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Lee K. Abbott

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## ONE OF STAR WARS, ONE OF DOOM

Lee K. Abbott

The slaughter hasn't started yet. Tango and Whiskey, in fact, have just left bowling class at the Mimbres Valley Lanes off Iron Street. No one knows about the Intratec DC 9 or the Savage sawed-off double-barreled 12-gauge. No one knows about Little Boy and FAT MAN, the propane tank bombs set up with egg timers and gallon gasoline cans. Even Mr. DeWine, who's famous for believing he knows everything about anything any kid does, doesn't know that right now, nearly nine in the morning, Tango and Whiskey are parking their cars, a black VW Golf and a blue Camry, in their assigned places in the student lot across from the gym. Sadly, Mr. DeWine can't even guess that in several minutes—maybe ten—Tango, Marlboro in hand, will stop Mike Richardson outside the cafeteria.

"Richardson, I like you," he will say. "Now, get out of here. Go home."

No, Mr. DeWine knows only that it's too early for lunch and that he has a mountain of civics exams to grade before seventh period. His gut is churning—too much coffee too early, he guesses—and, come four-thirty this afternoon, he'll be in his Jockey shorts in a room at the Red Roof Inn off I-10, listening to Ms. Petty—Ms. Leanne Elizabeth P., late of Tularosa—crying in the bathroom. Before or after—hell, often both—she cries in the bathroom: no one is listening to her, she sobs, no one values her opinion, she's a fireplug for all anyone cares. Just a truck or a root or a box of rocks. She'll be wearing a garter belt and seamed hose, the fetish wear Mr. DeWine drools over, and she'll be sitting on the closed toilet lid, sniffing and boohooing that even Mr. DeWine, the guy she's been screwing for the last ten months—Christ, probably the only heterosexual in this goddamn Land of Enchantment who can get from one to ten without using his goddamn fingers, a guy who regularly made her laugh right out loud—even he doesn't listen to her. No, that crumb just climbs

on and hollers “Whoopie!”—not a “yes” or “no” or civilized phrase to go back and forth between them until, at 6:30, he says adios so he can hustle back before Sue Ellen, the wife, gets home from Pioneer Realty, Associates.

So there is Mr. DeWine—Frank to his pals, Francis to the Social Security Administration and the DMV, shitbird to the likes of Tango and Whiskey—in the hall, for eight minutes merely another cop-slash-cowboy obliged to herd Brianna (all forty of her) and Jason (the fifty or so he is) and Niki (the dozen she’s turned out to be) into the right holding pens-slash-classrooms, to prevent them from stampeding over one another. He’s got the “Declaration” to teach, for crying out loud. And attendance to take. A zillion announcements to make, plus homework to hand back—No, Tiffany, not on the curve—a whole briefcase of ideas he’d like to tell the world about if only the natives weren’t so damn pimply and tall and loud, if only they didn’t dress like lumberjacks and toddlers and thugs, if only they had more on their minds than Friday night and Duke Nukem and where to barf up that turkey sandwich.

The world? Fuck the world, he wants to say. Wants to stand in the center of the hall—right there, in fact, right where Colin is messing with Trisha who’s messing with Erika who’s messing with Misty who’s probably wishing that Joshua were messing with her and not that skanky April May Lester—yeah, stand right there in between Mr. Geller (History II) at his door hither and Mrs. Fletcher (History I) at her door yon, and shout that it’s the millennium, for God’s sake, that there’s got to be something else to do for forty-eight thousand two hundred and sixty-one dollars a year; that he was once young, too, a skinny Virgo with an acceptable jumper from the top of the key, and an expert way with power tools, in addition to a singing voice that didn’t pain you too much to hear in St. Paul’s version of youth choir. “Hey, look,” he wants to holler, “Mr. Masters-degree-himself can burp the entire first verse of ‘Silent Night!’” Yeah, Frank Round-Yon-Virgin DeWine, you moles. Frank you-just-would-not-get-it, don’t-you-wish-you-did DeWine.

So, okay, it's crowded and noisy, the air thick and institutional, the air smelly and damp and bad for learning, rotten for anything except virulence and nightmares, and right now, while Rammstein and Nine-Inch Nails and Creed and Tupac and Little Fascist Panties and the Holy Modal Rounders are on that Walkman and that CD player and between those ears, and someone—Fishboy, maybe, he's the type, subtle as a circus clown—is bellowing “ho-ho-ho,” and while all of the Mountain Time Zone is getting stupid and cranky and old, Whiskey and Tango are unloading their duffels.

Jesus Lord, they are in possession of some seriously impressive ordnance—hand grenades and pipe bombs, all homemade with glass and nails and jacks and BBs—and these guys, breathless and teary-eyed, are practically punch-drunk with glee. The plan, amigo. Everything's proceeding according to plan, approximately a year in the making. Months and months downloading the data from the Net, the only other shit keeping you sane being Buckhorn specialty knives and natural selection and seeing white trash wreck their brand-new cars. Nearly a year, man, of putting up with jerks who mispronounce words, plus O. J. Simpson and weathermen and slow people in line in front of you and paying for car insurance. So it's now time for five—and five more, bro—and five on the dark side, too. The time, motherfuckers, is nigh. Oh, sweet Jesus, is it ever.

Which is ten on the dot, and the bell is ringing, the tardy bell, and the doors are closing—*boom, boom, boom* echoing in the hall—and soon Mr. DeWine, the image of Ms. Petty on all fours fixed like a photograph behind his eyes, takes roll. Surprisingly often of late, he's imagined the room with a Ms. Petty in each of the twenty-six seats. A Ms. Petty in a tiger print corset, growling. A Ms. Petty bound hand and foot, duct tape over the mouth, hands down the naughtiest wench in the area code. A Ms. Petty on her knees, tears dripping from her cheeks, her lower lip trembling, hers the grunts farm animals make. *Ugh. Baw. Eef.* A Ms. Petty laughing, then choking because, hell, if you didn't laugh, really bust a gut, you'd just end up banging

your head against the nearest brick wall—the government, for starters, and the freeways, *Friends* and the hopeless porkers at the free weights in Gold's. Oh, man, a Ms. Petty in the back of the room, pulling down the map of the Gadsden Purchase, her fanny shiny and smooth and broad, the ass of a former rodeo queen of Otero County now with unspeakable credit card debt.

But today, no. No frills to fondle. No silk or satin or whatever the dickens it is that brings his blood so quickly to boil and makes his thigh muscles twitch. Today, seat 6A, we find Amanda, too sparkly in the eye, busy as a hamster. And Chelsea, 4F, with earrings and bracelets in industrial quantities—probably couldn't get through an airport with all that hardware. And Todd, his best citizen, A's on everything, including his high-dollar hair. They're all here, it seems. Tarika? Yes, as usual, about as far from Mister Teacher as she can possibly be without leaving the room altogether. Tyson? A simple "here" would do, but, Christ on a crutch, this drama club president and his "present," a response that under his care and feeding seems to have eight—possibly ten—syllables. Bethany? Ah, practically under his feet again, eye shadow like poster paint, but a rack you wouldn't mind warming yourself against during the next ice age.

"Anybody know where Kathi is?" It's the *i* that kills him, hanging off the end like a tail, a smiley face above it on all her written work. A letter like a lollipop. "Kathi? Anybody?"

"I saw her in physics." It's Harrison, Todd's foot slave, a junior with the fertile imagination of a Dumpster. "That was second period."

"Thanks, Harrison," Mr. DeWine says. "Anybody else?"

They're studying the floor, every blessed one of them. Or the ceiling. Maybe that fascinating crack in the drywall. They don't look at you anymore, these kids. They mumble, they shrug, and they cough. Eye contact? A new social disease.

"She's on the Spirit Committee." That's Suzanne—not Suzy or Sue, if that's all right with you, Mr. DeWine—and she possesses a smile that all but blinds him: more teeth than Jaws, pearly as the path to Paradise itself.

The committee, he mutters. A second later, shazzam, it hits him. It's Free Cookie Day. The cafeteria. All the chocolate chip and peanut butter and ginger snaps you can eat. Fight, Wildcats, Fight.

"All right, then," he says. "Turn to page 194."

And so that's the way it goes—"When in the course of human events" blah-blah-blah—time a drip to torture yourself with, time the stick to poke into your eyes, time you wouldn't want to meet alone in an alley. Until it's time—no matter the ifs, ands, and buts—to serve up generous portions of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of ever-loving Happiness, precisely as Master Tom described it. Time, in fact, to turn the page, please.

"...appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions," Todd is saying—*intoning* is more the hell like it. Good Lord, the kid is a senator already. A justice of the Supreme Court. King Todd is straight out of the Charlton Heston edition of the Old Testament, the words raining down on Room 144B like murrain and flies and frogs, and, while Ben Franklin and John Hancock and the rest of the Colonies' ruling class are mutually pledging their lives and fortunes and sacred honor, Mr. Frank DeWine is doing his damndest to concentrate, to keep his eyes open, to hold himself upright and not, weakened by boredom and surprisingly epic fatigue, to lay his impossibly heavy head in Marcy Hightower's fetchingly ample lap.

"Mr. DeWine?"

Our hero finds himself looking straight at Harrison, eyeball to eyeball. The boy has spoken. He has brought Mr. Frank DeWine, our one-time recording secretary for Lambda Chi Alpha and full-time yellow dog Democrat, back to the here and now. Evidently—and this, DeWine thinks, is truly alarming—he was somewhere else, a there and a then well distant from the rhetoric of revolution, a place and time you most assuredly did not want to visit in the company of humanoids as aggressively disinterested as these.

"Page 208," he says. "Manners, Query XVIII—for man is an imitative animal."

They're good, these children. They appreciate knowing what to do next. They appreciate knowing what's to be done in, say, November—even in a November a decade from now. They're big fans of clean laundry and recreation rooms and pool parties. They like pizza and keggers and Old Navy. Oh, they get goofy over all the goodies FedEx can hand deliver to their doors. Not like Whiskey and Tango—code names, in case of capture behind enemy lines. Whiskey and Tango don't like people who bump into them, or country music or freedom of the press. Especially Whiskey, who wants to haul all those who are against the death penalty and who dig commercials and who cut in line and—well, he doesn't know exactly where he'd haul their sorry asses, except that it would be forever, the outer darkness and way beyond here, beyond even time and God and any idea that can't be made plain in four words.

It's the Luvox, Whiskey sometimes thinks. The shit gets in him deep, soaks his bones. It blasts him out there, really out there, where the stars creak and the slop drips off the sun and the angels dress like Baron Frank'N'Furter. But that's no reason, never has been. Instead, the reasons are Fishboy calling you “pussy” and “pansy” and Clinton—the fucking president—blowing his wad on that intern, that Monica. Yeah: Kellogg's and lard-butts and the crap they're spraying on your food. And against that, in opposition to all that stupefies and enrages and disappoints, stand himself—the Whiskey man—and his loyal sidekick, the Tangster. Hi-ho, Silver, you dipshits. Hi the hell ho.

Which is more or less what Mr. DeWine has come to think in the last ten minutes. He thinks to tell them he was in a rock band once, Dr. Filth and the Leather Cup—neat, huh? They specialized in Vanilla Fudge covers, Iron Butterfly. He played drums—the perididdle, the flam, the rim shot—no Ginger Baker, sure, but Ringo enough. Nineteen, freshman year at State, and he's on the stage at El Patio bar in Old Mesilla, pounding out the beat for “Hey, Joe,” and urging the unwashed to shake their tail feathers, joints the size of cigars going back and forth, the singer—man, what was his name?—humping the air, humping the organ,

humping the Peavey amp, humping the bass player one time. That's what he wants to say, here, out loud, from atop the desk, having dropped an atlas or two to focus everybody on the present. "Once upon a time," the speech would go, "in a world far, far away, Mr. DeWine, no kidding, had a topless ZTA from Roswell ride him pony-style while he, the selfsame son of a gun huffing and puffing before you, kicked over a cymbal and generally wreaked havoc on the stage décor." Here he would look around, taking stock, with that celebrated pregnant pause. "Ended up on the floor, ladies and germs, a pair of Bermuda shorts between the teeth."

But he won't. Can't. A line, you see, lies between them—a Maginot line, practically. You are the teacher, the incarnation of decrepitude, laughingly out of touch with cool, yours the clothes that even Larry, Curly, and Moe said "yuck" to. You all but wear your hair in a comb-over, you've gone spongy in the belly, and you gobble goddamn Lipitor and Prinivil because your body—some temple it is, Bunky—has turned on you in outright revolt. And they are the students, the rulers of the wasteland, the tribe yattering in Martian.

And then, thank God, the bell has rung and, only a moment short of a moment that doubtless would have shamed you eternally, you have not told them anything actionable, haven't told them anything at all except that they should know, with the same certainty they know their names, Jefferson's September 25, 1785, letter to Abigail Adams—yes, Tiffany, this will be on the test—and, instantaneously of a single mind, they rise, legs and arms everywhere, backpacks strapped on, their chatter a noise that becomes a roar, then insensible as static, then nothing for the next few minutes but elbows and ball caps and ponytails, nothing except time diving at you like a missile, you just something else goopy, slow, and warm-blooded that can talk.

The carnage? Still an hour away.

Erika's in orchestra, third flute, trying to catch up, her foot having found a rhythm for some fa-la-la that, duh, there



isn't ick to like. Misty's pretending she's not in English, at least not in any English that demands you read such brainless typing as *The Bluest Eye*, not to mention all the footnotes and commas and infinitives they make you use. Todd? He's in the library—study hall—doing math homework and another scholarship essay. The Kiwanis, the Optimists, the Lions—all the do-gooders. They're all looking for heartfelt words and a winning way of saying squat. Harrison, sitting across from Todd, seconds that opinion. Suzanne would as well, but right now she's trying to figure out why Mr. Hart, Latin (fourth period), hates her so much. After all, forty kinds of ablative, ninety noun cases, never mind Horace and Virgil and Cicero—who are these mush-mouths anyway? *Mehercle, qui dies!* Which sentiment Alicia would understand were she present, but she's gone to the cafeteria to help Kathi, who's managed to get rid of all the sprinkles and the butterscotch and who's made—sorry, Ally—a sizeable dent of her own in the gingerbread men. Which leaves April May Lester, who's not really a skank but just wants one of the cool kids—Bethany, for example, or that prep Tyson—to like her, to ask her a question she can say “sure” to.

So back we are to Mr. DeWine. “Francis Michael,” his mother used to bark, a genuine drill sergeant. “Francis Michael, you have been a profound frustration today.” He can imagine her here, at attention beside his desk, a switch or a flyswatter in her hand. Her plastic hairbrush, more likely. “Francis Michael, I trust we'll have no more of such tomfoolery.” Yes, ma'am, no more. No foolery of any kind, Mother. At which promise, she disappears, and Francis Michael finds himself with little to imagine but what, in the first place, his father, not a saint himself, ever saw in her—the former Mary Cobb, of Silver City. Her hair maybe? She had great hair, a thundercloud of it, hair to spare, all of it fine as cotton candy. Plus, she could take shorthand, did so right in front of the TV—one January the pages that were reportedly a faithful transcription of *Guns smoke* piling up beside her armchair. *Bonanza*, too. She liked the rough-and-tumble, sodbusters blazing at each other with pistols, dust swirling, horses

going to panic in the eyes. But other than that—the bang-bang and the frenzy, and, okay, modest expertise in the kitchen arts—what? Oddly, Mr. DeWine can't conjure her now, not a single feature. Just the hair, floating in midair, atop the head of a ghost maybe.

A vision which would scare him if, without warning, he hadn't been distracted by whatever hard and sharp thing that's settled in him—a bone, he fears. Something small and heavy has tumbled to the flat bottom of him, the thunk like a bolt in a bucket, and right now, before Jason appears to discuss his overdue research paper, Mr. DeWine would like to smoke a cigarette, the first in, oh, ten years. A cigarette. Menthol. Nothing at this instant (and for the several to follow) strikes him as a finer idea. At the very least, business to occupy the hands. An activity to keep them from banging here and there on the desk before him. Another flaw in character, albeit tiny and common, to lie about. And, magically, just when Francis Michael needs him, there he stands, Jason, the most earnest Caucasian youngster since Johnny Appleseed.

"Come in, son," Mr. DeWine says, startled he sounds at all like himself, relieved as well that he speaks any language other than Urdu.

"Something wrong, sir?"

Mr. DeWine, most recently of planet Earth, sneaks a peek at his watch. Eleven on the nose. T minus Tuesday and counting.

"I'm fine, Jason. Why do you ask?"

The boy knows everything, Mr. DeWine has heard. The periodic table, the succession of England's kings and queens. Who kicked hindmost in the Tang Dynasty, how law is made in Kafiristan. So what now?

"It's your face, sir," Jason begins. "It was like you weren't here."

All right, Mr. Frank DeWine thinks. They know he hollers and the comely Ms. Petty from mathematics weeps, and that old Ben Franklin has helped himself to all the tarts in Paris. They gab among themselves, these creatures. They know his dog,

the pound-bred Rex, and his weakness for bourbon. They know the sorry state of his socks, his wayward heart. They know the rusting piston in his chest, the sump above his shoulders. They have, indeed, found him out.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” Mr. DeWine gestures to a chair and, a minute later, time with shape and density and hue, they have begun.

As have Tango and Whiskey. It’s a pop quiz, right there on the hill overlooking the cafeteria. One Stevens pump-action, sawed-off shotgun? Check, Tangster. One Hi-Point 9-mm semiautomatic carbine with the 16-inch barrel? Double-check. One of this, one of that, one of everything they started whispering about the summer before. One childhood of *Star Wars*, one of *Doom*. They’re wearing their outfits—the flannel shirt, the camo pants, the lace-up boots, the ghoulish smirk. They’re about to engage hostile forces, the fitness fuckheads and those geezers who don’t use their turn signals. Whiskey has done what he needed to do. He’s washed his hands, he touched his ear six times when he got out of the car, prayed to the four corners, touched his other ear six times—the hocus-pocus you do on Tuesday so that on Wednesday you won’t find yourself naked in your closet begging the pardon of an audience of Klingons and druids and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. In his room, he identified everything that began with the letter c—his carpet, his cat, his cap, his Cap’n Crunch, his cudgel.

And now, goddamn, there’s more to inventory. The ammo, the Molotov cocktails in the Piggly Wiggly bag at your feet, the notes that tell the civilians you’ve morphed, you’re about to jump through the only open seam in the universe to join the master race, and so here you are, Attila himself, a BFG 9000 in hand, decay dust in one pocket and in the other a potion from the Wicked Witch of the West, warp speed the means by which you hurtle from A to B, you and your buddy now Knights Jedi and Errant and Black, you and your buddy now the most special of special effects, founding members of the ninth circle, the inner sanctum, the grave, you and your buddy now specters brought

into the full light of day by rage and by the heartening prospect of a prodigious volume of gore. Oh, Tango, it is April, the cruelest month. Oh, Tango, it is seventy fucking degrees. Oh, Tango, it is the end of the world as you know it and you feel fine.

"You ready?" Whiskey says. "I am go for liftoff."

To which, for the longest time—a century, it feels like—Tango says nothing, his mouth chewing crazily at the air. His eyes have become narrow and dark, his ski cap down over his ears like a bank robber. He could be thinking about heaven, about saints to goose step with, nectar to sip. He could be thinking about crows that tap dance or storybook Apaches to send on the warpath or a feat impossible to do like carry the ocean across the desert in his hands.

"I'm scared," he says. "Really scared."

Yes, it's springtime, the bell about to ring, a few kids on the lawn, smoking, a few walking in from the lot. Schoolmates, they are called. Peers. Whiskey loves them. No kidding. He must take their lives because he loves them, which fact they will comprehend when he walks among them. This is his lesson. They have been shallow, these Wildcats. They have been arrogant. They have given offense. And now, lo and verily, he will smite them.

"Afterward," Whiskey says, "we'll get nachos."

Tango knows this is not true, can never be true. Afterward is not in the plan. The before has already ended and nothing will follow but smoke and blood and debris and dreams never to wake from.

"Tango," Whiskey says, a question.

*Foot.* It is the only word Tango can utter, the only word he remembers from a lifetime of words. Wait, there's another. *Tree.* Which he says and says again until enough minutes have passed for him to say, with nearly incredible relief, *insect.* Then: *wolf.* Then: *night.* Whereupon Whiskey touches his shoulder, and, miraculously, Tango has other words to say, all of them big and new and remarkable as the day itself.

"Pizza, too," he says. "Pepperoni."

The world has already turned red and swirly at the edges,

an arctic cold settling at their feet. The world is about to tilt, to wobble out of its groove, about to shrink. The world is cracking, a splintering you can hear in heaven.

“Ready?” Whiskey asks.

This time Tango can answer. His shit is squared away. The epic wind has left his mind. He’s copasetic. He salutes, stiff-armed and urgent.

“Heil Hitler,” he says.

And now the doors are near, a handle for each to grasp. They have only to pull, which they have done, and they have only to march past several classrooms, Ms. Petty’s among them, and toward the library like soldiers, which they are doing, and they have only to arrive at the circulation desk, which they have, and they have only to squeeze off a round, which each does into the ceiling tiles, and at last, the clock ticking toward 11:45, to the dozens of now thoroughly why-faced Wildcats in front of them, those trembling like Todd and those not, those like Harrison wide-eyed with awe and those thinking they ought to be able to claw through their notes for the answer to this unreasonably complicated question, the warriors Tango and Whiskey have only to speak.

“Here we are now,” they say. “Entertain us.”

He’s got a half-hour, Mr. DeWine does.

He could eat. Mystery meat in the cafeteria or the tuna sandwich in the refrigerator in the teachers’ lounge. He could pay a bill or two, maybe. He’s got his checkbook, a week’s worth Pay Up in his briefcase. Instead, he puts his feet on his desk, rocks back in his chair. Why not visit Leanne, a surprise? She’s got this period free, too. He could sneak up behind her, grab her at the waist. He’s done it before, though only once. The whole time, not more than five minutes, he was overwhelmed by the fear that somebody—a student having forgotten a book, or a teacher searching for the new calculators—would walk in on them. His skin had felt too small, his head too big. He thought he might fall over, his heart like a squirrel in his chest, all claws and climbing.

Besides, she was herself spooked, slapping at his head like a spaz, hissing—Honest Injun—hissing like a goose or some such. Fucking fowl, for Pete's sake. No, he'll stay put. He takes his deepest breath of the day. He'll do a push-up or two. Work on that spare tire. Tend to the mind and body both, he thinks. Your familiar heart-and-head imbalance. Man, is it quiet. Eerily quiet, only the AC cycling and the clock and the creak of a middle-aged middleweight hauling himself to his feet. It's the quiet from the moon, the quiet where time ends.

Outside, there's nothing, just the school flag, all that Disney-worthy blue. He walks among the desks. "Abandon all hope," someone has scribbled. Dante—what a bozo. Blame the whole fiasco on Beatrice. At another desk—here is where the lovely Sherry parks her lovely butt—he finds a hair. Blond. Not Sherry's, though. No, this is the blond of a practicing Protestant. This blond drives an Explorer. Doubtless, this blond aced the ACT. Red would be something else, he guesses. Honest work to be done on a ranch. A career on the stage. He turns on his heel, Mr. DeWine does. And brown, Sue Ellen's color? He doesn't want to think. That's a smart mouth, a wiseacre. Brown's a story with an unhappy ending. Brown is boredom. Brown is a mannequin that drinks vodka gimlets.

Now he's really curious. What have they left behind, these kids? Last fall, he found a spiral notebook with writing in it so peculiar, so detailed and figurative, it could have only come from the hand of an egghead's egghead. Squiggles gave way to squares and those to bouquets of dashes and those to a series of capital *L*'s, the whole of it bizarrely architectural—the castle of a dark-minded wizard, he thought, or a Byzantine metropolis of gnomes and haunts, or a low country in ruin. Yeah, it was a civilization to dig up, you and ten thousand other zombies looking for the reason you can't sleep. He wonders now what happened to the notebook. It might have led to treasure. Jesus H., if only you were fluent in runes and glyphs and smudges and symbols, it might have led you out of Deming, New Mexico, and right to the golden threshold of Shangri-La itself.

Gracious, there's so much to know about Mr. DeWine, especially now that elsewhere the shooting has started. That topless Zeta Tau Alpha, for example, at El Patio those many years ago? That was Sue Ellen, his wife. Sue Ellen Bates then. Older by a year. A sophomore business major. But she wasn't really topless. She wore a Moby Grape T-shirt. He likes to embellish—makes the real realer, he thinks. The Bermuda shorts? Those he didn't invent. He didn't invent Roswell either, or the cymbal, or the wreckage in his wake. Nor, later that night, at his apartment off Solano Street, did he invent the clumsy sex he and Sue Ellen had, or that hour, toward dawn, when he felt that he'd been dropped on the planet for all the wrong reasons. He didn't invent Catherine either, the baby who died six years later. A miscarriage, actually, the first of two. Eons ago, it feels like, when beasts ruled and we were but fish or flesh that crawled.

What else should we consider before he makes up his mind to drop in on Ms. Petty? He was runner-up in the fourth grade spelling bee, *terpsichorean* the word that got between him and the silver trophy Kay Stevenson bragged about. His first girlfriend? Michelle "Mickey" Barker. Went steady the whole summer the Beatles came to America. Behind Timmy Bullard's house, in the onion field, she let him touch her breasts—"For a count of five, Frankie, no more"—the surprising weight of them something he swears he can still feel. Oh, this as well: He wrote a whole book in high school, in Las Cruces. Well, eighty-some pages. But hand-illustrated, lots of forest scenes and a mountain range that looked like eye teeth. His version of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Lots of derring-do in that. Nick-of-time stuff, too. An alluring maiden in distress, of course. He was the Sir, naturally. *Vanquished*—man, he loved that word, that and *dispatched* and *woe betide he who*, all the fancy talk you nowadays don't hear much at Del Cruz's Triangle Drive-In—yes, he vanquished a dragon. Slew the sucker silly. Afterward the Sir found himself bedecked—right, another word stuck-up Kay Stevenson wouldn't know the up from down of—with a sash and more medals than Bayer has aspirin, the king (the maiden's

father) the most grateful potentate in all of Pip-pip, Cheerio, and vicinity. Got some serfs out of the deal as well. Mrs. Chew let him read a chapter to his English class, Mickey Parker right under his nose. Made it all the way to the part where Sir Gawain and his friends—the vaunted Sir Fitzroy and the steadfast Sir Palmetto, mainly—lay siege to the manor house of the dastardly Archduke Fussface, before the bell rang. Yeah, dastardly. “I think,” Mrs. Chew said to everybody, “there’s a lesson in this for all of us.” It was this event, he still thinks, that made him want to become a teacher—to find lessons everywhere, even in his own needy heart.

Not terrible lessons, though, like those being delivered right now a hundred yards away in the library, where Whiskey, clomping through a tangle of overturned chairs and scattered papers, has announced that he is the Lord Humongous, the Ayatollah of Rock’n’rolla, and Tango has discovered underneath a reading table a girl, Tiffany, to play peek-a-boo with.

“You like me, don’t you?” he says, his the rictus grin you carve on a pumpkin.

What a silly question. Of course she likes him. He has the gun. Dark and greasy-looking with May Day streamers hanging from it and maybe actual human ribs, gobbledygook like Arabic or graffiti scribbled with Marks-a-Lot on the stock, the gun is pointed at her.

“So,” Tango begins, “if I asked you for a kiss, you’d give it to me, right?”

Another asinine question. He can have her purse, her hair, her hands.

But now it appears that all he wants is for that noise—an animal howling in pain, Tiffany thinks—to stop.

“It’s a cat,” she says, trying to help.

The gun goes off again, another boom wrong for books and study hall and Free Cookie Day, and Tiffany understands that it is she, the only daughter from the house of Hudspeth, who is crying. She is the cat, howling.

“Do her,” Whiskey is shouting. “Do the bitch.”



But she can't be done, she thinks. After all, she is home, under the covers. She has her pj's on, in her headphones Jack Diesel's greatest hits. A novel lies in her lap, a tearjerker Oprah wanted her to read. She can't be done. No, she certainly can't.

And, mysteriously, she isn't. Instead, the boy—she's seen him before, James or something, from the soccer team—crouching behind a desk chair is done. He has a cute haircut, close at the sides, then he doesn't. Unmoving only a moment before, he is flying—snatched by the collar, it seems, and hurled against a bookshelf, the reference section crashing down to bury him.

"Targets of opportunity," Whiskey is calling them.

He's firing into the floor—*pow, pow, pow*—his shotgun like a pogo stick bouncing him through the room, real astonishment in his eyes. The firepower. The fucking firepower. He's hanging on to the smart end of a contraption that spews out blood and justice, cordite and delicious disorder.

"Dance, tenderfoot," he orders, now Billy the fucking Kid and Triple H and Prince Jericho and Mr. Blue, and immediately one unlucky gomez—gee, Harrison, fancy meeting you here—is dancing, snot smeared across his lips, clearly the loneliest fellow in the hemisphere.

"It's the hucklebuck," Tango says, delighted to be the new host of *MTV World*. "Shake a leg, dude. Trip the light fantastic."

Arms spread as if in ecstasy, Harrison dances, knees higher than a desk, nothing beneath him now that the floor has disappeared, now that Whiskey, giggling, is keeping promises. Now that the present, simple as Simon, is giving way so easily to the even simpler past.

"The hokeypokey," Tango has said. "Turn yourself about."

Events are moving swiftly, many at the same instant. Todd intends to rise, to dash for the door. He's thinking it, yes, but a moment later he's not thinking anything at all, the organ to think with having unexpectedly gone mealy and cold. The world smells sour and sulphuric. A blizzard has roared through here, dust

roiling, shreds of paper falling like snowflakes. The floor is pocked and pitted, as if gouged by jackhammers and the picks of giants. Shattered glass lies everywhere—in your hair, down your shirt, in your Nikes. Wood splinters have stabbed you in the arm, the neck, the backs of your thighs. Remarkably, you've heard not a single sound. The muzzle flashes are unmistakable, a spray of wadding and sparks, a window pouring over a desk like a shimmering waterfall, but, huddled behind the body of a girl whose misfortune—thank you, Mr. Hart—was to need the Latin for *Never cut class again*, *Miss Suzanne Winters*, you can't hear anything. Except your own heart, its fitful thud-thud the rhythm vampires are aroused by. Yes, Tango is speaking—his mouth is working, his awful tongue—but the audio is on MUTE. You want the remote control. But the instant the sound thunders over you like a tidal wave and you have glimpsed Miss Petty at the door, you don't want anything except for time to snap backward so that you'd have a century to warn her, nasty old DeWine's girlfriend, not to come in here, that she can read this week's edition of *Time* tomorrow or the next day. Please, Miss Petty, don't come in here for anything.

But she has. And Tango—his shirt off, his birdlike chest glistening with a war paint of blood and paste and ink—has already, with the formal bow of a Beau Brummell, welcomed her to his intimate get-together.

"You're just in time," he says.

For Whiskey, there's too much to account for. The wall, the floor, the wall again. At this point, he had hoped to be well into Beta phase. The main event. Little Boy and FAT MAN themselves. But his ear has to be checked, and his wrist, followed by his boot and his ankle, before he can move on to his knee and his eye socket. "Say the words," he tells himself. And, soon enough, from his prepared list, he does: "Reason, virtue, plenitude." He glances around. Evidently, he has been shouting. "Being," he hollers, "is not different from nothingness."

"Put that down, James Crawford." Ms. Petty is addressing Tango, stern as a movie actress. "What do you think you're doing?"

What lunacy. Which can't be helped, unfortunately. Ms. Petty is, figuratively speaking, beside herself. She's watching herself stamp her foot—yes, actually stamp her right foot—and put her hands on her hips, a school marm from ancient America. She should shake herself, slap some sense into her pretty head, but she can't because Leanne Petty is not really there. Instead, dumb and foolish and proud, standing not a giant step from the barbarian with the rifle, is a lunatic female using her name and wearing her clothes and saying what would be said if the universe had not so completely melted.

"I said to put that down, Mister Crawford."

He can't, he says. He's committed. Totally.

Committed. It's an expression she's heard before, that fussbudget with the wagging finger and the profound respect for propriety.

"I mean," Tango is saying, "fifteen minutes ago, maybe. But, now? Jesus God, Miss Petty, we're, like, in the second act here."

Against the far wall, still wringing his hands as if scrubbing them in air, Whiskey has almost reached the end of his speech. "Give us this day our daily bread," he is reciting. "The horror, the horror. One if by land, two if by sea. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night."

Ms. Petty slowly surveys the room. If only Frank could see this. These kids worship new gods now. They speak a new tongue. They will eat a new food in a new world and grow old in the new way.

"Miss Petty?" It's Tango, his the shrug of youthful impatience. He has work to do now, okay? And little time to do it in.

"What's that on your forehead?"

It's sandpaper, he says. To strike matches on. For the fuses, you know?

"James, you were such a nice boy. I can't believe this."

Another shrug, this one of eighteen-karat sadness. "I still am nice, Miss Petty. You just don't know me, is all."

She's desperate to return to herself, to step into the person still staring at James Crawford, nice boy. The situation demands organization. She should be telling that girl—Misty or Jewel, something perky anyway—that she can leave now, poor thing. She should be calling the authorities, the principal at the very least. A thousand tasks need attention, if she could only climb back into her own skin. But she can't. Never will. For James Crawford has finished his work, Whiskey having hustled over to observe, and the old self of Ms. Leanne Petty is collapsed on the floor, one leg twisted under her hips, the last of her dribbling out of the shockingly ragged hole in her head.

Whiskey squats down, lifts her limp hand. "Goodnight, air."

The plan. It's Tango's turn to talk. "Goodnight, noises everywhere."

For weeks and weeks afterward, Sue Ellen DeWine will wonder what Frank was doing near the library. She's visited his classroom and it's—what?—a good hundred yards, could be more, from where the murders happened. The papers—*The Headlight*, even *The Journal* from Albuquerque; TV, too, Channel 4 from El Paso, and CBS—have called him a hero, running in to rescue those students that way, but all Sue Ellen will puzzle about, when she goes back to work a week after the funeral, is what Frank was doing there. He should have been on lunch break, the other direction exactly, but he was headed toward the library. In June, admittedly embarrassed to be obsessed with such an inconsequential detail, she will nonetheless phone Dick Spivey, the assistant principal, to ask him, but all he will be able to tell her is that he hasn't the slightest idea. "Maybe he had to return a book," he'll tell her, and, okay, that will be her answer—a book to return, another mystery solved—until the following August when, steering her Camry into the lot of Zia Title for a closing, a merciless logic of curiosity and intuition and suspicion still hard at work in her, she will say "Leanne Petty" aloud, and Sue Ellen DeWine, the widow of a hero, will know. Francis DeWine, the

son of a bitch, was on his way to see Leanne Petty.

Which is no more than Frank himself knows as he yanks open the door to the math wing. He's got his tie loose now and he's making good time, bum knee and all, more or less skipping, in his mind a dumber-than-dumb image of gimpy Chester shouting "Mr. Dillon! Mr. Dillon!" in the middle of a Dodge City street. Sir Francis has a personal matter to attend to, a furtive and private concern, so more than several seconds pass before he notices that he's the only person heading toward the weird banging noises. Everybody else, students and grownups alike, is scrambling to get by him. It's an honest-to-goodness fire this time, he thinks. It's not a drill, not a bomb scare like last Halloween. Adjacent to the men's toilet, he spots a kid he recognizes, one of the Goliaths from the lacrosse team, April Lester tugging on his arm.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Richardson, what's going on?"

The kid's head goes back and forth. It seems to be the only part of him that works. The rest of him is frozen, seized.

"Well?"

Richardson needs a second, clearly. He has the expression of a landlubber crawling out of shark-infested waters.

(A moment will arrive, soon, when Mr. DeWine will remember this Q and A with greatest sorrow. How boneheaded he has been, he will scold himself. What a stone. How could he not have known?)

"April?"

Mr. DeWine grabs her arm, gets her attention. Good Lord, she's thin, like a ballerina. What, he wonders, is she doing with a behemoth like Richardson. It's like finding Tinkerbell keeping company with The Incredible Hulk.

"The library." She's whispering, as if she has to tell the whole school the dirty word some creep in homeroom yelled at her. "They're in the library."

Somebody is smacking a wall somewhere, Frank thinks. With a bat, sounds like. Really giving it the business.

"Who's in the library?"

She shakes her head, her tiny head. She doesn't know. All

she can do is point, another of the species with seemingly only two or three moving parts.

(And this, too, is another instant he will regret when his moment comes.)

"Go on," Mr. DeWine says. "It's a fire or something. Go outside."

So they go, April practically dragging Richardson, the two of them replaced by five more and three more after that, and here charge a handful more, all of them with crab legs and flying arms, the last kid—Tyson, his orator!—missing a shoe. This is like the end of a period but at fast-forward and without the grab-ass and ha-ha-ha, students appearing from everywhere. One girl he's never seen before—she resembles Marisa Tomei, but chunkier—runs by him screaming "John" over and over. "You can't do this," another girl is saying. "It's just not fair." That's all. Just those two sentences, like a chant, the same sentences he will shortly find himself saying. But right now here are more kids bearing down on him, the short fellow—Fishboy, is it?—with the shiny Penn State jacket tripping and knocking two look-alikes down with him, all of them having the devil of a time getting up off the floor. And, shit, here are those goofy noises again, but louder this time.

"You seen Ms. Petty?" He's collared a boy lugging a bass fiddle, the instrument bigger in all dimensions than he is.

"Who?"

Mr. DeWine pulls the kid to the side. Down the hall, the litter is incredible. Books. Purses. Backpacks. Baseball caps. A blouse is there, too. And a pair of coveralls. Christ, what were all the fire drills for? He expects zoo life next. A giraffe would not surprise him one whit.

"Ms. Petty?" he begins. "She teaches junior calculus."

"I don't take that till next year, sir."

So Mr. DeWine asks the next kid—a doofus from student council possibly; he has that squeaky look about him. Another *no*. And another, this one from the dorkier end of the food chain. Nothing but *no*, *no*, *no* until, interestingly, there's no one left to

ask, the hall having become as still as deepest space. Which means that, despite the jangling of the alarms and sirens woo-wooing in the distance, Mr. DeWine can hear, with phenomenally stunning clarity, what he dares not believe is gunfire.

(That moment? When he at last apprehends how monstrously dimwitted he's been? When he learns how far up his ass his head has been? Friends, it's now. Right now.)

"No," he says, as much to the brickwork as to himself.

But there it is again. A shot. Like a cannon, he thinks. Shit.

You'd think he would run now, wouldn't you? You'd bet that, knowing what he knows, he'd turn the other way, scam for the doors he came in through. You'd think, because he's read the papers and watched CNN and has heard about those psycho punks in Arkansas and Colorado, and because he possesses the same instinct for self-preservation we all have, that he'd know what to do. At the very least, his body would react independently, right? His muscles, his fist of a heart.

But he does not move. No, Mr. DeWine—get this—sits, leans against the wall. It's a fire, he tells himself—not the last of his wishful thinking. He's no hero, that's not in dispute. And violence? Christ, the only fistfight he had was—when?—maybe in junior high, in the days when they had junior high. Instead, he tells himself again that the smoke in the air, bitter and grainy, is from a fire. Faulty wiring probably. Or some butt-wipe setting off M-80's in the restroom. But, all along, Francis Michael DeWine has known better. It's just like TV, friends. How sad. You go to a movie, A bona fide shoot-'em-up, and it's boom-boom-boom, just like now. Gangsters, terrorists, invaders from another galaxy—God, they're all in the library. It's astounding, really. His lungs have gone slack, the air in here too thin. The knee is seriously hurting now, the throbbing like a tom-tom. Skiing. What a dumb-ass sport. And here it is that he considers his lap, specifically the damp spots on his trousers, and realizes that he, the dumb-est of the dumber earthlings, is crying. He's weeping. Silently, without a heave or a tremor, tears are falling

from his chin. Tears.

"They didn't work."

Someone—a boy of wicked angles and rattles and marvelous heat—has sat down next to him.

"FAT MAN and Little Boy," the kid is saying. "I must've fucked up the timers."

The kid seems to wobble under a halo of fireflies, a buzz constant as ocean noise.

"Are you John?" Mr. DeWine says. "A girl was asking after you."

Whiskey, the boy says, his voice not at all the snarl a villain should have.

The emergency sprinklers have come on now, a fierce shower drenching the hall, the walls slick with running water, the floor shiny like a postcard of a stream from a world where the outside is weirdly in.

"You can't do this," Mr. DeWine says.

Oh, but he can, replies the boy.

"It's not fair. Really."

Time has unraveled. Yesterday, Frank DeWine was a Cub Scout stealing LifeSavers from the Stop'N'Go. Only a month ago did his voice change. He was born with a full beard and a three-pack-a-day habit.

"You cold, Mr. DeWine? You're shivering."

Yes. So cold. Between his ears, a glacier has ground through the center of him, the fissures and folds of his brain jammed with ice.

"You want to say anything?"

"Like last words?" Mr. DeWine asks.

Whiskey nods. He takes no particular pleasure in this scene. Business is being conducted, that's all. The "therefore" and "whereunto" pages of the contract. The paragraphs in which the who's who and the what's what become the *ipso facto* and the hey-diddle-diddle.

"I'd like to say something about my father," Mr. DeWine says, though for several breaths he can't think of what exactly he



might mean. "He had big hands, like paddles."

Again Whiskey nods. Mr. DeWine is being a good sport. Not like some you could name. Not like, oh, Bethany with her forgive-us-our-trespasses bullshit.

"I don't think he ever struck me in anger," Mr. DeWine is saying.

"My dad, too," Whiskey says. "He just sends me to my room, or takes away the car."

Whiskey has raised the assault pistol and placed it tenderly against the vein pulsing at Mr. DeWine's temple. The boy has an interest, keen but thoroughly professional, in this moment. He wonders what we will make of his own last words, those typed on the page folded in his pocket, after he, at the muzzle velocity of 1,230 feet per second, has transformed himself into liquid and light, meat and whitest bone.

"Anything else?"

Yes, Francis DeWine thinks. Yes, there is.