right? Well, we have friends.” He panted, catching his breath.

“Yes, friends. I’ll tell you. I just lost it. I mean all. I mean, flipped my noodle, get it? I couldn’t take seeing Helen in that damned box. Over. It couldn’t be over. My friends, they tried to have me committed. You bet. I needed help and comfort and, well, they fixed me up. You ain’t never been alone like I been alone, lady. Never!” His last words were a screech. He was finished. Iris gently set the empty soda bottle on the porch.

“I am about to be, George. I am about to be.” Slowly she moved toward the SUV, dragging her feet in the gravel. “I’m about to be just as alone as you.” She turned to him, looking over the top of the car door, “I don’t know how I’m going to live without my son,” she said, her lip trembling. “What I’m not going to do is crawl into a damned bottle like my father did, like you have.” She looked at George and

beyond him at the same time. "Life is precious, George. And I'm going to celebrate the life of my son and honor it. I'm not going to piss on it like you and dad did by crawling into a damned bottle and killing myself one sip at a time." In resolve Iris glared at him, "Goodbye, George, and God damn you."

She was gone a long time before George moved. He stood there for nearly an hour, hunch-backed, sweating, panting. A car passed on the highway. He never heard the sound but the movement attracted his attention. It was a red four-wheel drive. He thought she'd come back, but it wasn't her.

Across the porch, into the store, George dragged himself. He slid the bolt. He walked back to the apartment and followed the well-beaten path to the cabinet. Reaching for the bottle was a reflex. EXTRA DRY GIN. He poured a half-glass. This time, it won't work. He knew it. He'd done it up good, this time. Cursed at a dying boy's mother. A couple of sips and he sat the glass on the table, stood, walked back into his store.

* * * * *

"What's this, Cat?" A long envelope with no return address. George's name and address were typed. Postmark was Houston. He put the letter back into the stack and walked inside. His morning ritual began: coffee, newspaper, crescent roll. Page one. Page two. Page three. But that strange envelope distracted him.

Picking it up, he slipped a butter knife along underneath the flap.

Opening the letter, he read:

Dear George,

I wish you would reconsider. Pug has had few people to come see him. He is holding his own right now but the doctors are not hopeful. Perhaps you could write him a letter if you can't come to Houston. He needs you, he really does.

I am sorry that I was so harsh on you. I had no right.

You have your problems. We have ours. I'm sorry about that woman, Helen.

Praying is not easy, but when I do, I try to remember to pray for you.

Iris.

PS: I thought you might want to see what Pug wrote today. He is stronger than both of us.

“Why don’t that woman leave me alone?” George tossed the letter on the table. He sipped some coffee. The kid doesn’t mean anything. George picked up the letter again. He looked at the second page. It was a photocopy of a note, written in a child’s handwriting. George read it, a lump growing in his throat, choking off his breath.

...MY LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT,

I LEAVE ALL THE LOVE IN THE WORLD TO MOM...

... AND I LEAVE MY HURTING PLACE TO MISTER POP. I HOPE HE GO THERE AND NOT HURT, SO HE WON’T HURT NO OTHER BOY’S FEELINGS, AND SO HE WON’T HURT ANY MORE. I DREW A MAP, IT ON THE BACK...

...I LOVE MOM, AND I LOVE POP AT THE BAIT STAND. I LOVE GRANDPA. I HOPE I SEE THEM IN HEAVEN.

George laid the paper on the table. He looked on the back, for the map, then realized it was a photocopy. Suddenly he was afraid to look any further in the paper, afraid of what he might find in the obituaries. He folded the newsprint. Picking up the letter, he placed it back in its envelope.

Slowly George rose from his chair. He walked through the storage room and into the store, made sure the sign said “closed,” checked the bolt, put the cash from the register into the drop safe. Then he grabbed his jacket, picked up a cap and stepped outside his back door, pulled it closed and made sure it was locked.

Chapter Eight

"Five thirteen? Thanks nurse." George walked along the hospital corridor. His boot heels made a hollow thump, thump, thump. Around the corner, the elevator, fifth floor, he pushed the button. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Doors opened. The hallway on this floor was painted a blue pastel, cartoon characters on the walls. "Thirteen... thirteen...", he mumbled, following the numbers on the doors. He held a card in his nervous hand. Something stupid, a cartoon card. Hollow-sounding "Get Well" on the front. They don't make cards that say, "Get it over soon."

There it was. Five-One-Three. George lifted his hand to knock, then thought better of it. At least the kid was still..., he walked on past, to the nurses station. "Nurse?"

"May I help you sir?"

"The boy, there, five-thirteen. Could you tell me his status?" Another stupid question from the stupid question artist, George thought.

"Status? What do you mean?"

"Ah, well, how is he doing?"

"Well, let's see," She reached for a chart, leaning forward and peering over her glasses at him.

"Five, ah, thirteen. Yes. George."

"He likes Pug."

"Pug. Well, we have to go by the charts, you know."

"Whatever. How is he?"

"He's, ah," she lifted up some sheets of paper in the chart. Then her eyebrows rose. She shook her head, looking at George sadly. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm new to the floor, haven't gotten to know all the patients yet."

"I understand."

"Are you a relative?"

"No, no, a friend. Not family, no, just Pug's friend. George. George's friend."

"I am sorry, sir, patient information is confidential. You'll have to ask the family."

"What? Confidential? Why? I mean, can't you tell me...."

"You'll have to ask the family, sir. Patients have rights, you know. I am sorry." She cut him off cold, dropping the chart in a rack with a thud.

"Oh, well, thanks." George walked dejectedly back down the hallway. He considered pulling his boots off, they made so much noise. As he approached Pug's room Iris stepped into the hallway. She pulled the door closed, then fell against it, facing the hallway. She didn't see George. He had a chance to watch her for a moment. She didn't look well.

"Hi." He whispered. Iris looked up toward him. There was recognition, and an unreadable expression on her face.

"Hi." she repeated, also at a whisper.

"How is he?"

"Not good."

"I'm Sorry." She shrugged.

"May I? Is he awake?"

"Yes." She moved aside. "He's a little incoherent. Drugs, you know."

"OK." George tiptoed into the room. He looked around. The room was stark, barren. There were no great bunches of colorful flowers, no cards, only a green plant, a bowl of fruit, and a fading bunch of lilies. His lilies, he guessed. Across from the window a bed covered with tubes and wires and monitors stood. Buried in the midst of the equipment was a very small, pale boy.

The boy didn't hear George approach.

"Ah, hello Pug." George leaned over the bed. The boy looked bad. He had shrunk, George thought, since the day he came peeping through the window at Seaside Bait and Tackle. Had that only been just a few weeks ago? It seemed like years. Ages.

"Pop!" The voice was weak, but excited. "Pop, you did come."

"I'm right here, Pug. Right here, friend." George turned away coughing, trying to clear his throat. "How you doin'?"

"Not so good, Pop." The boy lifted his arm, displaying an IV tube. "I'm all wired up." He grinned.

"Looks that way."

"Sorry, ah, I haven't seen you, I, ah, have been away. When I got back, I, ah, had to run the store, you know."

"It's all right, Mom told me."

"She did?"

"Yes, she told me that you felt bad, but just couldn't make it."

"Yes, Pug, that's it."

"Thanks for coming, Pop." Pug's eyes rolled a little. "Am I still your friend?"

"Yeah, kid. still friends. We'll..." George started to say something about going fishing. Pug was drifting off to sleep. "Friends, Pug, good friends." The boy didn't hear. He was snoring gently. George had expected this trip to rip his insides to shreds. But he felt nothing. All the Gin in Texas couldn't make him as numb as he was then. He wondered what it meant. He spied a chair in the corner and went over to it. He spent a few minutes there, glad the boy was asleep but wishing he weren't. He wanted to be sure the boy knew he came. He didn't want this trip to be wasted. He cursed himself for having such a thought.

Iris slipped into the room looking much older than he remembered her, Even from half an hour ago. George rose to give her his chair. He grinned weakly, nodding. Iris followed him into the hallway.

"Thanks. Thanks for coming." She spoke softly.

"Sure." George said. "I came for the map."

"What?"

"The map."

"I don't...."

"You know, you sent me a copy of Pug's, ah, will. He said he drew me a map, on the back. You didn't copy it. I came for a copy of the map."

"Oh," she muttered. Something of a quizzical look seeped through the pain in her face. "Yeah, OK, right. I have it, here." She dug in the purse she was carrying. "Here it is." She looked up, again an unreadable expression.

George looked away. No more probing eyes.

"I can't give you this." She held the paper tightly.

"No, of course. Is there a copier around?"

"Downstairs, in the office downstairs."

"Can you, would you bring it? So I can have a copy?"

"I can, yes, I can do that."

"Thanks." George stepped back and motioned for her to lead.

She walked to the elevators and pressed the button. They rode down in silence. She led to the office and asked someone to make a copy. Disregarding an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign, she followed the receptionist. That piece of paper meant a great deal to her. Quickly she returned, clutching the original, and handed George a copy. He looked at it.

"Ah, could you join me for some coffee?" Iris was probing his eyes again.

"Yes, I owe you at least that."

"You owe me nothing. But I'd like to talk to you, just a minute, if it's OK."

"OK." They walked towards the cafeteria together without speaking. George could not keep from remembering how barren Pug's room was. You'd think friends, or family, somebody, would send him something. He was nervous, being with Iris. She led the way through the line. They took their coffee and walked to a table.

George spoke first, "I'd like to, first of all, apologize, I am very sorry for having, ah, blown up at you, that day you came to the store. I was way out of line. I am sorry."

"It's OK."

"I want to..., are you sure?"

"I understand. I think. Anyway, I had no right calling you," she paused, "what I called you." She blushed, making her freckles more pronounced. "I still can't believe I said those words. I have never done that before."

"I deserved it. And you were right."

"Please," she cut him off.

"Sorry. It is hard to break old habits. And trashing myself is one of my oldest habits." He looked into his coffee, swirling it around. "I just wanted to say that, well, coming here has been the most difficult thing for me. It has been hard." He saw she looked a little defensive. It occurred to him how selfish his remarks sounded.

"No, please, I'm not fishing for sympathy," He stammered. He reached for her hand, then held back. "I am not very good with words. What I'm trying to say is, well, I've been making it a practice of flushing my feelings down the toilet for ten years. Or stuffing them in a gin bottle. Whatever. Ever since..., he swallowed hard, "since Helen was killed. Died." Iris started to speak, he held up his hand. "Let me go on, before I chicken out." She leaned back.

"I let myself believe I could care again, for a little, tiny second, for a few days. Your son chiseled a tiny fracture in my granite heart. It's weird how that boy affected me." George couldn't believe he was sounding so corny. "What I'm saying is, I came here for Pug. There's no reason he should..., he should not, I didn't want him to be as disillusioned as I am. I am a jerk and I know it. There's no hope for me. But your little boy still is young enough to have some faith in people, in God. That's all. I didn't want to contribute to his losing it. That's all. Especially since, um...." He sat silently stirring his coffee. The rest he left unsaid.

"Pug is an unusual boy. He will get a great deal out of you coming to see him. And you needn't worry. If anyone in this family is in peril of losing faith, it is me. Not Pug. Pug has always been the little

angel floating around, reminding me of what life means.” A few moments passed. “I have to get back. He will wake up soon. Will you come up?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think my courage is gone.” he started to say something else but the thought escaped him.

“Well, I have to go.” She stood.

“Would you tell him I’ll come again? And that I had to go? My store, you know.”

“I’ll tell him. But you won’t be back, will you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry, George, that little boy up there knows and understands much more than you give him credit for. Much more. And thanks again for coming.” She turned and left.

“Sure,” George mumbled. He finished the coffee with a gulp and left the cafeteria, tossing the foam cup violently into a trash can. Walking towards his truck he couldn’t keep from thinking again how barren Pug’s room looked. Just as he reached for the handle of the truck, he turned. Quickly he ran back into the hospital.

* * * * *

“Are these all you have?”

“That’s all.”

“Well, I want them. All of them.”

“Sir?”

“All of them, all the balloons, flowers, everything.”

“I don’t know if we can sell them all, sir, to one person.” The gift shop attendant was an elderly lady, plump and jolly. She was in a tither over George’s request. While she was talking to her supervisor George called the fifth-floor nurses station. He took the names of all the nurses on all three shifts. By the time he had written the last name, the lady was back. “Oh, sir, that is a private phone. You can’t use it.”

“Sorry, lady, but I’m finished. Will you sell them?”

“Yes, you can buy them. But what about other people, other patients, they might not get something if you buy them all.”

“Listen, lady, I don’t give a damn about other patients. There’s a little boy up there dying, and he has nothing in his room, and he should have. And he doesn’t have time for me to run all over Houston.

OK? Now, here's what I want you to do." He handed her some cards he'd pulled from a rack. "Sign this card, lady, write 'to Pug.' Can you do that?"

"OK, sir, who do I sign?"

"Put your name, lady. What is it?"

"Gladys."

"Well, Gladys, sign the card, Gladys. But don't say get well soon, 'cause he ain't going to. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Good, I'll be right back." George walked out the door and down the hall to the receptionist's desk.

"Excuse me, would you help me, please?"

"Yes sir?"

"I have these cards here, and I need them signed. I want a lady's hand to sign them, could you and, ah, maybe your friend over there help me?" The receptionist looked startled. The girl George pointed to looked up.

"Look. There's this boy, upstairs, fifth floor. His room doesn't have anything in it. No flowers. Except some stupid lilies that I sent, but never mind, there's nothing much there. And he is dying, and I want him to have some flowers and things. But I need some cards to go with them, so can you help me?"

"Well, all right. What do you need?"

"I need these cards signed."

"Who's name?"

"Put, 'to Pug.' That's the kid's nick name. His real name is George, but it is a goofy name, so he thinks, so he likes Pug. His mother gave him that name. Never mind. Can you sign it? And you, lady?" George pointed at another clerk who'd looked up at him. Suddenly the most important thing in the world was getting these flowers in Pug's room. He shoved the cards in the receptionist's hand.

"Here's one, put these names on it, please." He handed her a slip of paper where he had written down the names of the nurses. "These are his nurses, see. And here, just put your names on these. Yes. Thanks. Thanks. I'll remember you ladies in my will." George rushed the cards back to the gift shop. He counted the bouquets, the cards, and matched them up.

"Now, I need them delivered, if you please."

"I'm sorry, sir, we don't deliver."

"What? Are you serious?"

"No sir. I mean yes sir. We do not deliver."

"Great!" George wondered how he would get them to the room. He surely couldn't take them there. He was insane enough to do this deed but not brave enough to put his name on it or see that kid again. He stood, looking out the door and down the hall. An orderly came into view pushing a gurney. "Hey, kid." George yelled at the boy. "Hey kid, come here!" The orderly came over.

"Are you real busy?"

"Sir?"

"I need a favor, kid. I need you to take these flowers, here," he waved at the bunches of bouquets, "up to room Five Thirteen."

"I can't do that, sir. Against the rules."

"How about the forty rule?"

"Sir?"

"The forty rule." George pulled out his wallet and extracted two twenty-dollar bills. "The forty rule, kid, what do you say?"

"I'll do it, sir. I like your rules." He snagged the bills.

"What room, sir?"

"Five Thirteen. Five-One-Three. Do not mess up, or I'll find you, and take twice forty dollars out of your hide."

"Yes sir. Five-One-Three."

"One more thing, tell them it's a special delivery from the gift shop, or something. Do not tell them it is from a man, or anything. You've never seen me. This kind lady here gave you forty dollars, right?" George waved toward the cashier. She smiled. The boy nodded, then started loading the gurney with the flowers.

"Very good, kid, and hurry."

George felt better. He watched the rolling bed disappear around the corner loaded with flowers. Pug just didn't know how many friends he had. There was that word again. Friend. He walked to his truck and drove away. Pulling from the parking lot he admitted to himself that he was the worst of cowards.

* * * * *

"Hello?" George was at home. He grabbed the phone clumsily, out of breath. It had been ringing off the wall while he was outside picking up trash off of his parking lot.

"Hello, George?"

"This is George."

"George? Iris."

"Oh, Iris. Yes, hello."

"He's in a coma, George." She was using her flat voice again. George sat down. "He's in a coma, George." She repeated.

"Coma?"

"Yes, George. In a coma. Doctor says," there was sniffing noises, "It's not good, George. I thought you'd want to know."

"I'm sorry, Iris." He was.

"George, thanks for the flowers."

"What flowers?"

"The ones you didn't send. It helped him, a lot. He woke up right after I got back to the room. Then this weird orderly came in, pushing a load of flowers on a bed. Just dumped them all off."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Iris."

"I know George, I know, but anyway, Pug was really happy. He remembered your visit, too. Said you two were still friends. And he said thanks for the flowers, too."

"How did he, um...."

"I told you George, he's a smart boy." There was a pause. "I don't think you will have to worry," Iris said. George heard a sniffing sound, "...worry about coming back to see Pug."

"Don't say that, Iris."

"I have to go, George." There was a click. George held the phone to his hear until a loud beeping forced him to put it down. As much as he wanted to blow the whole thing off, he simply could not do it. The damned kid got to him. So did the kid's mother. He reacted the way he always did. He reached for the bottle, up in the cabinet. Then he remembered the map. Taking it from his shirt pocket, he unfolded the piece of paper. It looked like a child's treasure map. There were arrows, paces, little scribbled boxes. Pug had tried hard to let someone know just where the place was. What was it they called it? The Hurting Place. George looked at his watch, then said, "Why not?"

* * * * *

"I sure ain't no kid no more." George crashed through underbrush, pushing back briars with his hands. He had half a dozen bloody spots on his arms already where briars had stuck him. He squinted

at the map, then looked around. "Let's see, it says, this way, along this creek bed." George walked forward six paces, like it said. Then he slipped and slid headlong down an embankment. "You could have told about that, Pug." He mumbled. He fished around in the leaves for the bottle he had dropped. Almost a full bottle, couldn't lose that. Regaining his footing, George tracked on. The creek bed curved. Pug's map showed that. Either the boy had been here often, or he had a photographic memory. George plugged along.

Following the map George found the tree where roots hung into the creek bed. He followed the instructions to climb to the top. George beheld an amazing sight. How had the boy found it? Up from the creek bank and along a trail, Pug had managed to find the only vantage point on the highest hill for miles. A little open patch among the scrub precisely located allowed a panoramic view.

But this wasn't right. George thought to himself, if he was going to pick a hurting place himself, he would pick the darkest hole he could find, under a tree, in the bushes. He checked the map. It looked right. Then George noticed foil pie pan with a few grains of little round seed in it. Bird seed. Nearby there was a bag of the seed, tied at the top with a twist-tie. It sat on a bread wrapper that looked to have a couple of slices still in it. Oddest of all were the white and gray feathers here and there on the ground near the pan.

"If that's not the damndest thing," George muttered to himself. "I wonder, how did he...." his voice trailed off.

George dropped to the ground. He felt silly, there in the woods. He hardly knew that little boy at all. Just a few weeks. But that kid had stirred him from ten years of, what? Self-loathing? That. And more.

The only thing the boy had not given George was courage. "Goodbye, kid. goodbye, Iris." George had decided to flush them out, just pull the handle and flush them out of his head. He would go back to being the old George. The real George. Him and Cat and dead fish. "Here's to you, kid," he said in his best fake Irish accent. He waved the bottle of Gin in the air, unscrewed the top, put the mouth of the bottle to his lips. It hung there.

Nothing happened. He didn't take a drink. It was strange but George felt that if he drank here he would be desecrating a holy place. He'd desecrate the memory of the boy. His intentions were not to toast the boy, they were to drown him.

"Can I be your friend, Mister?" The kid asked. Ah, but he was just a kid. But he asked. "Stupid kid," George mumbled. Still, no matter how much he wanted to, George could not pull that bottle to his lips again. The boy was on his way out of the world, maybe was already gone. A real friend, too.

George fished Iris's letter out of his pocket. He read it again. Then Pug's "will." What was it that it said? "I love Mom, and I love Pop at the bait stand...." The last time George had had someone say they love him what the night, the last night, he'd kissed Helen goodbye. Helen. And Joe. Little Joseph.

George couldn't see. His eyes were full of something. And he started coughing fits. He held the bottle of Gin out and tipped it over. Its contents drained out onto the ground. "It's not exactly Holy Wine, Pug," George sputtered, "but in this case, it's close. I think. You stupid kid." The bait-keeper then fell on his face in the dirt.

* * * * *

A fuzzy bug crawled across his face. George opened his eyes. He was shivering and wet. Where was he? It was dark, but not the kind of darkness in his bedroom. He was not in his bedroom. There was no roof over his head at all. His muscles were in spasm. His head hurt. That was usual. What was not usual was his waking up in the middle of the woods. Overhead the sky was a blue-black glow, the fading of darkness and arrival of morning. He must have fallen asleep in the woods. How ridiculous. Crickets sang a chorus all around. Then he remembered. Even in the dark, George noticed as he sat up, Pug's secret place had a great view. He hugged his knees. There was no going back now, too dark. George wondered why some rattler hadn't bit him.

The deep blue of the sky slowly started giving way to orange and yellow. One by one the stars twinkled out. George sucked air into his lungs like he had never breathed before. This was real air! He lifted his hand and ran his fingers through his hair. There were leaves and sticks all in it. He shook them out. He stood. When he looked up from knocking the dirt from his clothes he saw radiant beams of sunlight fan out above his head. Thin clouds were burnt orange colored. From beneath and above them, the sun, a brilliant red ball of fire, looked straight at him. It was an uncanny feeling. He shivered noticeably.

George slipped to the ground again, leaning against a tree. He held his head back, closed his eyes, and sniffed the air.

"Hello, Pop."

"What?" George sat up, startled. In the haze of the morning George saw the boy standing near him. "What?" He repeated.

"You found it, Pop? Good."

George shook his head, rubbing his eyes. When he looked again, there was no haze, and no boy. He heard a flapping of wings overhead. When he looked up he spied a single seagull perched above him on a limb. "Well I'll be damn," he muttered. He felt the sensation of ice water running down his back. He shivered. After a long moment he struggled to his feet again. As he did the bird took flight and disappeared into the sky. The only sound besides the loud crunching of leaves under his feet were birds, far up in the sky. A south breeze brought the thick smell of the gulf up from the coast. Or was the smell a creation of his imagination. Like seeing the boy. He turned for one last look at the vista. The sun was turning from red to yellow dazzling light.

Chapter Nine

George came crashing out of the brush across the highway from his store. He walked toward the store, feeling worse, and feeling better, than he had ever felt before. He had met a crisis and not drank a drop. There was some kind of miracle in there somewhere. He looked terrible. His clothes were filthy, covered with dirt and crumpled leaves. He had smudges on his face and hands. Small splotches of dried blood, leftovers from the briar patches, decorated his arms. A car sat in the parking lot of his store. As he approached, a man got out of the drivers' side.

"Hello!" George said.

"Hello. Do you know who owns this place?"

"Sure do." George looked at the thin little man, balding and somewhat shaky. He was the Don Knots type, George thought to himself. "Me."

"You?" The man looked uncertain. "Are you all right, mister? You look like you got rolled or something. Have you been robbed?"

"Not much to rob, not here. No, I am fine. I have just been playing in the woods, that's all." George pulled a ring of keys from a pocket and thumbed through them for the door key.

"You do not look well, Mister."

"I'm fine. Did you need something?" He turned to the man.

A voice from inside the car spoke, "Looks like a three-day-drunk to me." George heard it. He walked over to the car and stuck his head in the drivers' window.

"Not a drop, lady, not a drop at all." He huffed a breath towards her. She recoiled with a disgusting look on her face.

"Excuse, me, sir!" The lady was big, wearing a cheap print that hung over her like a circus tent.

"I said, not a drop." George straightened up and stomped up the steps. He stuck a key in the lock and turned. "You need something?"

"Ahh, yes, I do. I need some worms. We are going fishing!"

He said it with a certain pride, like it was his idea.

"Well, Good, Don. Let me get you some worms!"

"Don?" The man looked from George to his car, presumably at his wife. "Are you sure it is all right?"

"Of course! But you'll have to come get them. I don't deliver." He went in. The man followed. George walked to the shelves where he had the worms. "Here you are, Don."

"Don?" the man said. "How much?"

"Let's see. Two dollars."

"Two dollars? That's a little much."

"One Dollar. Shoot, on the house. Today's special. Want some soda-pop Don? It's on sale today, too. George walked over to the cola chest and pulled out two sodas. He held them up.

"A special today, Don! How 'bout it? worms on the house, sodas on special, four quarters. Four quarters and two Kennedy half dollars and you're done. A drink for you and the little lady on a hot day. How about it, Don?"

"Who's Don? Four quarters? Half dollars. What are you talking about. Here, here's five bucks, will that get it?" The man held out a five-dollar bill. He looked fearful.

"Thanks, Don!" George snatched the bill. That will do just fine, Don! Just fine. He forced a smile, "And thank Bertha, too. Tell her, not a drop! Woops, don't drop the worms. Good bye Don, good fishing!"

The man hurried past George. He rushed down the steps and jerked open the car door. He tossed the box of worms over the seat, handed the woman the sodas, then slid under the wheel. Tires flung gravel toward the store as he backed up and sped away. George watched from the door. Then he hung the RING THE BELL sign on the window, slid the bolt lock, and walked to the apartment.

* * * * *

"Git, git, git, Cat!" George shoved Cat away. He opened his eyes to the usual morning pattern of yellow bars streaking around his bedroom. He dressed in his better khaki pants and a clean shirt. He put a pot of coffee on while fixing a breakfast of tortillas, sausage and salsa. Holding a fresh cup of coffee, George walked outside and picked up his paper. The ritual began: Page one. Sip coffee. Page two. Nibble. Page three.

The morning passed slowly. He wasn't sure what he felt. Or that he felt anything at all. And he wasn't sure what to do with himself. Mostly he just wandered around the little store, swatting at dust with a feather duster. In the early afternoon, George heard tires on gravel. By instinct he stepped behind the counter, waiting on the customer to come in. When he saw through half-opened blinds who

was coming up the steps his stomach began to knot up. He quickly tried to find something to make him look busy. The door jangled.

Iris opened the door narrowly and slipped through it sideways. She took a few moments to let her eyes adjust to the darker room. "Hello, George."

"Hello, Iris."

"He's gone, George."

"I'm sorry."

"I thought you should know."

"When's the...." he couldn't say the word.

"Tomorrow. I had to come home to, well, get some things for him." She turned toward the window. "He doesn't have a suit." She wasn't talking to George anymore, just thinking out loud.

"Hey, you ah, ...don't..." George searched for words in his limited mental dictionary of sympathetic responses. He could find none appropriate for the occasion. He decided to change the subject. "How about some coffee?"

"Hmm?" Iris' expression was blank. She was still staring out the window. Suddenly she realized where she was. "Oh, George," she turned back to him. "Oh, well. It is not, I mean, things happen, you know, George? Things happen. Well, I better go." She turned for the door.

"Look, Iris, I know you don't know me at all, but, well, why don't you have some coffee? Come on back and let me get you a cup." George felt that he wasn't handling this situation too well.

"Coffee. Yes. Well, OK, George. Sure." She followed him around the counter. "You sure have a thing about coffee."

"Yes, I guess I do." George pushed the corners of his mouth up in the closest thing to a sympathetic smile he could muster. He turned to the door which led to his apartment behind the store. Briefly he glanced back to see if Iris was following. He thought to himself how good it was that he'd straightened up the place this morning. It still looked ragged. As he took two coffee cups from a cupboard Iris walked into the room. "I got used to coffee, when, well, my friends poured so much down me." He set the cups down. "That was when I, um, after, ...and I um... drank...."

"I can understand that." She knew what George meant. "So, you live here." She looked around the room.

"Yeah, it's not much, but, it's all I need." George poured two cups of coffee from the decanter. "Cream or sugar?"

"Cream." She walked to a shelf, browsing some photographs that were there. Picking one up, she looked toward George. "Is this Helen?"

George looked up. He hesitated. "Ah, yes. It is."

"She was your wife?"

"Yes. She was." George didn't want to talk about it. Iris noticed. She set the picture down. Another, smaller picture caught her eye. For a second she wasn't sure what she was seeing. Picking up the picture, she started, "Where'd you get...", the picture looked exactly like her son. But on closer examination, she saw that it wasn't, though the resemblance was uncanny.

"His name is, was, Joe."

Iris looked towards George, who now had the most painful look on his face.

"He was my son. I killed him too." George said it flatly, with such a matter-of-fact tone it unnerved Iris. She put the photo down gently. George held up a steaming cup of coffee. She took it. "Have a seat, Iris." George held a chair at his small dining table for her. She took the seat. Her look of trepidation told him he should offer some sort of explanation. Settling down into another chair, he took a deep breath.

"I was driving. The roads were slick, I lost control. I lived. They didn't." It was all he could say.

"I'm sorry." Iris gave him a sympathetic gaze.

"It's not your fault, it's mine." George lifted his cup to his mouth. They sat in silence. Outside, life went on. The sounds of traffic on the highway, an occasional distant roar of an airplane, birds chirped. Inside, the two of them sat grieving. The sound of a jingling door aroused them from their individual introspection.

"Oh, excuse me, a customer." George sat his now-empty cup on the table and hurried into the store. After he'd taken care of a man who bought sodas, George felt a presence behind him.

"Oh, Iris. I'm sorry I left you alone."

"I have to be going, George. Thanks for the coffee. And, I'm sorry about your family."

"Yeah, well, I am too. Thanks." He followed her to the door. She held out her hand. George shook it, reluctantly.

"Thank you, George, for that fishing trip. I know it was a highlight of Pug's last few days. He never stopped talking about it. And I must admit, I was terrified at letting him go with you. I don't know you, didn't know you, that well. But something told me to let you go. Maybe it was meant to be. There has to be a purpose to all this. There does, doesn't there?"

"I quit looking for purpose a long time ago," George said. Then thinking better of his words, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. But, well, Thanks for stopping by."

"Sure. I'll see you." She left hurriedly.

* * * * *

There were only a couple of cars at the cemetery. George felt obvious, pulling up beside the SUV. A minister was there, and Iris. Very few others. And they looked like paid mourners. He walked up to the small group of mourners. The scene reminded him of Western Movies where there's only a hand full of mourners gathered around a grave. The minister was praying as he approached. Iris looked up and saw him. He lifted his eyebrows in recognition, then bowed his head. He stood across the casket from her.

Such a small casket. Small and simple. George felt a stabbing pain of guilt strike his stomach. He was remembering, another place, another time. But that was then. The minister lifted his head and opened his Bible. George expected some "Ashes to Ashes" sermon. But the minister read something he wasn't familiar with.

"To Everything, there is a season," he began. "...and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal...." George looked up. Iris was solemn. There were streaks down both of her cheeks. "...a time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh... I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made everything beautiful in His Time. Amen." The minister bowed his head again. Everyone stepped back. The service ended with a prayer.

Soon all the others were gone, except the minister, Iris, and George. The minister placed an arm around the grieving mother. She thanked him. They held hands in a lingering fashion while he ask if he could do anything. She didn't speak, just shook her head. The minister walked away. George turned toward his truck. His and Iris's paths intersected at the foot of the grave. A few steps they walked silently. Then she spoke.

"You went there."

"Where?"

"The place."

"You mean, the hurting place."

"Yeah."

"Yes, I did. How'd you know?"

"Pug doesn't, ...didn't, drink Gin."

"Oh. I forgot the bottle." George felt stupid. And he felt very guilty. He looked upwards. Gulls hung on wings above him. "That's really strange," he muttered. Then he looked back at Iris. "Umm, yeah, should have picked it up."

Iris had followed his gaze upward without comment but now looked at the ground. "No matter. I have no right to judge you." She paused. "If you want to pickle your brain, it's nothing to me." Her bitter tone startled George.

"Well, I mean, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your boy." George opened the door of his truck, "let me know if you need anything." He slipped into the seat. Iris started toward her SUV, then turned toward George's truck. She walked up to the driver's side.

"I'm sorry, George. That was a cruel thing to say. I apologize."

"I understand. I really do. And it's OK. I meant it, too, about you needing anything."

"Thank you. And I'm glad you found it, the hurting place, I mean."

"I am too. It is a beautiful spot. I don't know how Pug found it."

"It is a lovely spot." She looked back towards the small grave where attendants were already moving dirt with a front-end loader. She looked away quickly.

"You should know, I found the place, and plopped down in the dirt, covered with scratches. I held the bottle up and said goodbye in my best Irish. But I couldn't drink. Not a drop. It was like a voice told me that I was desecrating a holy place. I poured it out. To the last drop." He ran his hands up and down his legs nervously. He didn't share the part about his anguish over his past that somehow came to the surface when he was there. "I fell asleep. The next morning..." He started to tell her about seeing Pug, but he didn't.

"So you weren't home? In the morning, I mean?"

"No."

"I tried to call. He died, you know. In the morning, I mean. Right at sunrise..." She was struggling to speak. "I remember, his face looked so yellow, the morning sun was shining on him. But he was smiling. He wasn't afraid. I was afraid, he wasn't." She breathed in and it caught. "I'm OK," she sniffed, "It's OK now, he's not hurting anymore." Her expression told George she was not as OK as she said. "He hurt so much sometimes. He hid it well. Now he's not hurting." She looked into George's eyes but couldn't read his thoughts.

“Yes, well, he was special.” George reached over with his right hand and took her hand from the truck window. He gave it a gentle squeeze and released it, feeling a surge of emotion he was not used to. “I better get back.” He started the truck engine. She was still standing there. He looked at her again. “What will you do now? Stay down here?”

“Oh, stay here. Get a job, I guess. I don’t know.” She stepped back. “I haven’t thought much about it. Pug has been my whole life for so long, I just don’t know.”

“Let me know,” George concluded, “If I can help. Bye.” As soon as she took another step backwards he dropped the truck into gear and pulled away. He watched her in the rear-view as he drove out of the parking lot. She raised her hand in half a wave.

Chapter Ten

Days turned into weeks. George kept up his routine. At least, he tried. But when, every few days, he stood before the pictures of his lost family and started to blame himself and started sinking into the malaise of self-pity, he'd get interrupted. He'd hear the rattle of the front-door and turn. Then he'd realize the tinkling was his imagination. Or, when he'd reach up to the cabinet to get his bottle of Gin he'd hear Iris' voice, "if you want to pickle your brain, that's your choice." Slowly memories of Pug and thoughts of Iris sanded down the rough edges of his character. He allowed himself to remember more, when he and Helen and Joe had been together, how they'd talked and dreamed of moving to the coast, opening up a little store, casting off corporate life.

One morning he was just opening the store when he saw Iris emerge from the woods up the road. He watched as she stood near the highway, looking back and forth. Then she started walking towards the store. He turned and busied himself with a duster. It was the longest time before he heard footsteps on the porch. The door jangled.

"Hello, George."

"Iris! Hello! How've you been." George refused to admit to himself how glad he was to see her.

"I'm OK, George."

"You look ... fine," he said. And he meant it. She was more attractive than he remembered her being. Her flowing, curly red hair fell across a plaid shirt tucked into well-worn jeans. She looked healthy and rested. "I saw you, coming out of the woods."

"I've been to the place. I guess I've spent a lot of time there. And, I've been thinking about you, George."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I'm nothing. Better things to think about."

"No, I mean how I understand your, well, attitude. You lost your wife and son, then a kid comes along looking like your boy."

"Yeah, well, that was then."

"But you should not throw your life away, George. I mean, I thought about it. I bought a bottle of Jack Daniels, you know, Pug's daddy and I, you know, used to... anyway," she looked at George for understanding. She wasn't sure if she saw it or just a crusty old man listening to himself.

"Anyway, though, I just, you know, didn't." She looked everywhere but at George. "I mean, hell, what do I mean. There has to be hope. Life goes on. It does. We have to."

"Do we? I'm not so sure. I am just too big of a coward not to go on. I'm a hopeless case. Worthless."

"Nobody's a hopeless case, George." She paused. Her eyes sought his but he was careful not to look in her direction. He wiped a clean counter and fidgeted with the register. "Well, George, anyway," she said, "how are you?" It was a nonsensical remark that filled an empty patch of air.

"Me? I'm the man of steel," he said, "Ruff and tuff and all that." His bravado was all false and they both knew it. He shrugged. "Same'o me, I suppose." He looked at her, "hopeless." A hint of a smile hovered over his lips. When he saw that she had turned her gaze to the store, and not him, he settled onto his stool and took the opportunity to look at her. "Have you, um, decided what you are going to do yet?"

"Get a job, I suppose," she said under her breath. She was strolling along the wall looking at merchandise George had on display. "Hey, nice Zebco," she said, picking up a fishing reel. "Old, isn't it."

"Well, it wasn't when I bought the stock," George muttered. In fact, he thought to himself, a good portion of the "stock" he had in this store was purchased along with the store itself.

"How long have you had this store, George?"

"Too long," he said. He exhaled. "Ten years. I should sell it and get a beach house where I can stay drunk all day and let the sound of the ocean drown out my thoughts."

Iris ignored his remark. "You and your wife start it up?"

"Not exactly," George muttered. "I, um...."

"I'm sorry, George, really, I didn't mean to pry," she turned and before he could stop her she was peering into his soul again. He held her gaze for a short while and had to break it off. There was something so intense about her eyes, he couldn't take it for long. "You know what you need?"

"A lot of things, I imagine. And nothing. Depends on who you ask."

"I mean, yeah, I mean, let me tell you what you need." She walked to the counter. "You need a change."

"Oh, well, I don't think so. Nah, I'm just fine."

"Nope, you need a change." She turned again, walked across the store, fingered a few things on a shelf absently. George got the impression, suddenly, she was wanting to say something and didn't know how to say it.

"OK, I'll bite. What change?"

"You need, um...", she turned and walked towards George. "I am just trying to ask you to dinner." She looked directly at him again. He looked towards her but focused on the tiny creases in her forehead. "So, what do you say, George? Dinner?"

"Um, well, sure," he muttered. "Sounds fine."

"Well, heck," she said, placing her hand onto the counter. George noticed how slender her fingers were, long and slender, her hand looked smooth, soft. And it was shaking. "...don't sound so excited or anything."

"Oh, no, it's just that," he stumbled, "I mean, you don't have to, um...." He wasn't sure what he was trying to say. "Sure. I'd love to have dinner with you. If that's what you're asking, I mean."

"That's what I'm asking," she said. "Tomorrow evening. You do like Mexican food."

"Of course, I love it."

"Well, good then. My house, then, say, around seven? Oh, you stay open later than that don't you?"

"I set my own hours, I think I can swing it."

"Good." See seemed a little lighter on her feet now. George could see a lot of that kid in her or was it that he'd seen a lot of her in the kid. Memories of Pug twisted his insides so he stood as if to shake them off.

"I'd be glad to visit," he said, "Shall I bring anything?"

"Just yourself," she said. Reaching for the door handle, she turned, "Just yourself, George. I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Tomorrow."

Quickly she disappeared out the door and George walked to it and watched her walk away, across the gravel lot and along the highway.

"I've been a little worried about you," Iris said, pouring coffee into a cup as she stood near the counter in her kitchen. She replaced the pot and turned towards George. He was sitting at her dining table watching her.

"No need to worry about me," George said. Then he saw by her expression he had done it again, and said, "You have?" George's habit of self-deprecation was annoying but it was such a part of his thinking he had difficulty not doing it.

"I have," she said, ignoring the first remark. "I know you didn't know Pug well but, anyway, I know you cared for him."

"Yeah, I did, as much as...." His voice faded. He was going to do it again but caught himself. "Yes, I did. He was a wonderful kid."

Iris checked the oven where a casserole was cooking and then settled into a chair across from George. Her gaze turned to a window and far, far beyond it. "It's so, ...hard." She turned to George. "How do you handle it?"

Before he thought, George blurted, "Two parts gin, three parts soda. On a good day. On a bad day leave out the soda."

Iris frowned. But her response startled him. "I almost envy you, George." Her gaze went back to the window and beyond. "You know, I tried that." She seemed to have forgotten the conversation in the store. Her expression was unreadable.

George didn't know what to say so he said nothing. There was a silence but it was comfortable. The quiet lasted so long that George felt a slight wave of sleepiness pass over him. He looked down at the coffee cup, now empty. Then he leaned back and looked around. The home Iris lived in was neat, clean, still looked brand new. There were pictures and a few memento's but missing were the toys and clutter George remembered from his last visit here. "This is a very nice place you have."

"Thanks," she said absently. Then she turned to him, "Oh, hey, oh," she stood, took his cup and walked towards the counter where the coffee pot sat. "I'm sorry, George, I zoned out on you there." She filled the cup. "I'm sorry, some hostess I am."

"You're a terrific hostess," he said, taking the cup gingerly. "Wonderful," he said. He took a sip. "This is really good coffee, too."

"Thank you," she said. "It's a blend my Dad always drank." She settled into the chair again, "when he wasn't drinking Rum." The bitterness in her voice was obvious. She looked at George, "I'm sorry, that wasn't, I mean, that was uncalled for."

"I understand." George considered his next words carefully before he spoke them. "I need to tell you something."

"Yes?" She could see he was struggling with words.

"That day, you know, before Pug died," he took a breath. Suddenly he felt winded as if he'd ran a marathon. "Well, I went to that place, you know, the special place, the Hurting Place, with a bottle of Gin and carrying a nice big chip on my shoulder. Ten years, more, now, I've been washing away every single pain with a bottle of gin." He paused again to get his breath. "Well, here I had come to care for this kid, and now he was going to die on me. I have to tell you, I was really pissed off." He paused again, "I'm sorry, I mean, I was angry. Anyway, I had planned to do it one more time."

"I know, you told me, you poured it out." She said that like she only half believed him.

"Yeah, right," he said, slightly annoyed at her interruption, "I did that. But, you know, it was dark. Or it got dark. Something. I fell asleep. It was the strangest thing. I woke up the next morning."

"I saw the disturbance on the ground and figured you had just passed out." She saw George looked annoyed so she stopped. "Sorry," she said.

"Well," he stammered, "Next morning, there was, I mean, I saw, um," now he didn't want to say it. "Oh, never mind."

"Oh, I don't think so," she said, standing and walking towards the oven. "Oh no, George, I don't think so. What?"

"Well, I don't exactly know how to say it."

"Just say it," she said, looking at him over her shoulder as she opened the oven door. "Say it, I'm listening." She was taking the casserole out of the oven.

"Maybe you should sit down first."

"OK, then," she said. She placed the casserole on the stove, turned the oven dial to off, and returned to her chair.

"Well, I saw Pug." There was silence. George saw Iris's eyes begin to water and she looked out the window again. "I'm sorry, I mean, I didn't mean to..."

"No, no," she said softly, wiping her cheeks with the ends of her fingers, "No, I mean, yeah, I believe you." Briefly her composure broke and she sobbed. Her head nodded slightly, affirming her words. It was the only sound in the room. Then she stood and walked to the counter, lifted a kitchen towel from

a rack near the sink and wiped her face. "I'm OK," she said. George had sat silently looking at her. "I'm OK" She busied herself then with setting the table and serving the food. George continued.

"Well, I did. He said, 'you found it.'" George took a breath. "It was as clear as...." his voice trailed off. "Anyway, I've been seeing that kid ever since. In my head, I mean." Pause. "And, I haven't had a single thing to drink. Not a drop. Nothing."

Iris just nodded. She sort of shook herself and stood up. "Do you like Iced tea, or would you like more coffee?"

"Tea'd be fine," he said. "Just fine." The mood lightened. As she sat down to join George for dinner she asked something about fishing. Within a few minutes they were engrossed in swapping fishing stories. The meal went well and they enjoyed each others' company.

"More, George?" Iris scooped a last bit from the dish and held it up.

"Oh, no, Lord no, I can't." But she put it on his plate anyway. "OK, I can," he smiled and picked up his fork.

"Dad would have loved to have met your store, George," she said. "He taught me, and Pug, all about fishing. Now, you haven't told me how you wound up with that store anyway." Her question brought a cloud over George's face.

"Well, no, I haven't." It was at this point in any given conversation about Seaside Bait and Tackle that he most often went into his best "I hate me" speech. He didn't want to do that so he had to adjust his thinking. That wasn't easy, either. "I, uh, it was a dream of ours. Helen and I. And Joe." Iris was giving him her attention. He went on. "Yeah, well, then came that night." He paused and struggled to breathe. Even after all these years he still couldn't talk about it. Not easily. "Anyway, the insurance we had was sufficient to buy the place. We had actually started the paperwork. I wasn't going to do it but everyone at the office said I should. Go through with it, I mean. I actually did fairly well for a year or two."

"And then?"

"Then? Well, then the hauntings started, call them what you will, and I decided to explore the inside of a bottle of Gin. The rest, as they say, is history." He was finished. He could talk no longer. He really wanted a drink.

"You're not OK, are you, George?" Her eyes were piercing him again. They were compassionate, kind, and so beautiful. But they were killing him. He stood.

"I'm OK, really," he muttered. "Geeze," he said, looking at his watch. "Geeze, hey, this has been a really good dinner. Thanks for inviting me. Really," he said, looking around for his hat and wishing he

could find a bottle of Gin instead. As he did so he thought to himself, "good God how long will this pain inside last?" Iris rose too.

"You are welcome, George," she said. "You are good company."

"Yeah, right," he blurted, not meaning to sound quite as rude as it did. "I'm sorry," he reached for his cap on the back of her couch, "Really, I am so good at sticking my foot in my mouth."

"It's OK, George," she said. He was fidgeting as he walked through her living room towards the door. "Please, don't go so soon."

"I have to, you know, it's late and all," he said, "and I have to check on the store," he lied. The store had kept itself countless days and nights while he had been in a drunken stupor. But it was the only thing he could come up with. At the door he felt a tug at his arm and he turned around. Iris stood there, very close, looking up at him.

"You loved them very much, didn't you George," she said. It was an obvious question with an obvious answer but somehow George didn't even think of the sarcastic remark he might otherwise have made.

"I did," he said, returning her gaze.

"You have to let them go, George. You can't join them and it's not fair of you to want to. There are other people in this world. People who need you." Her eyes searched his face.

"Nobody," he said, "nobody. Not me."

"Somebody, George," she said. "Maybe there is somebody." Her eyes said far more than her words.

"I'm not worth a damn thing, Iris," he said, stepping backwards, "I'm not worth anything, trust me," he stepped backwards again, "really, you don't, you just, don't...." he broke her gaze, turned toward the door, paused briefly and looked back at her, then disappeared through the door.

Chapter Twelve

George cursed himself, he cursed the world, and he cursed God. Now he was angry. And he felt stupid. And... what else did he feel? For Ten years, since his wife and son had been killed, George had nurtured his cold heart. He had gotten used to his cold heart. He was happy with it. He was also happy with his sorry state and his anger and his loneliness and all those things. Then along comes some kid and sucks all that stuff right out of him so easily it just wasn't funny. And then the damn kid up and dies and leaves a lonely grieving mother around. "Damn," George said aloud, "Damn!"

There was always that lovely liquid refreshment on the shelf. He entered his apartment, tossed his cap onto the couch, shoved Cat out of his path and went to the cabinet. He took down a bottle, quickly screwed the top from it and gulped before any vision of any kid could get in his way.

* * * * *

"George!" He wasn't sure if the banging was in his head or somewhere else. "George!" He looked around from where he lay on the kitchen floor. To his surprise there was blood on his arm. His back and head were killing him. He was lying on his back on the kitchen floor. Swinging an arm up to his forehead he felt a stabbing pain in it.

"Oh, damn!" Something was stabbing his left arm so he held it up where he could see. It had a shard of glass sticking into it. Carefully he pulled it out and there came blood to follow. He rolled to his right and managed to get up onto his hands and knees. Blood trickled down his arm and dripped onto the floor. He figured out after a while that the banging was outside his back door and not in his head.

"George!" He recognized Iris' voice.

"YEAH, Yeah, yeah," his voice was at first loud and then faded as he struggled to his feet. There on the floor were bits of broken bottle and droplets of blood. Sometime later it would occur to him he could have bled to death there but just now it was far from his mind. At the top of his list of things to do was to quell that banging. "shush," he muttered, "SHUSH" he said louder, then, "KNOCK IT OFF!" The banging stopped.

Unable to lift his feet from the floor he shuffled clumsily to the door and peered through the blinds. Iris stood outside looking very upset. He considered just leaving her there but then, seeing the expression on her face, decided it would do no good and she'd probably start that banging again and

then his head would explode. He flipped the latch, pulled the door open, and then stumbled to his couch without waiting for her to enter. As he lost every bit of energy he had and fell heavily on the old couch he heard the screen door creak and the kitchen door rattle and footsteps behind him.

"You are the sorriest piece of shit I've ever known!" She spat the words at him like flames. "You are a real piece of work. Good God, look at you!" He couldn't see her, his face in the back of the couch as it was, but he could feel her eyes on him. Her feet shuffled on the floor. He could tell she was coming towards him now. "What the hell happened to you?" Her voice was softer now. "George, hey," she was behind him, pulling his arm gently to turn him around, "What happened, George?"

When his eyes cleared the cushion and he opened them he immediately slammed them closed again. The light from the window was horrible. It sliced through his brain like a butter knife in melted butter. He grunted and lifted his arm instinctively to his face. Something sticky on the arm and now on his face made him look. The sticky stuff was red. He was so confused he wasn't sure what it was for a while.

"Hell, George," Iris was saying, "what have you done now?" She was turning him around to lay on his back on the couch. He was staring blankly at his arm. "Goodness, you are going to bleed to death," she said. He heard her feet slipping on the worn wooden floor again. She seemed to be plundering around in his kitchen. "You sure as hell are a bachelor, aren't you, George, you ever heard of a dish towel?" He heard her go off through the door of the bedroom, heard cabinet doors banging in the bathroom, water, then her feet on the floor near him again. All of this was going on somewhere in the back of his mind. He heard his refrigerator open, then close. More water. Then something very cold on his arm. He was no longer looking anywhere but had his eyes glued shut. Cold on his arm and burning.

"Owe, damn, ouch...." He said. He opened his eyes. He saw this beautiful red headed angel mopping his arm with a towel. Then he figured out the angel was Iris. But mostly he watched with extreme detachment, like he was above himself almost. Almost. He could sure feel his arm. As his consciousness returned to him he noticed his clothes were mottled with dark splotches too. Iris was mumbling something he could only pick up part of.

".... damn fool.... Kill yourself.... Alcohol... why I bother..." When she had his arm cleaned up she saw that the cut was not extremely deep and that George would live. She seemed to take pleasure in pouring rubbing alcohol on the wound.

"AIEEIEEE, Shit! Ouch!" George was fully awake now. He sat up and forgot everything except his arm which was now on fire.

"Burn a little?" Her words were as cold as the fire on his arm was hot. The expression on her face was comical, like she knew a joke George didn't. George didn't think anything was funny at the moment.

"Ouch!" It was all he could say. Iris was mothering him now, pulling at him to get him to sit upright on the couch. She checked his other arm, pulled him forward to check the lump and bloody spot at the back of his head, and generally was making a bit of a fuss. Any other time he would have thought that was a nice thing, being mothered, but this angel had suddenly turned ugly and grew horns, the minute she poured that alcohol. And she wasn't through with it either. Once she made sure his other arm was OK and his head was still attached correctly she poured more alcohol on the towel she held and mopped his left arm where with each stroke she found another little cut and it started burning.

"I can tell you are no nurse," he muttered.

"Ah, coming back to the land of the living, are we?"

"Unfortunately."

Silence again as she finished her task and then went off for bandages. "Do you have any band aids of any kind?"

"Never seem to need them."

"Men," she said. George heard fabric ripping and the sound worried him. What could she be ripping? Her next statement told him. "Well, George, time for you to buy some new t-shirts." She came through the door with white strips of cloth that only seconds earlier had been a clean t-shirt. It wasn't quite white, though, any longer.

"I suppose so," he muttered. She pulled his arm out and expertly bandaged it with the cloth but not before she gave it another good measure of alcohol and put something from a tube on it. Her task complete, she let him fall backwards on the couch and moan.

"You really are an ass, George." His eyes were closed but he was able to hear things clearly now above the pounding of his head. "I mean, a real donkey, mule, jerk...."

"I get the idea," he said.

"I don't think you do." There came sounds of sweeping and clanging glass. Then the sounds of cabinets opening and closing. Some kind of squirting noise. "Do you have a mop?"

"In the store," he moaned. He heard her footsteps fade as she went into the store and then heard them as she returned. Water running. Swishing sound. George couldn't force his eyes open because he was sure his eyeballs would fall out if he did. In a little while new sounds erupted. Plates, silverware,

the refrigerator, more cabinets. Not too much longer and he heard the ptptptptptpttrrr of his coffee pot.

"You are not only a jackass, George, you are a cheap jackass," she muttered. "Store brand coffee, store brand canned goods, generic junk. Have you no sense of taste at all?" More clinking, clanging, and the sound of a toaster. "I hate to tell you, George, but that cup of coffee I had the other day here was horrible and now I know why." More shuffling sounds, like his dining chairs being slid. Then he heard footsteps. This time in his direction. He felt his hand being lifted by the softest hand in the world.

"Your hand is bleeding again," she said, and she swabbed it with something that made it cold. It didn't burn this time though. She pulled him forward and he sat up, squat-like, on the edge of the couch. He opened his eyes a peep and the light was so bright he instinctively jerked the hand she was doctoring to cover his face. In a flash he learned that was a very bad idea. The alcohol on his hand landed in the corner of his eye and worked its way around inside to quickly destroy his sight. Or so he thought. It was REALLY burning. He let out a yelp. "Here," Iris's voice was gentle, but not too gentle. He felt a towel against his face. At first he jerked back thinking it was the one with the alcohol but she pulled his head towards it. A brief instant he had the idea that she was going to kill him. But then he figured out the fabric against his face was wet with water.

"You can be stupid, too, George," she muttered as she swabbed his face. "Now, all better." The burning subsided as the water in the towel washed away the alcohol. George struggled to open his eyes, first a tiny squint, then a little more, then almost half open, his brow wrinkled like the hide of one of those little pet pigs.

"Hi," he muttered. Iris looked at him with another of her unreadable expressions.

"Hi," she said back, "glad to meet ya," she almost grinned, "fancy us meeting like this." Her tug on his arm told him she wanted him to stand. He tried. His legs were Jell-O. Third time he managed to stay on them. More tugging and he was led to the kitchen table. Her efforts to maneuver him gently down into a chair failed and he landed with a PLOP, almost toppling the chair. She left him there to teeter on the edge and went back to what she had apparently been doing: fixing some food.

"George," she began, "one of these days, George, you will have to climb out of that hole you are living in. It's unnatural and stupid for you to wallow in self-pity all these years. Everybody loses somebody, George," she paused, took a deep breath, "I have lost somebody. I've lost my father, and my son. I have nobody." Then as if to answer George's unspoken question, "Pug's dad was one of those one-night stands that I want to regret but can't because it gave me Pug." As she talked she turned George's disorganized kitchen into something it had never been, an organized mess. "This kind of food

will kill you by itself soon enough, George,” she said, peering into his refrigerator. Pulling a bowl from it she asked, “how long this been in there?” It must have been in there a long time from the expression on her face. “Eeeaach,” she muttered and tossed bowl and all into a trash can nearby. George was going to protest her discarding his dishes but didn’t have the energy.

“I understand grief, George,” she continued, “Boy, do I understand. Dad was my best friend and then, you know, Pug, what a wonderful kid he was. Dad? He threw his life away, just like you are throwing your life away.” She washed dishes that had already been washed as if she didn’t trust George’s washing. Then she dried them with paper towels and placed them on the table. “I don’t understand how it works, George. I tried to drink myself away, after Dad died, I said, ‘sure, I’ll see if it works, it worked for him, till it ate his liver away,’ so I tried. I sent Pug to an uncle I barely know and went on a bender. Only thing, it didn’t work. Hell, I didn’t even have hangovers. I drank and drank and couldn’t stand and still my little old brain kept right on working and my heart kept right on breaking.” She washed silverware and placed it on the table. “So after a couple weeks I said, ‘this is stupid,’ and I just went and got Pug and went on with life.” Now she was placing toast and butter on the table and then washing already-washed coffee cups.

“You know what, George?” He paused to look at him. “I almost envy you. And Dad. Booze seems to take away your pain for a while. But it never did mine.” She poured coffee for them both, searched in vain for milk or some kind of cream and settled on instant creamer. Her lips curled, indicating how distasteful the idea of instant creamer was. She then sat down across from George. “You know what else George?” She was looking at him severely now. “You look like shit.” With that she burst into laughter.

“Thanks,” George muttered, then laughed himself.

Iris buttered some toast then dropped it unceremoniously onto the plate sitting before George. “Eat,” she commanded. He obeyed.

Halfway through a slice of toast and after a few sips of coffee he looked up as if suddenly enlightened. “You know what, Iris?”

“What, George?”

“I feel like shit, too.” Coffee flew up his nose as he suddenly shuddered with laughter again. He reached for a towel on the table to swab up the coffee he spilled. Quickly he grabbed the toast from the plate and swabbed the droplets of coffee up and then dropped the toast back onto the plate.

"Oh, very sanitary, George," Iris muttered. Then he realized he'd used the towel she had cleaned his arm with. There were a few more chuckles at the ridiculous situation before they both settled down some.

"What time is it?" He suddenly began to wonder about the world.

"Afternoon."

"You're kidding."

"No, about twelve thirty now."

"What day?" He was worried about the answer to that one.

"Don't worry, George, you've not been out for days." She reached for the plate where a few pieces of toast remained which she tossed into the trash. Then she took both their plates and put them in the sink, ran water, washed them and placed them on another towel. Only after she had filled their coffee cups again, and she winced at the idea of drinking the stuff, did she speak.

"I um, George," she was serious now. "George, I, um, I...." She seemed to be having trouble with her words now. Unlike a while ago when she was running off at the mouth ninety to nothing, George thought.

"I wish...." She paused, looking out the window. "Damn." She changed her expression and the direction of the conversation with such lightning speed it left George confused again.

"I think you need some help around here. What do you think, George?"

"I can hardly pay for myself."

"I know, but anyway, it wouldn't cost much. I work cheap...."

George then saw what she was going to say. "Oh, hey," he muttered, thinking about what it would be like to have Iris around the place. "No, I don't know, Iris, I can't...."

"No, I mean it, George. This place, your store, has some real charm. But it needs a woman's touch. Just a bit, here and there. The kind that would make it a little more profitable."

"I kind'a like it the way it is."

"Maybe so, but still..." she stood. She spoke no words and made no gestures but George knew she meant for him to follow her. He did. Right through the storage area and into the store. "This register, it's like from another world, isn't it?" She ran her finger along the little shelf below the keys. Then she walked around the counter and poked at a few things here and there. She was in thought. George took the opportunity to reach onto a shelf beneath the counter, bring out a bottle of pain killers and toss a handful into his mouth which he washed down with the cold remains of the coffee in the cup he was still clinging to. He sat the cup on the counter.

“You will have to, um....” She turned to him, “You will have to do a few things to make this place pay, George.” Then she slowly spun around and swept the whole place up in a single glance. “But I wouldn’t change anything, George, not anything at all about how this place feels.” Walking to the counter, she placed her elbows down solidly on the old wooden countertop, dropped her chin onto her hands and stared into George’s eyes. “You know why?” George couldn’t answer. Those eyes were so deep, they swept him away. “I’ll tell you why, George. Because,” she paused, “because, this place is the REAL you!” Something in how she said that made George’s eyes water and he wiped them with his right hand. His left was being held by a beautiful, red headed woman.

Chapter Thirteen

George had not gotten used to the jingling of the front door before he had opened it to business. Neither was he used to having to open the door between his apartment and the store. But for two weeks now it had been that jingling door that told him Iris was here and was coming in through the front. Something odd was happening to him but he liked it. He was, what was the word? Happy.

"Naw," he said to himself, "that's not the word." Pulling his shirt into some semblance of neatness and re-buttoning after he discovered the first attempt had ended in failure, he reached for the knob of the door leading to the store. Almost instinctively he started to unbutton his pants to tuck his shirt in as the door swung wide but he caught himself and left the shirt tail hang out.

Iris stood behind the counter apparently busy at something he could not see. She was bent over the counter away from him.

"Morning, George," she said without looking backwards.

"Morning, Iris."

"I have an idea," She said.

"Another one?" George shuffled through the door and up behind her. Then he knelt down to open the floor safe. "I know, let's move all this fishing stuff to one side and open a beauty parlor."

"How did you guess?" She turned at him, smiling, and holding up a piece of paper. There was a drawing of a woman wrapped up by a giant earth worm. Behind her was a giant fishhook. The whole scene was about to be swallowed up by a giant fish. Below the drawing was a caption, "Bait Me!"

"Cute," George muttered. It looked very silly but he was struck at the artistry of Iris' drawing.

"I thought it'd get you going," she said.

"Got me going all right," he muttered, "right on down to the department store to buy bait instead of stopping in this oddball place." He huffed good-naturedly, "Bait me?"

"It's funny though, you have to admit," she said.

"Do I?" He took the paper from her and walked to the window where there was better light.

"Well, maybe," he said. His eyes grinned if no other part of his face did.

Iris pulled the cash from the bank bag and expertly opened the antique register and loaded the drawer. Then she pushed the drawer closed, dropped the bag into the floor safe and bent over to drop the safe top back in place. In the meantime George was trying to figure out just exactly what Iris had done to his place. She'd done nothing, and everything. It looked exactly the same but entirely different

and he could not figure out how she did that. What he would not admit was that she was doing the same thing to him. He looked and sounded exactly the same but was, at the same time, entirely different. He looked at her, busy again on another drawing, and wondered who this woman was.

Iris squatted behind the counter and was riffling through the shelves looking for something. Suddenly she stood and in her hand was a picture frame. It was dusty and the metal of the gold-colored frame was rusted a little at the corners. Gently she wiped the glass with the bottom of her baggy t-shirt. Then she stared at the picture for a long, long time. She spoke softly, "you loved them a great deal, didn't you, George." It was not a question. It was a statement.

"Yeah, I did," George said. George's "past life" as he called it was the one thing the two never spoke of. "I did." He turned to the door and flipped the OPEN/CLOSE sign. "But that was then."

"It was," she said. Then she cleaned the back of the frame with her t-shirt and stood the picture on the counter. "I am here, George, you know, you don't have to carry this stuff around inside all your life."

"I know," he turned to her. Compassion was on her face. So was something else he almost recognized but could not quite understand. "I know, Iris. Maybe," he paused, "maybe someday." They exchanged unspoken words for a brief second and then George went to the soda box. He slid the doors back and reached in. The sound of clanking bottles rang out as he arranged them and took a mental inventory of how many he needed to fill the box. Iris was still quiet. He didn't like it. He had gotten to know her a little better in the two weeks she had been "volunteering" at his store.

"George," she said softly, "what's it like?"

"What?"

"Being in love."

"Oh, that. I wouldn't know."

"You were in love, George."

"That was a long, long time ago," he said. Bottles clanked as he pulled them from the box and sat them aside. Then he went through the doorway into the storeroom, picked up some packs of soda from storage and returned to the box. He put the warmer sodas on the bottom and then the cold ones back on top. Iris was still quiet and he was really getting worried about that.

"I mean," she went on as if ten minutes had not passed, "I mean, you know, George." She settled onto the stool. "I have never been 'in love,' you know. Sure, I loved Pug, and Dad, but that's not the same of course. Not the same. I thought I loved Brad, that was a boyfriend, but that wasn't love either, only infatuation, and, um, sex." George said nothing so she went on, "anyway, being 'in love,' it must be wonderful."

George was now arranging the chips in the racks. He was looking for something to do with his hands, and his mind, because Iris was about to suck something out of him he wanted left alone. He knew it, she knew it, and he couldn't stop it. Abruptly he stopped what he was doing and looked up at her. "Look, Iris, I don't think I can...."

"I know, George, I know," she said. "Still," her head was cocked sideways in this "I'm such a wonderful person" look that it always took George off guard. It also reminded him of the things that stirred inside him sometimes when he looked at this woman. But he had loved, he said to himself, even using that 'forbidden' word, he had loved, and he had killed that love. And now he was as dead as that love was. Love was dead.

"I'm just dead," he said aloud, not meaning to.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, turning back to the chip racks.

Iris had heard but pretended not to. She continued. "I want to be in love, George." She spoke in a matter-of-fact way, no emotion, just like she said she wanted a candy bar or something.

"You will be, Iris."

"Think so, George?" George didn't see the look on her face for he was turned away. "Do you think so?"

Chapter Fourteen

George walked through the door from his apartment to find Iris busy stocking the shelves. It was Monday, four weeks since Iris had begun working for him. Working without being paid. He was still not sure why he'd let her talk him into the idea. But she was good company. That was all, he'd told himself over and over, just good company.

Business was picking up a little and he wasn't sure why. She looked at him as he came through the door. He was dressing a little neater every day and had even taken to shaving every morning instead of once a week. Today he even had on a shirt and pants that were not wrinkled. That was mostly because Iris had washed them for him. He had paid her for it too. She'd protested but he'd insisted.

"Hi, George," she said. But before she could say anything else someone pulled up outside and came clomping in across the porch. The door jingled and a man stepped into the store.

"Howdee," he said. He was tall, lanky, wearing over-alls and a plaid shirt, long sleeve with the sleeves rolled up. His hair was in disarray and he held a cowboy hat in his hand. "This is the bait stand place isn't it?"

"It's a bait stand, how can I help you?" George stood behind his counter with a blank look on his face. The man noticed Iris, nodded his head in typical cowboy fashion, and walked to the counter.

"Well, 'says you got worms, huh?" The man chuckled a little, "Does it hurt?" He laughed aloud at that. "Ha, ha, just a little joke there...." His humor faded as he saw George's expression. Clearing his throat, he said, "Well, then, maybe I got the wrong place."

"You have the right place, mister," Iris spoke up. "Just exactly the right place. You want night crawlers or wigglers?" She walked to a shelf where boxes of earth worms were stacked.

"Oh, yeah, well now, night crawlers I think. Them durn wigglers, they are too hard to get on a hook. That's because I 'reckon they wiggle too much," he thought that was funny, so he laughed a little. "Sort'a like a gal I had once, oooo weee, wiggle wiggle," he said loudly and then he laughed louder.

George wanted to find a way to eject this nut from his store but Iris stepped in front of him at the counter. "Here you are, sir," she placed a box of worms on the counter. "Three dollars."

"Well, heck, why they cost so much?"

"Because we have to pay them not to wiggle," she said with a perfect monotone. The man really laughed at that. He dropped three bills on the counter, took the box, chuckled, and walked towards the door shaking his head.

"Pay'em not to wiggle," he muttered, chuckling. As he exited the door his hat was returned to his head. George watched the man get in his truck and drive away.

"Pay them not to wiggle?" It was only half a question. George looked at Iris who had a comical expression on her face. "Some people make me wish this bait stand was in England or something."

"He's not so bad," she said.

"You would think so," George said. "By the way, the worms are two dollars."

"Are they?" Her face was the epitome of innocence. "Oh, too bad," she said, dropping two dollar bills in the register and tucking the third away mischievously into pocket. "Hmm... well then, I'll keep this, payment you understand, to prevent wiggling...." They both laughed at that one.

Twenty minutes passed as they settled into the routine of running the store. There were several customers who came in to buy bait or snack food, or both. George figured it was because he had a new marquis sign outside which Iris had insisted he buy. It looked like he was actually going to have to work for a change. But work wasn't so bad. He had less time to think and that was probably just as well.

Just as a teenager walked out of the store carrying chips and a drink George raised his head up and looked at Iris who was at her perch upon a new stool she had brought from home. "What did that screwy fella mean this morning, 'says you got worms, does it hurt?'" Something about his remark finally soaked into George's slow brain. "What'd he mean by that?" Iris' expression told George she had done something.

"Oh, I haven't the slightest idea, George," she purred.

"Yeah right, and the moon is cheese, too." He looked at her. "You've never put that on that sign out there. So?"

"Oh, well," she debated how to say what she was going to tell him. She wasn't sure how he would take it. "Well, anyway, it was nothing."

"Something," he said, "What have you done now?"

"Oh, not much. Just ran a teeny tiny little add in the paper."

"You did what?"

"Yeah, just a teeny tiny one. You know that little drawing I had, 'Bite Me.'"

"You didn't."

"I did. In the sports section."

"No."

"Yes." She was not able to read his face, not this time. She had been getting better but sometimes he could still hide behind a wall inside his head. In a few minutes, however, she figured out he was hiding his amusement.

"Well, hell, Iris, you must want us to have to actually work around here."

"Well, George," she mocked, "I want to actually get PAID some time."

"Well, hell, Iris," he returned, "you DO get paid, fifty cents per hour!" He cocked his head, "And how did you pay for the advertisement anyway?"

"I washed your clothes."

"Hell," he said. He put his most frustrated expression on his face and tried to be annoyed but it didn't work. She saw right through it. They both laughed. "You are something else."

"But what, that is the question."

"Huh?"

"What else?" She stood and busied herself with a feather duster, turning her back to George. "Who knows, George," she said as she flicked the duster around, "Nobody knows." The last words were too quiet for George to hear. This wasn't the first conversation of the past month that had turned into something different. George was confused. Iris was just quiet.

"Oh, by the way, George," Iris said after a while, "I need to tell you something."

"Yeah?"

"I have to go up to East Texas for a few days. I'm selling Dad's place."

"Are you? Do you?" Something inside George's stomach turned around. The hunger he was feeling only seconds ago vanished and was replaced with a sensation that was the same, but different.

"Is that a good idea?"

"What, George, going or selling the place?"

"Well, selling the place, of course. You can go wherever you want."

"Right," she muttered with some slight disappointment. "Well, I can't keep paying taxes on it, I don't need it, and all."

"Oh, I see." He punched a button on the register and the drawer popped open. His actions were more to keep from looking at her than to count out the cash in the drawer. "I see, well, then, when you going?"

"Tomorrow." He looked up at her when she said that.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sorry for such short notice."

"You can't go," he said, then, "I mean, not tomorrow, it's Friday."

"It's a holiday, George. You are closed."

"I am?"

"Of course you are."

"What holiday?"

"Good Friday."

"This is July, Iris, are you crazy?"

"No, it's Good Friday. A 'good Friday' to take off and drive me up there."

"Huh?" Now he was totally confused.

"I have to drive Dad's truck back. So, you can drive me up there."

"Shouldn't we wait until Monday then?"

"Nope, have to go tomorrow, I'm meeting with the realtors."

"Oh." He wasn't sure how she did it but this woman could probably get him to drive to New York and jump off the Brooklyn Bridge if she wanted to. He WAS too much of a softy.

"Right," she said, putting down the duster. "And I have to go. I have to get some stuff packed."

"Oh, you do?" He stammered, "well, OK, then."

"You can handle things, can't you?"

"You are funny," he said, walking around the counter, "very funny. I ran this place just fine for ten years without you." But inside he knew what might happen if she wasn't there to watch over him.

"Ran it into the ground," she teased.

"Right," he said.

"Pick me up tomorrow morning, six AM."

"Damn, that early?"

"Yes, that early," she muttered, just barely brushing his lips with her fingertip. She smiled at him.

"Yes ma'am," he muttered. She stepped through the door and he followed. He watched her walk across the lot and down the same highway in the same direction that he'd watched Pug go only a few months ago. Seemed like a longer time. He noticed that she walked like that little boy, too. Then just as he was turning to go inside, after she disappeared around the curve, he noticed the marquee: "TOO NICE A DAY TO WORK, BE BACK SATURDAY." He shook his head and turned back towards the store.

Chapter Fifteen

There was almost a chill in the air as George stepped through his back door. He paused to make sure it locked, then went to his pickup. The sun was not yet up. The sky was clear and orange was mixing with the deep blue of the eastern horizon. He backed out of the drive. Ten minutes later he and Iris were headed up the highway towards East Texas. She had not spoken too much about her father to George because she couldn't help drawing comparisons between him and her father's drinking and she didn't want to sound too preachy to George. But on the drive to her dad's former home she talked and talked, about her childhood, her mother and father, her mothers' death and how her father could not handle it. Her mother had died of cancer when Iris was a teenager. It had been a long, traumatic episode. Her father had continued the farming and small businesses he had always been involved in but also managed to live "inside a bottle" as she put it, whenever he was not doing business. She loved her father and so did Pug. In spite of his drinking he'd been a great father and always made sure Iris had what she needed. The morning passed quickly and George did something he was not used to doing, listened to someone else talk.

"There, there," Iris pointed at a rusted, sagging iron gate. George pulled up to it. "Back up, George, it swings in this direction." Iris jumped out of his truck and he backed up. She fished for keys in her pocket and struggled to unlock a rusted padlock on the gate. George could see down the path beyond the gate there was a rambling farm-house type home and behind it a tall, somewhat shakly-looking barn. He saw where cows had been grazing not too long ago but no cows were in sight.

"Things go to pot pretty fast, don't they?" She slid into the truck and pulled the door closed.

"I suppose they do."

"It seems like yesterday Dad bought that gate down at the Feed'n Seed. Now look at it." As George drove through the gate she looked back and forth, as if trying to see something. "I suppose Buchwald finally got his cows out of here. There," she pointed, "you can pull in there." She flung the door open again. "We're here." She didn't sound very excited. George got out and followed her into the house.

Inside he discovered the rooms were empty. He had expected, for some reason, rustic pine furniture and old-fashioned end tables and dainty tablecloths and a fire in the fireplace. But the house was barren. And it was hot inside the house. The day had turned into one of those typical late July scorchers as they had driven up from the coast.

"Whew, hot in here," she muttered, wiping her forehead. "Power's off too. So, we'll just have to suffer."

"Where you going to stay?" George had assumed she was going to stay at the house.

"Oh, motel, in town, Jerry has me a room there."

"Oh."

"Small town, you know," she said, looking at George, "Jerry is an old school mate. I called him to keep me a room. He owns the Budget Inn." She walked into the empty kitchen. "He lets me have a room for near nothing."

"Oh, I see," George said with a bit of sarcasm.

"Yeah, right, George, not a chance," she said, giving him a scolding look. "Jerry's a nice enough fella, but he's very married, three wonderful kids and a wife...." Her voice trailed off as she peered into one cabinet and then another.

"What you looking for?"

"Oh, nothing, just looking." George figured, then, that she was just re-running some memories through her mind. He stayed silent. Turning away from Iris he wandered around the house on his own. The place had a guy-feel to it. It was obvious a woman's touch had been missing for a long time. It was no wonder that Pug had loved the place. George thought that he could almost hear the boy running down the hallway leading from the living room towards several bedrooms, stomping and sliding and generally making noise. In his mind he heard Iris scolding the boy, telling him to be quiet, and then her dad saying, "Now Iris, let the boy have some fun." And George somehow knew that the boy would stop and look between them and see which one was going to win this time. It was a nice fantasy until Pug morphed into Joe and it was George and Helen in the conversation and then George flushed the entire thought out of his head and went through the kitchen and out the back door. Iris was already outside.

"I have to be getting back, Iris," George said.

"Oh, George, what is your all-fired hurry?"

"It'll be late."

"Poo," she puffed. "Come on then, let's check the truck." She walked towards the barn. With some effort she pushed a huge door that was hung by rollers back across the front of the barn revealing a big, empty space inside. There, looking rather small inside a cavernous barn, was a half-ton truck. It was a fairly late model but showed the kind of wear and tear a farm truck usually does. "I hope it'll crank." She walked towards the truck and George followed.

The air was pungent, acrid, damp. It was the smell of hay and cow manure, and somehow, the smell of sweat, though nobody had worked in that barn for a long time. George stood by as Iris unlocked the truck door, got in, and cranked the truck. She revved the engine then put the truck in reverse and backed out of the barn. George followed. He made a motion to her asking if she wanted the barn door pulled closed and she shook her head no. He walked toward her as she got out of the truck which sat there running.

"It's OK, I guess."

"Seems so," he said.

"Yeah, well," she put her hands on her hips, bowed her back, and then bent forward, touching her toes with her fingertips. "Ugh," she muttered. Then she stepped back a step and looked around with a sad expression. "I thought this place would last forever," she said mostly to herself. "I thought Dad would live forever and Pug would come here someday all grown up and work in the summers and go to A & M and" The rest of the sentence was completed only in her head.

"Yeah, well...." George could say no more.

"I know," she said quietly. Then she got into the truck and drove it around the house leaving George to walk. When he rounded the corner she had already taken her suitcases from his truck and had them in the back of her fathers' truck. She was locking the front door of the house.

"OK, then, George, I suppose you can go."

"I suppose I should," he said, now for some reason reluctant to do so. "Yeah, I suppose I should."

"I suppose so," she repeated. It was an awkward moment. The pleasant familiarity they had experienced on the trip evaporated into something more tense and less pleasant. "Well, George, I'll be back down to the house in a few days," she said, holding her hand out. George shook it.

The feel of her soft fingers against his was electrifying. Except for the morning she found him passed out on the floor of his home, they had never touched. It had been an unwritten rule, one that George made and one that Iris respected. He made quick work of the handshake and when he withdrew his hand and stuck it into his pocket under the pretense to get his keys he could still feel the heat of her hand in it.

"I suppose I better go," he said again. Their eyes met and Iris made a sudden, short movement in his direction and then halted. She stepped backwards and turned to open the pickup door behind her. She turned back towards George who had not moved. Resting her right arm on the top of the door, she smiled an odd smile.

"George, you take care of Seaside while I'm gone, OK?"

"Yes ma'am," he said. He walked around his truck and opened the door. "I'll do my best."

"Well, you do that, George. I'll see you soon."

"Yeah, soon," George muttered, slipping into his truck and pulling the door closed. He backed up and turned around in the big expanse of yard in front of the house. As he pulled through the gate and stopped for traffic on the farm road he saw Iris pull up behind him. She waved and he returned it perfunctorily and turned right. She turned left and in the rear-view mirror he could see her disappearing rapidly behind him. He felt like an idiot but could not figure out why. He knew one thing. That store would be far quieter now than it had been.

* * * * *

The days passed slowly for George now that he was alone again in his store all day. Business came and went and so did vendors who were now delivering regularly. He busied himself with a long overdue inventory of tackle and placed an order. He was surprised when he thumbed through the new wholesale catalog from the supply house at the kinds of things that were now available.

Iris called every day or so, telling him she was just checking up on him. The calls were brief. The Friday after George had taken her up to East Texas she called in the afternoon and said she was going to be stuck there longer than she had planned. There was some kind of problem with deeds or something. She asked George to go check on her house, which he did dutifully that next Saturday morning.

For some reason that Saturday was not feeling right for George. He stayed fairly busy all day with customers but there was something hanging over the place, a pale or something, he couldn't figure it out. He would not admit to himself how much he missed Iris. She had brought something to his store that had never been there before. And while he never allowed himself to think romantic thoughts about her he wondered why some guy had not stolen her away long ago. She was beautiful, sweet, caring, thoughtful, funny.... These thoughts kept pestering him all that Saturday. By late that afternoon he was sitting dejectedly behind the counter catching himself making long glances at the picture Iris had pulled from the shelf under the counter and which now hung on the wall. It was himself, Helen and Joe, a happier time, a time of hope.

But hope is gone, they are gone, he killed them and life sucks. That was the exact thought going through his mind as he took the picture and tossed it back on the shelf. "Where it belongs," he said out loud to himself. He decided to call it a night. Just as he saw a car pull into the driveway he slid the bolt

on the door and flipped the sign. Someone walked up onto the porch, peered through the half-closed blinds, and tapped on the door.

"Closed, death in the family!" George didn't know why he said that but it worked. The people went away. He walked back to his apartment. He instinctively walked to the cabinet over the sink where the Gin was kept and opened it up. It was the first time he'd done that in several weeks. A neatly printed note was taped to a bottle in plain view: "You don't need this stuff, George."

"Shit," he said, closing the cabinet door without disturbing the note. Then he walked to the refrigerator, opened it, lifted up a gallon of milk, removed the cap and drank. The phone rang just as he put the milk back onto the shelf.

"Hello?"

"George?" It was Iris' voice and she was talking a little loudly. In the background George could hear music playing.

"Yeah, Iris, it's me."

"You check on my house, George?"

"Still there, Iris."

"That's nice to know," she paused, the music sounded louder, and then got quieter, "There, now, I can talk." George didn't respond so she went on. "George, hey, I'm at the VFW hall, there's a dance tonight."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, a dance." The music quieted a little more, "There," she said, "OK, now, I'm standing in a broom closet, is that funny?"

"Funny." His voice didn't sound like he thought it was funny.

"Are you OK, George?"

"I'm just peachy, Iris."

"How's the store doing?"

"Doing good. Good." He paused, "I ordered some new tackle today."

"That's good." Music became louder and then faded again, "Oh, say, George, I have to go. Richard says we got to dance or something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, say, George, do you dance?"

"Only on burning coals," he muttered. She laughed at his joke but he really wasn't trying to be funny.

"Well, George, I don't know when I'll be back, you know, this damn legal stuff is a real pain. I think I have a buyer but it's a mess. Dad's taxes were all screwed up and stuff. I think I told you about that."

"You said something...."

"George, I have to go. Hey, you miss me?"

"Miss you? Well, maybe a little, um... nah, you have a good time."

"Oh," there was a disappointed sound to her voice, "Oh, OK, George. Richard, he's an old boyfriend of mine you know, Richard, well, he brought me to this stupid dance so I guess I better go dance."

"OK then, Iris. Have fun."

"I will, George, maybe, I don't know." There was a pause but the music stayed low. "George, I miss you."

"Yeah? That's nice to know, Iris." His voice was without emotion.

"Yeah, well, I do, George." She sounded disappointed.

"You have fun, Iris," he said. "Goodbye now." He hung up the phone. Standing there looking at the phone he suddenly felt very angry at himself. "George," he said to himself out loud, "Were you born stupid or did you grow stupid as you got older?" Then he answered himself. "Born stupid and got worse as I grew up."

Once again he went back to the cabinet above the sink but didn't open it. Not because he didn't want what was inside but because there was a note there with her handwriting which would remind him of her and now she was off making up or out or something with her old boyfriend and here he was all alone again. Instead of taking a bottle from the shelf he did the only other masochistic thing he could think of. He made himself a pot of very strong coffee and drank all ten cups. Then, of course, he lay awake all night, jittery from the caffeine and totally unable to stop the torturous thoughts whirling around in his bedroom from haunting him. Only after the daylight had started sending dim streaks through those blinds did he fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Buzz, Buzzzz.... George's short-lived slumber was abruptly halted by the incessant noise of the front door buzzer. As he swung his feet around to the side of the bed and dropped them heavily onto the floor he swore he would disconnect that buzzer this very day. He sat up on the side of the bed and ran his fingers through his hair. His mouth tasted like stale coffee and something else George didn't want to think of.

George rushed to brush his teeth and toss on some clothes. Then he hurried through the kitchen and into the store where he stopped short. There at the door was a set of eyes, peering through the half-opened blinds. It was a boy of about twelve or so, round head and chunky build... PUG! For a split-second George hurried to the door and then the thought struck him at the top of his head and worked downward to his feet: Pug is dead. Again George halted. The buzzing was still incessant, and louder now that he was standing under it.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you'll wake the dead," George said, the volume of his sentence starting out loudly but fading to barely audible on the word "dead." He slid the bolt back and jerked the door causing the boy, who had been leaning on the door, to fall forward and stumble into the store. "Sorry, kid," George muttered. This boy looked very much like Pug. But he was dressed in a cammo outfit and the words he spoke made it very clear he was nothing like Pug.

"Gaw'Daem, man," the kid yelped as he stumbled. The boy quickly recovered, however, and went to the soda box. While he went to digging around in the box for something George saw a man get out of a pickup sitting in the lot.

"What the hell you doin' to my boy, there, fella?"

"Ah, sorry, sir, the door sticks sometimes," George lied. "Didn't mean any harm." George lied again.

The man strutted bow-leggedly into the store. He too had on camouflage clothes and wore big, heavy military-style boots which clumped noisily on the wood floor. "Wahl, OK then," he muttered, looking around.

"What can I do for you?"

"Worms," the man said.

"I have worms," George said. He went to the shelf and picked up two boxes of wigglers and two of crawlers, placing them on the counter.

"Hey, old man," the boy was addressing George, "you got any orng?" The boy squeezed the word 'orange' together so tightly that it came out as a honk. For a half minute George didn't know what the boy had said. Then he figured it out.

"Oh, no, kid, sorry. Sold out." That, too, was a lie. There were two cases of orange sodas in the storeroom.

"Hayull," the boy spat, and dug some more in the box. He pulled out a cola, twisted the cap off and gulped down a goodly portion of it in the exact way George figured he'd be guzzling moonshine if he was at home. "Ahhh...." He said, and burped. "Wish it was orng, though."

"Yeah, well, sorry," George said. He thought to himself that his nose might start growing if he kept telling lies. But he liked telling lies this morning, and these two probably deserved it. He turned back to the older man. "I have wigglers and crawlers," he said, "which would you like?"

"Hmmm...." The man seemed to be in thought. Then he grinned, "Awe I tell yew, when I crawls on her she sure do wiggle!" He and the boy laughed at his vulgar joke. George didn't.

"What're these?" The man was digging around in one of the Styrofoam containers he'd opened. Soil from the box was spilling onto the counter.

"Those are," George paused, reluctant to say the word, "wigglers."

"Humpf," the man said, "Wahl, how many?"

"Those, there are two dozen. The others, one dozen."

"Oh, don't look like no two dozen."

"They're in the bottom of the box." He immediately regretted saying that because the man dumped the box onto the counter. There on top of a heap of black soil was a wad of wiggling earth worms.

"Oh, there them thangs are," he said, "they are wiggly little thangs." He scooped the worms and soil up with both hands and dumped them back into the container. Then he dropped the lid on the container and pressed down so hard that he wrinkled the Styrofoam. "OK, then, gim'e these, two boxes I suppose."

"Fine then," George said. He rang up the worms. "Two dollars a box for the worms, dollar for the soda.

"Oh hell, yeah, I forgot," the man said. He turned to the boy, "Get me and the old man a drank," he said. Then he spied bags of pork rinds on the chip rack and he took two of those and dropped them on the counter. "There, how much now?"

George rang the man's order up and took his money. As he did so the man tore open one of the bags of pork rinds and started eating them. Lifting his hand to his nose, he said, "Sheesh, what you keep them worms in? Snuff?"

"It's a special soil mixture," George said. He almost said, "horse shit" but thought better of it. He resisted turning his nose into a curl at the man's eating chips before washing his hands.

"Oh, OK, dirt, huh?" The man sniffed, "smells kind'a like shit." The man shoved another handful of the pork rinds into his mouth oblivious to what else was going in there too. He grabbed up the bag and turned to the boy. "Come on you little ass-hole boy. Let's git." He turned to George again. "That was a funny ad you got in the paper. Was why we decided to come on down here and get our worms."

"Ad?"

"Yeah, 'bite me,' ha ha, funny." George made a mental note to cancel that add first thing Monday morning. "Come on you stupid kid," the man yelled at the boy again.

"OK, old man, keep your gawdamn pants on." The two walked out the door, clomped down the steps in their matching combat boots, and went to the truck. George watched as the man and boy argued although George couldn't hear them. Suddenly the boy punched the man in the stomach and must have knocked his wind out. Then a minute later the man hit the boy beside his head, knocking him to the ground. George started to go call the police until he could hear the laughter of the two coming through the closed door.

"My Lord," George muttered as their truck pulled away from the store. For the next twenty minutes he was busy cleaning the mess the man made with the worms and muttering expletives about rednecks, among other things.

About noon the phone rang. George lifted the receiver. "Yeah?" He was not in a good mood now. After the rednecks had left several other customers came in, each with their own complaints.

"George?"

"Yeah, oh, hello, Iris."

"What's the matter, George."

"People."

"Oh, well,"

"Yeah, some stupid idiot come in here and...."

"I'm sorry, George," she cut him off, "I was just calling to see if everything was OK?"

"Still here," he said, "Like I was saying, this guy...."

"That's good." There was a pause, "Good, George," her words were spoken absently, like she was listening to someone else. "Oh, I have to go, George, Richard is here."

"Oh, yeah, your boyfriend," George muttered.

"Well, yeah, no, well, I got to go, George. We're going to dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yeah, lunch, whatever. I'll call you later, OK?"

"Sure, I'll be here." The phone clicked and he knew his last words had not been heard. Cat curled himself around George's ankle and meowed. George went to a cupboard, took down a can of cat food, popped the lid off of it and dropped it to the floor. Cat ate. George walked back through to the store.

The afternoon faded and customers were fewer and fewer until George said to himself that he'd had enough and he walked to the front door, closed the blinds, slid the bolt and flipped the sign to "CLOSED." Just as he started to turn around and go back a thought struck him. He walked to the buzzer, next to the door, and with a jerk pulled the wiring from it. Then he walked back to his apartment.

Monday morning George called the newspaper and canceled the advertisement. Then he spent the rest of the day quietly waiting for the sunset. He had only one customer all day long. As the sun started down behind the trees opposite his parking lot he went out and perched on one of the posts. It was the first time he'd done that in months. An hour later he still sat there. It had gotten dark and he'd not turned any lights on inside or outside of his store. At around nine he bolted the door and went to his apartment where he ate some tuna from a can and went to bed. Tuesday was a repeat of Monday. He spent the time thinking. And that was not good. Before that kid showed up, he thought, he'd had an easy enough time. When he did start thinking, which he was getting good at not doing, but when he did, he could easily find solace in a few Gin and Tonics. But now he was thinking all the time and that stupid note was up there on the Gin mocking him.

By noon Tuesday he had thought himself into a few corners. He had re-lived the wreck a dozen times, seeing his wife and boy lying broken and bloodied just before he passed out. He actually had no recollection of the wreck itself. He remembered feeling sandwiched between his seat and the steering wheel and looking over at his wife, and on top of her, his son. Both were motionless and crumpled. He remembered trying to reach out to them and feeling his arms pinned down and then he blacked out. The very next memory he was that of standing at a grave side looking down at a casket, a tiny casket, being lowered. Everything else is just gone. That is the hardest part for George, not remembering. He wanted to remember. But he couldn't remember. It wasn't as much as the loss itself that sent George to the liquor store that first time. It was his not remembering.

Then George thought about Pug and his mother and what a sweet family they were and how cruel life was to them and what an ass he had been to them both and the kid and now the kid was dead and Iris was off finding herself a man when George knew that he, himself, wanted Iris and he wanted to be with her and at the same time he knew it was a stupid thought. By Tuesday evening he was almost his old self again. As he slid the bolt on the door and flipped the sign in the window Tuesday night he had decided he would go to that cabinet. Iris had not called. Not since Sunday.

He walked back to the kitchen, opened the cabinet door and jerked the note she had written off the bottle. He read it again, "You don't need this stuff, George." Her handwriting was very nice. "Yes, I need this stuff," he muttered, wadding the note up and tossing it on the floor. Then he reached for the bottle.

Thursday morning George lay on his couch clutching an empty bottle. His head was spinning and he was more confused than ever. And he was just little angry because this time the bottle had let him down. His mind had not stopped working at all this time. And he felt worse than ever. All the holes in his past haunted him, screamed at him, made him wretch with nausea and bend from an emptiness in his stomach.

The day before was a bit of a blur for George. He recollected now only bits and pieces of that day. He'd gotten up and stumbled through the kitchen to open the store. The Gin HAD worked Tuesday night, he'd passed out. Or maybe just because he was tired. Anyway, though, he started off with a gin Wednesday morning. And for an odd reason it sobered him up. AND it turned on his brain. He remembered making the decision not to open, to put, "Gone Fishing" on his sign out front and just stay in bed. He had vague memories of carrying the litter box outside, bringing it back, bolting the door and falling on the couch.

Then, completely out of the blue, George started to remember. He remembered every detail of the wreck that claimed his wife's and son's life. He was a younger, happier man then, that night he and Helen and his son headed home. They had been laughing and talking. Out of nowhere, he remembered now, came a pickup truck. Right towards him. He swerved. The road was slick. His memory played back in bizarre slow motion. The car spun, Helen screamed. Round and round, across the highway, the car bounced off a concrete divider to the left of the road, around and around, and back to the right, where it slammed into a post. George remembered seeing Helen and Joe, mangled and wadded up on the passenger side front seat. He was pinned by the steering wheel. He remembered being there a long time, looking at the two people he loved dying within arm's reach and he could do nothing. He even

remembered the ambulance trip, days in the hospital, funerals which had been delayed so he could attend. He remembered it all.

Now, Thursday, he sat, staring at an empty bottle, a bottle that had betrayed him for the first time. He sat and wept. And he said over and over to the air above his head how sorry he was that he couldn't reach out and help Helen and Joe. He watched them die and he couldn't help. It was his fault they died. About noon George sat up with a start. It suddenly occurred to him there was a pickup truck. In his lane. On a divided highway. Where had it come from and where had it gone?

It wasn't his fault. It wasn't his driving or anything he'd done that had caused the wreck. It was some idiot on the wrong side of the road. Probably some drunk who to this day doesn't know the grief he has caused. Drunk. George looked at the bottle in his hand and instinctively threw it across the room where it hit a wall and shattered.

By Thursday evening George pulled himself together enough to get something to eat. He had forgotten about the store, almost, and everything else. Slowly some semblance of reality seeped into his brain. The phone rang, then quit ringing. He never answered it. Four times it started up, rang ten or twelve times, and quit. His machine was not on. He went to bed. Now he knew, it was not his fault. For the first time in many years he actually went to sleep. Tomorrow, he said to himself, he was going to call Iris, go see her, tell her what he knows now and maybe, just maybe figure out how to make a life again.

Chapter Seventeen

"God, George, I thought you were dead or something!" Iris' voice sliced the air. He sat up in bed with a start. She was standing over him. What was she doing in his house? How'd she get in?

"What, what?" He was confused.

"What? I'll tell you what, you jackass," she yelled. She was as angry as he'd ever seen her. "Don't answer your phone, don't answer your door, lying here in a drunken goddamn coma, I don't know why the hell I bother!" She turned and stormed out of the room. From the kitchen he heard her, "Go to hell yourself, George, you are there already!" George heard an odd crunching sound just before he heard his back-door slam.

Quickly he jumped up, realizing he was still wearing his khaki's. He ran towards the door as fast as he could, considering he was dizzy and confused. Just before he got to the door he realized there was glass all over the floor. The window in the back door was broken. Halting his forward motion he carefully tiptoed through the shards and went outside. Iris was in her fathers' truck trying to get it cranked. Apparently she was so angry she couldn't concentrate enough to get the key in the ignition. Just as he got close to the truck she managed to start it and it moved backwards. He leaped for the rear-view mirror and clung to it and for a dozen feet she literally drug him as she backed up. Then she hit the brakes with such force that it threw George off balance and he tumbled, bumping his head on the mirror as he somersaulted into the grass beside his driveway.

Iris sat in the truck looking at him. She didn't get out to see how he was. "You really piss me off, George, and I don't need this crap." Her words were cold and hard.

Pulling himself to his feet and trying to dust himself off George stumbled to the truck. "Wait, wait, wait, Iris, just hold on, wait..."

"On what? The next time for you to kill yourself?"

"No, you don't," he stumbled and fell against the truck. "You don't understand."

"I sure as hell do. I watched my father rot his guts out just like you are doing and I'm not going to watch someone else I love do it." She shook her head, slammed her hands down onto the steering wheel, and spoke to some unknown presence outside the windshield, "Why in the hell I let myself fall for a drunk I'll never know." She leaned forward, looking upwards at a passing cloud. "Is this some kind of joke? Hello, God, are you up there? IS THIS SOME KIND OF DAMN JOKE!?"

George was tried desperately to figure out what was happening. His brain picked up on the words “fall for” and “someone else I love” and tried to process them. But before he could she was looking at him again.

“What does it mean, George? Go to hell? What do you mean by that? Go to hell?” The truck jerked backwards slightly, “Get out of the damn way, George,” she said. He stepped back but not quite enough. The edge of the mirror clipped him as the truck surged backwards into the highway and then forward past the store in the direction of her house.

George stood and watched her go. He shook his head, trying to put the pieces of this morning’s puzzle together. Why was his kitchen door glass broken? Why was Iris so angry? And what did she mean about, “go to hell.” He walked out to the highway to look in the direction she had gone knowing she was long gone. But as he looked passed the store what he saw on his new marquis answered at least one of his questions. There clearly written out on the sign were the words, “GO TO HELL.”

After a shower, and after cleaning up the glass on the floor, George went outside and removed the letters from the sign. He hadn’t a clue how his “Gone Fishing” had turned into GO TO HELL but he had apparently written it out Wednesday morning some time. Slowly he walked back to his store carrying plastic letters under his arm. Twice he tried to call Iris’s house but got no answer. He had expected none.

His brain began to process the morning’s events and eventually got around to what the angry woman had said. Something about “love,” and “fall for.” One of the things he had figured out Thursday was that he had strong feelings for her, too, and for the first time he admitted it. He loved her. But he had also resolved that she didn’t love him and she had some fella named Richard. But now what? He got in his truck and drove to her house.

“Go to hell, George,” Iris said through the door. He knocked again. “Go to hell, George.” He was beginning to understand what was rumored about a red headed woman’s temper. But he was not going to give up. He’d knock. She’d say, “Go to hell George,” until the whole thing became somewhat comical. Finally he’d had enough.

“Maybe I’ll just break your door like you broke mine.”

“I’ll blow your goddamn head off, too!” Iris’ words weren’t quite as fierce as they could be.

George heard steps on the floor inside. The door latch clicked. “I’m sorry about your door, George, I’ll pay for it. Now Go to hell.” She slammed the door back.

He stood there, unmoving. Her door, of course, was metal and had only a tiny window in it. He considered putting his fist through that window but thought better of it. So he just stood there. Eventually she opened the door again.

"I said go to hell, George."

"I heard you, Iris," he said.

She couldn't stay angry any longer, though, and so she smiled. "You are a total jackass, a drunk, a sot," her face was growing cloudy again, "and I'm NOT going to watch you kill yourself." Now her face was stern again and she went to slam the door. George blocked it with his foot. He stood looking at her face which looked bruised.

"What happened to you?"

"As if you care."

He ignored the remark, taking a step closer. He reached out his hand and at first she dodged it but then let him move her hair back. The left side of her face was bruised. "Good God what happened?"

"It's nothing."

"Like hell," he said, stepping towards her and by his actions causing her to step back into the living room. "What happened?" he ask, suddenly feeling some very odd emotions. "What happened," he repeated.

"Oh, just a little wreck," she said. Resigned to George's being there she motioned for him to move, which he did, and she closed the door. Then she walked to the kitchen and George noticed she had a slight limp. "Richard hit a damn deer, Sunday night. Swerved off the road and into a fence. Kind'a screwed up his truck. I just spent the night in the hospital and they let me go."

"Why didn't you call?"

"I tried!" There was frustration in her voice. "Richard took me to his place Monday and I was out of it with some pain killers. I tried to call Tuesday night, when I came around, and I tried all day Wednesday and Thursday. What happened to your machine? I drove back today thinking you'd been robbed or had a heart attack or something. What do I find?"

She turned to face him, "I find 'Go to hell' on your sign and you not answering the door. I beat and bang and yell and then I figure, 'hell, he's killed himself or something,' so I broke the glass and went in." Her voice rose in pitch with each word, "and I find you laid out drunk! Damn you, George, I can't afford to lose someone else I...." She halted in mid-sentence. "I just can't." She walked back to the door. "I just can't, George," she said, calmly this time, "I just can't. Go home, George."

George walked towards the door, as broken inside as he had ever been. Here before him was a most wonderful, beautiful, loving woman and he didn't believe it was possible that he could feel the way he was feeling again. He had to do something, say something. He stopped, turned, and walked back into the kitchen.

"Go home, George, please," she repeated.

"OK, now, Iris," he said.

"Don't, just.... Don't."

"Listen, can you just listen?" His words were soft, broken, but with enough of an edge to get her attention.

She hesitated. "No, George." She pulled the door back a little more, "Go home. I'm going to stay in Dad's house. I can't sell it now anyway."

"Why not?"

"Doesn't matter, go home."

George shrugged and walked towards the door. Then he stopped again. "NO, damn it, no. You are going to listen to me." The words came out louder than he had intended and Iris was startled. She looked defensive and a little frightened. He softened and his shoulders drooped. "No, I'm sorry, I mean, I, um, didn't mean to startle you, but please, Iris, listen?"

"OK, I'm listening, George." She was firm in her stance and he felt like she may and may not hear what he had to say, but he said it anyway.

"I understand, finally, I know what happened," he started. Then he explained everything, from what happened Tuesday, to what he remembered, the truck, everything. As he talked ten years of anguish rose up inside him. By the time he'd finished telling Iris about the accident he was sitting on her couch with tears streaking his face.

He looked up at Iris, still standing by the door but not quite so defiantly now. "And you are right, I am a damned fool. Some drunk ran me off the road and what do I do? I BECOME that drunk. I didn't murder my wife, I didn't." In ten years George had been angry, he had drank, he had pounded the table, but he had never, ever cried. Now he felt something in his throat, his head hurt, his chest hurt and he was trembling. Then, suddenly, he was sobbing. He placed his head in his hands and cried, and kept repeating, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it."

Iris's arms were gentle and warm as she slipped them around him. He sat on the edge of the couch, elbows on his knees, crying into his hands. She tugged at him so he would slide backwards on the couch. He leaned backwards. As he leaned back she carefully wiped his cheeks with her fingertips.

"Shshsh," she cooed softly, "I know, I know, it's ok." There were tears in her eyes as well. For a very long moment they looked into each other's eyes. She wiped his cheeks again, this time with a handkerchief she produced from somewhere. "Shshsh," she said again.

George took a breath and it caught halfway down. She held him slightly. He could smell her hair. Her warmth was almost more than he could bear. Hesitantly he moved his arm from by his side and placed it carefully at her waist. They embraced.

"Iris," he whispered.

"Yes, George?"

"I feel like shit," he muttered.

She smiled. "You look like shit, George," she said.

"So do you, all purple and speckled."

"Thank you, George," she said, smiling at him.

"You're welcome."

"Iris?"

"Yes?"

"I, um,..." he sputtered, "I love you, Iris."

"I love you too, George. You are a stupid, grouchy, crotchety man but I do love you so!" She kissed him a gentle kiss and then his arm closed around her, pulling her towards him and he kissed her.

"Ouch," she said, favoring a sore arm.

"Sorry, Iris," George whispered. She lay on his shoulder, blinking away tears that ran down her cheeks.

"I love you," she whispered again.

"I love you," he said, "I never, ever thought I'd ever love anyone again. But I do, I do, and maybe something in this stinking world will work after all."

With both arms around her and feeling her warmth against him, George stared out the open door and up towards a blue sky. A sudden flash of white caught his eye. Suddenly a seagull landed on the porch right outside the door. "Sonofabitch," George muttered.

Iris leaned back a little and looked at him curiously. He just nodded. Iris followed his gaze and saw the bird. It took a hop up to the threshold, squawked, then in a second it was gone.

George stared blankly at the spot it had been. "Maybe there is hope after all," he thought to himself. "Maybe there is."

About the Author

H.J. Ted Gresham is a writer and craftsman living in Lufkin, TX. He's a rideshare driver, mostly for Uber, in Houston several days a week. He's married with two grown children. He's self-published three novels and has a good number of articles published online, primarily on the Texas travel website TexasExplorer.com.

Ted was a home-parent for more than a decade. He cared for foster kids and then his adopted children. He has an unusually diverse work history, from truck driving to welfare casework, restaurant management to radio announcer to Air Conditioning technician. Ted has a BA in history from Corpus Christi State University and attended Stephen F. Austin State University, Angelina College and Del Mar College. He studied a wide spectrum of subjects, from government and a bit of pre-law to counseling and writing. Ted has also completed Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Tech School in the Air Force and Truck Driver Training at Northeast Texas Community College.

Ted's interests are as diverse as his background. He tries to keep up with space exploration, science, and government. He's a fan of Science Fiction. He's also a fan of American classic authors and Shakespeare. Ted loves the outdoors, often doing his writing or working on his website sitting outside. When he can he gets away on road trips, camping or fishing.

Ted thanks you for reading this novel and hopes you enjoyed it. Please check out his other works.