

APPLEWOOD

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Brendan P. Myers



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

Applewood

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Here there be monsters...

One

Moon finds a body—Dugan comes home—In the days of my youth—Stephen Harris has a headache—
In the sweet, summertime, summertime—Cupid,
draw back your bow—The Fourth of July—Uncle
Dan comes to visit—Diversions—Halloween

1

Moon Finds a Body

It was 10:25 on a Friday morning in late March when the highway worker happened upon the body, halfway down a small incline in a shallow wooded area by the side of the road. Sergeant Lombard of the Grantham Police Department, who'd been on the scene for only a minute or so, stood by silently while Officer Wilson filled him in on the details. The highway worker himself was just a seventeen year old kid, performing his last few hours of community service left over from a joyride last year.

“Kid says he went into the woods to take a leak,” Wilson began, though Lombard had already deduced that much. Rorschach patterns of damp liquid decorated most of the boy's pant legs. He

had looked away before attempting to read anything into them. Instead, he glanced down at his watch and noted that twelve minutes had passed since the call came in.

Smith and Wilson were the first on the scene, located at the halfway point of a one-mile stretch of State Route 135 that bisected the central Massachusetts town of Grantham. The State Police had been notified, of course, and they would take over from the locals as soon as they came careening in from their barracks four exits down the highway. Lombard expected them at any moment.

He glanced up to see the sun had gone in and the sky was now a haunting gray, with low clouds moving swiftly across the horizon. Zipping his coat against the chill, he recalled wistfully that the first tease of spring had come and gone over the past few days. The morning forecast warned that a new blanket of snow would begin falling sometime later this afternoon. It was expected to continue through the weekend.

Walking a few paces toward the woods on his left, Lombard scanned the shoulder before stopping a moment to kick the ground with the heavy heel of his boot. Raising his head, he glanced down the highway and noticed the mounds of litter exposed during the recent warm spell. He thought it long past time to bring back the crying Indian.

After signaling Wilson to continue attending the young man who found the body, he motioned Smith to come join him before speaking for the first time.

“Show me,” he said.

Smith nodded and led him away from the shoulder and into the dense patch of woods below. The two walked ten or twelve paces before Smith stopped to put his arm across the Sergeant’s ample midsection. Lombard saw it after another moment. It was half-hidden by a large tree limb, felled during one of the late winter storms. He moved closer to get a better look.

The victim was young, maybe eighteen, a male Caucasian with medium length brown hair. His head was bent back at an impossible angle. Most of his neck and the right side of his torso had been ripped away, as if he’d been involved in a gruesome industrial

accident of some kind. The translucence of the remaining skin made him appear more washed up floater than roadside murder victim. His eyes were gone, leaving only empty sockets to stare directly toward the two cops. His mouth was open in a silent scream.

“Whaddya think?” Smith asked.

Lombard began moving clockwise, giving the body a wide berth. At twelve o’clock, he looked up toward the highway. Through the low branches, he could see Officer Wilson beside the highway worker. Even allowing for the garishness of the boy’s fluorescent clothing, Lombard knew the sparse woods offered little cover for murder.

“Looks like he got his neck broke,” Smith said, “before the animals got to him, I mean.” Lombard nodded.

“What couldda done that, Sarge?” Smith asked in a hushed voice. A moment later, as if to himself, he added, “And where’s all the blood?”

Getting no response, Smith looked across at Lombard and was shocked to see that the color had drained from the usually unflappable Sergeant’s face. His skin had turned a sickly shade of gray, and despite the cold, beads of sweat had broken out across his forehead.

Before Smith could speak, they heard the sound of oncoming sirens—a whole parade of them. *The cavalry has arrived*, Lombard thought. “Let’s go.”

The two made their way out of the woods back to the side of the highway. From there, they watched a half-dozen blue and gray state police vehicles come screaming to a stop. They were trailed moments later by an ambulance, and an unmarked vehicle Lombard knew from long experience belonged to the coroner.

A State Police Captain emerged from the vehicle closest to Lombard and began barking orders at the platoon of officers. From this moment on, Lombard knew that he and his crew were officially bystanders. About the time they began rolling the gurney from the rear of the ambulance, the State Police Captain finally approached.

“Officer Lombard, good to see you.” The two men shook hands.

“Good to see you again too, Captain Jenkins. Just wish it was under different circumstances.”

Lombard glanced over to see Wilson had been relieved of his babysitting duties and was coming to join his brother officers. Half a dozen troopers now surrounded the young highway worker, and all of them looked to be in a very bad mood. *Probably the kid's worst nightmare*, Lombard thought. But he also knew they weren't going to find anything there.

“What do we have so far?” Jenkins asked.

Lombard glanced at his watch. “At about ten twenty-five this morning, that young man there discovered the body. His supervisor phoned it into us at ten twenty-seven. Officers Smith and Wilson here were the first to arrive on the scene at ten thirty-four. I arrived at ten thirty-nine.”

“The kid got anything to say?”

“Not much. Went into the woods to take a whiz. Came out screaming.”

The barest hint of a frown crossed Jenkins face. “Not for nothing, but why did they call you people?”

State cops viewed the highways as their turf, but Lombard didn't see it that way. All of Grantham was his turf. “You'll have to ask him.”

Jenkins glanced around a moment, as if assuring himself his minions were doing everything by the book, before turning to address the roadside gathering of Grantham's finest.

“You guys got anything to add?”

Smith and Wilson looked down at the ground. Lombard looked up at the sky. After another moment, Jenkins dismissed them all.

“All right, then. Thanks. We'll take this one from here. Please fax us a copy of your reports before the end of the day.” He began walking back toward the crime scene when he heard Lombard call to him from behind.

“Captain?”

Jenkins turned around and looked at the local cop. He'd met this one before, so he was no longer taken aback by the man's sheer

size. Jenkins recalled that he sometimes overheard people who knew him well call him, "Moon." It was a fitting nickname for the big man. He also knew that the man standing before him was a very good cop.

"What is it, Officer Lombard?" Jenkins waited patiently for the man to speak. After a moment, he did.

"It's not what it looks like."

Jenkins put his hands on his hips before half-turning to look toward the road, where rubberneckers had slowed traffic to a standstill. He motioned one of his officers to assume traffic control before sending a nod Lombard's way. "Thanks. But it never is, is it?"

He began making his way back to the woods. The Grantham cops stood there until Lombard motioned that it was time to leave.

Back in his own cruiser, he scolded himself for not trying very hard. But at least he could say he'd given it a shot. It wasn't as if they were going to believe him. Grownups never did.

A wave of nausea overcame him and he began to shiver uncontrollably. His hand was still shaking when he reached over to turn the heat up high, though he knew these tremors were not caused by cold. He closed his eyes while waiting for them to pass and began making plans. First, he had some calls to make.

This was the reason they had all stayed in touch for...what was it, twenty? No, twenty-five years now. *Time flies*, he thought. The time had finally come to bring the old gang together, because it had started again. His own worst nightmare come true.

When his shakes finally receded, he allowed himself a smile when he remembered that at least one good thing would come out of this.

It would be good to see his old friend again.

2

Dugan Comes Home

Dugan watched the towering Mobil sign loom closer, just across the highway and off to his right. Blinking hard, he rubbed his eyes and began making his exit just as the first pink hint of the approaching dawn showed itself through the low cloud cover. At the end of the curving ramp, he took a right and then the quick left into a well-lit service station. He shut off his car to close his eyes for a few moments and listen to the sweet sound of nothing at all. Shaking off his weariness, he stepped into the chilly air of the late winter morning.

As he pumped, he moved his head in circles, stretching out tired muscles. He heard the occasional whoosh of a car or truck speeding down the highway below him. Looking up, he saw an empty field of yellowed grass across from the station and recalled the sound of homemade rockets and the laughter of little boys. Turning his head, he glanced toward the station itself and realized that nothing remained of the place he remembered.

There was a two bay garage on the left with cars parked outside awaiting service. To the right of the bays was a 24-hour convenience store, with a tricked out Dodge truck parked beside it. After hanging up the pump, Dugan opened his car to remove some loose paperwork before making the short walk to the convenience store.

The smell of strong coffee that greeted him made his empty stomach churn. He saw a counter to the right, shielded from the front doors. The young clerk glanced up to nod a bored greeting before returning to his newspaper. Dugan returned the nod and followed his nose to the coffee station. After fixing himself a

strong cup—black with three sugars—he reached into a glass case for a coffee roll.

Gagging at his first stale-sweet bite of it, he managed to wash that down with hot coffee before eating the rest in two bites. He refilled his cup and grabbed a second roll before heading toward the counter. He considered purchasing a few more supplies, but decided he had enough for now. Packed in his car were the last of his groceries: cereal, powdered coffee, loose packets of oatmeal, a box of crackers. A small cooler held half a bottle of tomato juice, a few cans of generic soda, and a half block of jalapeño cheese.

The clerk looked up at his approach and moved his newspaper off to the side. Dugan took the kid for about nineteen. Rail thin and liberally pierced, he had blond hair in a ponytail. Beneath a short-sleeved shirt with the Pegasus logo, he wore a more seasonable long sleeve black thermal top. If you believed the nametag, his name was Duane.

“Howya doin’ this morning?” the kid who might be Duane asked.

Grateful for human contact, Dugan thought a moment before replying, “Pretty good, all things considered.” He put his coffee and pastry down on the counter.

“You comin’ or goin’?” the clerk asked, beginning to punch keys.

Dugan puzzled over the question long enough to notice a row of black and white monitors on the counter opposite the register. One of them focused on Dugan’s car, piled medium high with boxes and loose clothing. “Coming back, I guess.”

The kid smiled. “We don’t get a lot of that here.”

Dugan remembered to ask for two packs of butts to augment his dwindling supply before reaching into his wallet and handing over a twenty.

“That your Dodge parked out there?” he asked. The kid smiled as he handed back the change.

“Sure is, that’s my baby! Fixed it up my own self, too.” He turned to look back at the monitor. “Your car is way cooler, though.”

Dugan nodded and said thanks. After pocketing the change,

he reached into his jacket to remove the folded pieces of paper.

“Lemme ask you a question, kid. Did you grow up around here?” After the boy nodded, Dugan continued, “Do you know anything about this place?” He set the paperwork down on the counter and turned it toward the kid.

Duane squinted at the wrinkled sheets, then reached down and moved them closer. On top was an overhead satellite image that Dugan had printed from the Internet along with directions he didn’t need.

“Okay mister, yeah, that’s right down the street,” he said, though Dugan hadn’t asked for directions. “You just take a right outta here and then take your second left.” He looked up and added, “Heck, I bet you can even see this place from there.”

After pushing the paperwork back toward Dugan, he looked up to catch his eye. “But I don’t think there’s anything left, is there?”

Dugan shrugged, privately asking himself the same question. Thanking the kid, he shoved the directions into his pocket, picked up his coffee and sweet bun, and made his way to the exit.

He sat in the car a few minutes to sip his coffee and finish his breakfast. After leaving the city around 2:30 that morning, he drove straight through the night. Windshield wipers smeared away the intermittent snowfall that had kept him company through most of his journey.

The shakes set in about an hour into the trip, forcing him to pull to the side of the road. He swallowed a handful of pills and began breathing in the way he’d been taught. It had been so long since his last episode, he had almost convinced himself he was rid of them. But those with his condition would call Lombard’s message a “catalyst.” Eventually, the shakes subsided, he regained control over his body, and was able to continue driving...

His eyes snapped open. After a confused moment, he realized he’d been dozing. The car was still running. When he looked up and saw the brightening sky, he knew he was pushing his luck. With a queer pang of sadness, he saw the last remaining bite of sweet roll had fallen out of his hand to tumble onto the grimy floor of the passenger side.

He waved once when passing the glass windows of the convenience store, wondering whether Duane had watched over him as he slept. More likely, the kid had already forgotten the funny looking short dude with the funky hairstyle, had put him out of his mind entirely once he'd left the store. Dugan knew better than most that you got all kinds when you worked the night shift.

He left the station and drove another quarter mile on the quiet road. There were houses here and there, most of them occupied. When he came to a chain link fence, he slowed, coming to a stop in front of its high gate. After fumbling a moment in his knapsack, he found the set of keys his friend had supplied. Mike thought it was a bad idea for Dugan to stay here and hadn't been afraid to say it. But he didn't waste any time trying to talk him out of it.

Dugan opened the padlock, unwrapped the rusted chain holding the posts together, gave the gate a slight inward push and let gravity do the rest. Walking backwards while watching it swing, he banged clumsily against the front corner of his car. Swearing, he bent down and rubbed his thigh before reaching for a cigarette. Lighting one up, he leaned against his car and peered down the gated old street.

The ancient asphalt beyond the gate was marred with deep potholes and pitted with frost heaves. He saw a seam in front of the gate where the newer and blacker road he was on met the older and bluer asphalt of the street beyond. He remembered suddenly that when he was a kid, the streets had been blue. Bending to look closer, he saw the old asphalt was marbled with chunks of white quartz and was the color of a tropical sea. Looking again at the place where black road met blue, he decided he liked the old blue much better.

Beyond the gate, he could discern the ghostly remnants of ancient landscaping, overgrown now with thick grass and tall weeds. Dugan remembered a time when both sides of this entrance had been cut back about twenty yards from the woods. Looking deeper, he saw a single post still standing in the middle of the thigh high vegetation.

Throwing his cigarette to the ground, he got in his car and

drove through the gate and onto the property. Getting out of the car, he pushed the gate closed. After securing the chain and padlock, he walked slowly into the weeds toward the remnant of post. He was almost upon it when he saw the once familiar sign lying on the ground.

Long abandoned to nature, it was covered now with years of dead leaves and other organic matter. Using his right foot, he wiped away enough grime to see bas-relief letters raised against the dank and rotting wood. Crouching down, he used his hands to wipe away the remaining twigs and dirt, and read the single word written on the sign: "Applewood."

Decorative apples were raised against the wood on either side. He stared a moment longer before standing too quickly. Thinking he might be sick, he bent over and put his head between his legs until the nausea passed. He stood more slowly this time and walked back to the car, raising one eye toward the brightening sky before putting his car in gear.

Maneuvering down the crumbling street, Dugan watched with growing unease as the overgrown woods on either side closed in. At their thickest, he cringed to hear branches scrape against both sides of his car. A nervous few seconds later, the road widened ahead of him and the woods began to recede. As he emerged from the dark tunnel, he caught his first glimpse of the overgrown lawns and abandoned houses.

Crumbling late '60s and early '70s Colonials occupied small plots of land, lining both sides of the street. Most of the windows had been broken long ago, leaving the structures unprotected against the vagaries of wind, weather and time. Still, it surprised him to see just one house totally burned out. The black scorch marks above its empty windows evidenced the raging fire that had licked against the melted yellow paint. He wondered who might have cared enough to put it out.

Distracted for a moment, he felt the jarring crash of the street slamming against his undercarriage as he drove too fast over a deep rut. He slowed just in time to ensure the rear wheels passed over more slowly, then stopped the car, took a deep breath, and

waited for his heart to slow.

Rolling down his window, he revved the engine loudly and listened closely to the sound. Relieved that apparently, no harm had been done, he put the car into gear and proceeded more cautiously down the empty street, arriving at a small cul-de-sac marking the end of the road. He took a moment to gather his strength before turning to glance at the house on the right—the house where he'd grown up.

Halfway up a small hill, it was a gray three-story edifice. The third floor windows were boarded over, but glass remained throughout the first two stories. A covered porch along one side connected to a gazebo in back. He turned his car into the gravel driveway and drove up the sloping hill. After shutting off the car, he reached for his knapsack and stepped out.

Pulling his coat tight against the chill, he grabbed a few small boxes and a handful of hangered clothes from the back seat. Draping the loose clothing on top of the boxes, he carried them awkwardly up the steps. At first glance, the porch appeared in decent shape. But further along, toward the gazebo end, he saw boards missing or rotted through. Most of the white painted trim had peeled away to reveal a flesh colored undercoat. Putting down the boxes, he reached into his knapsack for the keys. He inserted a key into the rusty lock in the weathered door, then pushed the door open and stepped across the threshold into the dark and empty house.

He was greeted by a powerful, musty odor: dank earth and rank sweat mingled with the fetidness of sweetly rotting fruit. His eyes watered, and he stepped backwards again onto the porch. Turning his head to expel his breath, he began waving the door open and closed to coax some outside air into the house. He almost smiled to think that as bad as it was, he had expected worse. After a while, he picked up the largest box and stuck it in the doorway before bending down to grasp the rest of his boxes, juggling the hangered clothes on top.

Walking down the dark narrow hallway, he stopped at the first doorway on the right. It opened into a small sunroom with

a beat-up couch. Crumpled yellow sheets lay on top of the couch in a heap. Two oversized chairs sat opposite, interior foam poking out of dozens of rips and tears. A worn oriental rug covered most of the hardwood floor.

The next entrance on the right led to a small living room with a fireplace. Tattered brownish yellow curtains hung half open in front of the three bay windows. Further down the hall, he looked into a room on the left and recalled that his family had used it sparingly as a formal dining room. It was empty now, bereft of all furnishings.

At the end of the hallway, he poked his head into the kitchen. Empty beer bottles and cans covered every surface. The room reeked of stale nicotine from hundreds of cigarette butts overflowing the ashtrays scattered among the empties. Dugan sensed a fouler odor coming from the fridge, but he wasn't ready to investigate that yet. Turning, he walked back down the hallway to the sunroom. He put his stuff on the floor and made three trips to the car for the rest: a few more boxes and two trash bags holding loose clothing and bed linens.

He put on his gloves before lifting the yellowed sheets from the tattered couch and stuffing them into a trash bag. He picked up a few stray beer cans and chucked them in the bag as well, twirling it shut to contain the reek. After opening the five windows, he grabbed a coat hanger and beat it against the well-worn sofa. Large motes of dust and dirt rose into the air before they were trapped in the stream of cold winter breeze and sucked out of the house.

After a while, he risked a quick sniff of the sofa. He detected only a mild funk, with perhaps a hint of Aqua Velva. Smiling, he grabbed the bag with his bedclothes and made up the couch, then walked through the adjoining door into the living room. It took him a moment to remember how to work the fireplace. The brass knob of the flue stuck, but a small bit of force always did the trick. He used sheets of paper from a small notebook as kindling, and somehow, the half-burned log in the fireplace caught.

After throwing another log on, he returned to the front room to close the windows and grab his cigarettes. He snagged the box

of crackers and went to the cooler for the tomato juice, taking it all back in front of the fire. While the food did nothing to satisfy his hunger, it gave him something to do.

He set the food aside after a while, took off his jacket, and lit up a smoke. The room warmed up considerably as he flicked ashes into the hearth, and after a few minutes his eyes became heavy with the overwhelming need for sleep. He flung the butt into the fireplace and was able to muster strength enough to drag his tired body into the next room.

He shut the curtains so not a hint of daylight could get through, then slammed the sliding doors that led into the room. Slumping onto the sofa, barely conscious, he managed to kick off his shoes and lift his legs onto the cushions. He pulled the thick comforter over his entire body and was asleep before his head was on the pillow.

Although his condition made him incapable of dreams, Dugan's last conscious thoughts were about his boyhood, and the events that had brought him back to this place...

3

In the days of my youth

Fourteen-year-old Scott Dugan groped for his nightstand and shut off the alarm before rolling out of bed. His eyes were still closed as he reached to the floor for yesterday's crumpled jeans. After pulling them over his pajama bottoms, he opened his eyes and walked across the room to his dresser. He grabbed an old sweat-shirt and put it on while shoving his already sock-clad feet into a pair of dingy blue and black high tops. Fully dressed, he left the room and tiptoed down the stairs into the kitchen.

He turned on the coffee maker and grabbed an apple from the fridge. Pulling a handful of biscuits from the box

in the cabinet under the sink, he filled his sweatshirt's pouch and went into the bathroom off the kitchen to take a whiz. Before leaving, he ran some water over his fingers and ran them through his unruly mop of blondish-brown hair. In the hallway, he heard snoring from the sunroom. He looked in and saw his father asleep on the couch, still dressed in yesterday's clothes and only half-covered with an old blanket. Dugan walked over and gently pulled off his father's shoes before hiking the blanket over him. The old man stirred but did not awaken.

He went out back to the shed where he kept his bike, tightening his scarf against the wind and cold of the late March morning. It was still dark as he hopped onto his battered ten-speed and rode to the top of the street. From there, he took a left onto Route 135 and rode the half mile up to Katy's Korner just off the highway.

The Korner was an old-fashioned drive-through variety store that sold cigarettes and beer and penny candy. It had a couple of gas pumps for folks who might wander in off the highway, and between the pumps was a small wooden hutch that belonged to Dugan. Its once green paint was mostly gone now, but it was to this box that trucks came every day from Boston to drop off the newspapers for Dugan's route.

His routine was the same every morning. He pulled off his gloves with his teeth and knelt down to open the hutch. Using his pocketknife, he cut the thick twine off the two large stacks and was pleased to see no circulars this morning. That always saved him time. He reached behind the box and into a hidden alcove where Mr. Gordon left a can of Coke for him each day. Popping the tab, he sat back to read the paper. The presidential race was heating up. Iranian students still held the hostages. Interest rates might exceed twenty percent.

After finishing his Coke and the paper, he folded the papers and stacked them carefully into the twin saddle baskets. That done, he got on his bike and took a left out of the lot, swerving back and forth on the empty road to help balance his load and pick up some speed. His routine was to first ride out to the houses that were farthest away before turning around and heading back home to his

own neighborhood. He stopped at every house to carefully insert the paper into the front door.

About halfway along his route, there was a slight dip in the road. He always sped up when approaching this stretch to heighten that weightless, fluttery feeling in his stomach. It was at about this same place every morning that he waved at a passing truck, Mr. Gregory making the early morning deliveries of fresh milk and cream from the dairy farm.

He had learned over time which houses had dogs and how close to the front door he dare venture. The Wilson Shepherd and the Smith Doberman were well tempered and wagged their tails when he approached. Dugan was able to feed them the biscuits straight from his hand. But Mrs. Skinner's poodle was another matter entirely. He had to throw the biscuit away from the house and then make a run for the door lest his ankles suffer the consequences.

Sometimes, there would be an envelope taped to the front door, the laggards who waited weeks to pay him or the jerks who didn't tip but wouldn't stiff him to his face. He collected in person every Sunday just to let the stiffs know he was on to them. He figured today's envelopes should yield about twenty bucks or so.

By the time he turned his bike back home into Applewood, he would be down to a dozen of the sixty papers he delivered each morning. These went to his closest neighbors, with the last paper going to the house next door to his own.

Turning into his driveway, he rode up the steep hill just as the sun began breaking through the early morning cloud cover. After putting his bike in the shed, he ran up the back porch and into the house where his father slept on in the sunroom. He hung up his coat and looked at his watch to see it was 6:45. His mother would be up by now.

Smiling as he walked down the hallway, he entered the kitchen and there she was, sitting alone at the end of the kitchen table. She looked up at him and smiled. Dugan went over and made himself a strong cup of joe—black, no sugar—before sitting down to join her at the table.

“What’s new in the world?” his mother asked, invoking their daily ritual. He told her about the presidential election and the hostages, but left out the part about the interest rates. He didn’t know just how bad things were, but he figured their family was probably in hock big time by now. Had to be.

His father hadn’t worked in ages and she just made excuses, so it was a subject they each now tried to avoid. She worked as a secretary at the dentist’s office and had to be at work by 8:00. She didn’t drive, so she usually scrounged a ride from a co-worker or took a cab that cost an hour’s pay. Dugan couldn’t wait until he could drive.

“Are you going to shower?” she asked.

“Naw, don’t need to. I got gym second period so I can shower there.” It would also leave some hot water for his mother.

He sipped at his coffee for a while before looking at his watch and realizing he had to leave now if he was going to catch the bus. Gulping down the last swallow, he got up and walked over to put the mug into the sink, before turning again to look at his mother.

She was nibbling at her right thumbnail and staring off into space, her half-finished coffee gone cold in front of her. When he looked into her face, he saw a single tear trickle slowly down her cheek. He walked over behind her and bent down to give her a big hug, to nuzzle his face into her neck one last time, and as always he clutched only empty air.

“He loves you very much, you know,” his mother’s voice said softly, but only inside his head. She’d been dead almost a year now.

He stiffened and turned away, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. Dropping a ten onto the table for his father, he turned his back on the empty room and walked down the hallway, grabbing his coat before heading out the door.

There were already about a dozen kids standing at the top of the street in the semi-gloom of the late winter morning, waiting for the bus. Dugan saw Mike Dolloff standing alone, clutching something close to his chest wrapped in a brown paper bag. An under-sized seventh grader with fiery red hair and freckles, Mike’s family owned the funeral home in town. Dugan would be forever grateful

for the kindness they showed him and his father last summer.

Walking over to Mike, Dugan tried to sneak a peek into the brown paper bag while thinking that whatever it was, it looked heavy. "What you got there, squirt?"

Mike smiled up at him. "Check this out."

He bent over and lay the bag flat on the ground before slowly and deliberately sliding something obviously fragile out of it, about a foot and a half square. When Dugan crouched lower to get a better look, he saw it was a carefully constructed, three-dimensional, papier-mâché diorama. Dugan's best friends Larry Miller and Jimmy Thompson came over to get a better look, too.

"It's Gettysburg," Mike said proudly.

Dugan was astonished. There were painted green fields in the valleys. Brown roads made from real dirt led into and out of the battlefield. One-inch, delicately cut pine stalks densely populated the sloping hills, giving the illusion of enormous trees. Plastic blue and gray Civil War game pieces showed the positions of the opposing forces. Tiny plastic cannons marked the artillery positions, while in the ranks, plastic generals on plastic horses led plastic infantrymen to glory.

But as he stared at it, Dugan began to feel woozy. He heard the anvil sound of blood pounding inside his skull, distant echoes of the tiny cannons. After another moment, his vision began to cut in and out.

"See, that's Cemetery Ridge," Mike said, pointing things out. "And underneath that is Little Round Top. That's where Picket charged."

But to Dugan, his voice seemed a million miles away. He felt a momentary, though not altogether unpleasant, sense of vertigo, and then tunnel vision blurred away both his friends and his neighborhood. He couldn't take his eyes off Mike's creation. It was the only thing he could see. As he continued to stare, he was stunned to see the tiny diorama begin coming to life.

Suddenly, Dugan felt a strong wind on his face, heard it whistling in his ears. Above him, he heard what sounded like a hundred propane lanterns. He managed to tear his eyes away from the scene

for a moment and look up, to discover he was standing alone in the basket of an enormous hot air balloon, hundreds of feet above the bloody battlefield. As if in a dream, he looked down again.

From high aloft, he watched the tiny cannon begin firing into the hills, taking down huge trees, blowing dirt a hundred feet into the air. He watched the Confederate infantry begin shooting down the hill into the Union forces gathered below. Some of the Union troops began to run, but men on huge horses came at them from behind, their swords drawn high to block their escape. Dugan saw a Union general on horseback move out in front of the fleeing troops. Raising his sword, he urged them to fight on, imploring them by his example to be brave.

Even from this high up, Dugan could hear the shouts and screams of desperate men, could smell the acrid smoke rising from the battlefield. When a powerful gust of wind began shaking the balloon, he feared for a moment he would be sent tumbling out. As the shaking became more violent, the wind itself began to speak his name.

“Dugan. Earth to Dugan. Come in Dugan...”

He felt a strong hand squeezing his shoulder, trying to shake him out of it. He blinked hard and kept his eyes closed for a moment. When he opened them, he was back on his street. Looking down, he saw that Mike had already slid the diorama back into the paper bag. When he glanced over his shoulder, Dugan saw the smiling face of his friend Jimmy, and realized that it had been he doing the shaking all along. He looked up and saw the cloud of black exhaust signaling that the bus had arrived.

“Did you see that?” Dugan asked incredulously. He looked over to Jimmy and Larry.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool!” Larry said.

“No, I mean did you see...” His friends looked at him expectantly.

Realizing he’d never be able to explain some of the things he’d been seeing lately, he said, “Naw, never mind,” standing up just as the bus door opened. But when he reached into his breast pocket, he felt his stomach lurch.

“Aww...shit,” he muttered.

“What is it?” Jimmy asked.

“Don’t have my ticket,” Dugan said grimly.

He felt around, but was certain that it wasn’t there. He’d used it last night as a bookmark and then stupidly forgot to bring the book. Mingling with the crowd like he had every right to be there, he got on the bus after Jimmy and Larry. He had just turned the corner and thought he was home free when he felt Mr. Marden grab his shoulder.

“You gotta ticket kid?” Marden used his strong hand to turn Dugan around.

Dugan looked down before answering, “I forgot it.” He looked up and saw Jimmy and Larry walking back toward the front of the bus.

“Can’t ride the bus without a ticket kid. Rules are rules.”

Dugan waited a moment in an attempt to stifle his rising anger, before raising his head to look Marden in the eye.

“I’ve been taking this bus every day for three years now. You know that. You know I’m supposed to be here.” He tried to stare down Marden, but Marden had stared down tougher kids than him. Dugan had seen him do it.

“Let the kid take the bus,” Larry chimed in, to no avail.

“Can’t ride the bus without a ticket kid. Rules are rules.”

Dugan knew it was a lost cause. He turned around to begin the long walk of shame down the three steps, but for some reason he decided to turn and make one last try.

Looking into Marden’s stony face, he said, “You know I take this bus every day. You see me here every day. Every single day.”

He waited another moment before he gave up and got off the bus. He wasn’t going to beg. Sometimes Marden let kids ride the bus and sometimes he didn’t, and as far as Dugan knew, that was the one immutable law of the universe. As he descended the three long stairs he began to hear assorted jeers and catcalls directed at him through half-open windows from some of the nastier kids.

He turned around in time to watch Jimmy say to Marden, “You’re a real prick, you know that?” before he and Larry both

followed Dugan back onto the street below.

Dugan supposed it was just in case they hadn't heard him before that Marden repeated, "Rules are rules, kid," before he reached over and pulled the lever that closed the door. Larry bent down to pick up the nearest rock he could find and threw it at the departing bus. They watched it smack against the rear emergency door before spinning off into the woods. Only after the bus had disappeared altogether did they begin the long walk to school. It was about two and a half miles.

It took forty-five minutes to get there, but they knew they might make it just in time for homeroom if they jogged part of the way. As they approached the school, they heard the two short bells signaling two minutes to homeroom so they were able to slow down some. Mr. Larsen, the school's security guard, was standing at the side door. He had been about to lock it as the three of them approached.

"Nice of you gentleman to join us today," he sneered as they passed.

They split up quickly after that. Dugan ran to his locker to hang up his coat and shuffle his books before looking down at his watch. He figured he had just enough time to run to the almost empty cafeteria and grab an orange juice.

While standing at the counter, he glanced toward the glass front doors and saw what looked like the aftermath of a ticker tape parade. Torn and shredded pieces of newspaper were strewn all around the floor. After paying for his juice, he walked over to investigate. He saw a small kid with red hair crawling around underneath the tables on hands and knees. He was picking up the trash and putting it all into a brown paper bag.

Dugan noticed then that some of this newspaper had been painted green. He moved closer and began to see one-inch pine stalks scattered all over the dirty linoleum. He stepped on something and stopped to lift his sneaker. A tiny Confederate soldier had impaled his rifle into the worn tread of his shoe. Reaching down, he pulled it out and heard quiet sniffing from the boy on the floor. Just as the long bell rang signaling his last chance to be

in homeroom, Dugan got down on his hands and knees and began to help Mike.

The two crawled around silently underneath the tables. Dugan used one of his books to make a small pile of ripped up newspaper, broken toothpicks and pine needles, and shoveled it into the paper bag with his hands. When he looked at Mike, he saw him using his shoulder to wipe tears from his eyes. After they had gathered up most of it, Dugan spoke for the first time.

“Who did this, kid?” Mike shook his head and looked down.

“It’s all right, Mike. I won’t say anything, I promise. Just tell me who did this.”

After a moment, Mike looked up. “Who do you think?”

Dugan just nodded. He didn’t have to ask again. It was Harris, and his brother Michael, and Cotter, and that gang. Dugan recognized their handiwork.

After they finished cleaning up the mess, Dugan stood and looked down at Mike. “You gonna be all right, kid?”

Mike looked down at the ground and nodded. Dugan didn’t know what else to say, so he began walking away, but turned around suddenly.

“You wanna know something, kid?” Dugan waited to meet Mike’s eyes before saying, “That was the coolest thing I ever saw. I mean it.”

Mike half-smiled and looked away. Dugan began running toward his homeroom. He knew he was already late, but a grim smile crossed his face when he thought that at least this time, he didn’t need a ticket.

4

Stephen Harris has a headache

Thick smoke clouded the interior of the vehicle. Stephen Harris and Johnny Walsh were seated up front, Harris in the driver's seat. Cotter and Michael Harris were in the back. Cotter kept flicking his lighter on and off and staring into the flame.

"Cut that shit out," Harris said. The noise made his headache worse.

Cotter flicked the lighter a couple more times before shoving it into his coat pocket. Michael handed the joint up front to his brother. Harris took the last hit and threw the remnant down onto the floorboard in front of him. He watched it burn for a moment before closing his eyes to quiet the throbbing in his head. The four sat in stoned silence amid the bluish haze.

"Whose car is this, anyway?" Michael asked.

"Don't recognize it," Walsh said.

Cotter began leafing through a stack of college-level textbooks he had found in the back seat. "Must belong to one of them loser college kids here for car-eeer day," he said, sarcastically stretching out the word. He began tearing out pages in thick chunks and crumpling them into a small pile at his feet. He stopped suddenly to snicker, "Hey Harris. There's a book back here about you." The slight lisp caused by his two fully formed sets of front teeth made the name come out sounding like *Harrith*.

Although he had begun to nod off, Harris managed to raise his bleary eyes and look into the rear-view mirror to see Cotter holding up one of the books. Harris looked away. He couldn't read that well anyway; it was even worse when he was stoned and had a

headache and the letters were all backwards.

“Yeah? Whatsit say?” Harris closed his eyes again.

“*Abnormal Psychology: Treatment and Effects*,” Cotter said, then he and Walshie erupted with laughter.

From his perch in the back seat, Michael was smart enough to wait for his brother’s reaction before daring to join in. Harris slowly raised his head and opened his bloodshot eyes to grin into the mirror. Cotter threw the textbook back into the pile.

“Career day. Does it get any lamer than that?” Walsh said.

Michael looked out the window toward the school. The last lunch bell had already rung, which meant it was too late now for any of them to get back into the building without going through the office-note bullshit. Michael knew that none of them would even try, and the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. “I dunno. People gotta do somethin’ with their lives, don’t they?”

He was thinking about how the four of them would split soon and spend the rest of the afternoon down in someone’s basement, hanging out and getting even more wasted. He remembered fog-gily that things had been better for him until the sixth grade. Back then, he even had a few friends of his own. But that was the year they decided to hold his older brother back, his brother Stephen who was sixteen years old and still in the ninth grade.

“Shut the fuck up, ya homo.” Walsh turned his head around to stare daggers at Michael in the back seat. Cotter abruptly stopped drumming on his knees.

Michael watched his brother begin to raise his head, the movement as slow as an uncoiling snake. He turned slowly toward Walsh. Walsh must have sensed something wrong too, because he remained frozen in position until Stephen Harris spoke.

“Whaddyou call my brother?”

Walsh curled his lips upward in imitation of a smile. He turned his head slowly toward the driver’s seat. “Steve...come on, man. You know I was just kiddin’, right?” He turned back around to look at Michael. “No hard feelings, right?” Walsh’s eyes implored Michael to help get him out of this. Michael probably would have,

too, but it happened way too fast.

Harris reached across the front seat with both hands and grabbed Walsh by the hood of his trademark white sweatshirt. Twisting it around his neck, he used the hood to push him hard against the car door where his head made an ugly thump against the glass.

Walsh put his hands up in a defensive posture, but it was already too late. Harris sprang out of his seat like a jack-in-the-box, pushed Walsh down and began to pummel him mercilessly. Open-mouthed, Michael stared in mute horror at the explosion of violence in the front seat. While he immediately recognized the sound of screams and moans, Michael realized that they sounded different somehow. It occurred to him that of course these would sound different because this time he wasn't the one making them. He felt rather than saw Cotter resume pounding his feet and drumming on his knees to music that only he could hear.

As Michael tore his eyes away from the scene, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. His mouth was open and silvery liquid dribbled out. He turned away to look out the window toward the school, moved his hands up against the glass, and pushed as hard as he could. It felt like he was drowning, and the only dry land for a mile was in that brick building just across the way.

"You didn't answer my *question*," he heard his brother shout. "What did you call my brother?" He kept repeating that as he pounded on his friend.

For his part, Walsh was determined to take the pummeling like a man. He knew that the coppery taste in his mouth was coming from a split lip, but whatever else was going to happen, he knew one thing for sure: however many times Harris asked him what he'd said, he sure as hell wasn't going to repeat it.