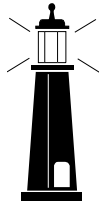


MERCURY CHAMPAGNE

Dan Goodrich



Erie Harbor Productions
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For Sarah, who dreams with me

Special thanks to my publisher for taking a chance.

Chapter One

The previous morning, Ed Derringer sat in a comfortable office chair in front of the large and immaculately organized desk of his boss Raymond Garner. Raymond was late. Ed checked his watch; it was 8:37 AM. Raymond had asked in an e-mail that Ed meet him in his office at 8:30 AM. When Ed poked his head into the office three minutes early, his boss's quarters were still lit only by the ambient light from a hazy winter sun. Raymond hadn't given Ed any indication why he was requesting the meeting.

Naturally, Ed was worried. He knew that he did a good job—an exceptional job, in fact. Ed found it hard to imagine anyone who could perform the constant and persistent tasks of a data entry clerk as well as he did. A meeting first thing in the morning with the boss, with no prior notice and no knowledge of the subject matter, led Ed to believe this would be his last visit to Raymond Garner's office.

He checked his watch again: 8:38 AM. Ed glanced at the silver-plated picture frame on Raymond's desk. On the frame the legend, "15 Years of Sterling Service," was engraved. Inside the frame was a four-inch by six-inch school photo of Raymond's daughter, a teenager just coming out of that unfortunate stage of adolescence where one grew from an ugly duckling into a swan, or perhaps remained a duck. Ed feared that Raymond's daughter was destined to quack. *Welcome to the pond, my dear. Mind the geese.*

Ed heard the dull click of the light switch behind him, coupled with the simultaneous illumination of the fluorescent lights above. He also heard the sound of the office door closing shut. Yes, Ed believed this would, in fact, be his last visit to Raymond Garner's office.

"Good morning, Ed."

Ed cleared his throat. "Hi, Raymond."

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I made a couple of stops on the way to my office." Raymond walked smoothly past Ed. Ed could smell cologne or aftershave. Not a subtle scent, but one that drove straight to the point. Raymond was broadcasting his cologne to anyone in range. Was it a gift from the maturing duckling on Father's Day? Birthday, perhaps?

Ed could see two, plain-white, business-size envelopes in Raymond's hand. This was no fatalistic paranoia playing through Ed's thoughts; he was being fired. His mind raced through all of the possible reasons and finally settled on three pretty good ones: habitually late from lunch, long and frequent smoke breaks, add to that the painful admission that no one at the office really liked him. Was there anything else? Because he was a duck? A slightly overweight mustachioed duck?

"We're letting you go, Ed."

Just like that. In the midst of it all, Ed admired Raymond's directness.

He neither liked nor disliked his job, but it had infused him with a comfortable feeling of purgatory that allowed him to forget about nearly everything for eight hours a day, five days a week. Everyone at the office left Ed alone, and he, in turn, didn't talk to them. He preferred it that way. Ed disliked unnecessary relationships. Maybe it wasn't that he disliked the unnecessary relationships so much as that he was terrible at the necessary ones.

After the death of his dad three months earlier, he'd come to the realization that he was terrible at the necessary relationships simply because he categorized relationships as either "necessary" or "unnecessary." The ones that fell into the former category seemed to Ed relationships that needed to be nurtured and maintained in order to ensure his humanity—they were, in fact, necessary. Here, the

concept of nurturing and maintenance brought thoughts of tedium and routine-work, in other words. What else is there that can suck the joy out of something more thoroughly than when that thing is converted into work? He avoided relationships that he felt he had to work at in order to maintain. The act of avoiding those relationships led to feelings of guilt at not working harder on his part to keep ties to family and friends strong. If he had to work so hard just to keep up relations with those he loved, how in the hell could he expect himself to engage in the day-to-day chitchat of interactions with co-workers, grocery clerks and casual acquaintances?

Getting fired gave him a good reason to go out on a serious bender—a memory erasing drunk that started shortly after depositing his last paycheck into his checking account and cashing the check for his unused week’s vacation. That one, the vacation check, that was drinking money: \$383.27. Ed was pretty sure he couldn’t drink that much, but it was worth a try. Let it be a crass solo flight around the bar tap. A barfly newly born, if just for one night, if just for one seriously what-the-hell-have-I-got-to-lose? booze-drenched evening.

Ed remembered looking at his watch shortly after three that afternoon and realizing that he was already very drunk and he’d only managed to spend a little over thirty dollars. He remembered cigarette after cigarette until his lungs burned and then the near euphoric sensation when the smoke being drawn in tasted crisp and cool like fresh air. He remembered the sky growing dark as evening came, and not much beyond that waning of day.

When he finally got out of bed the next day, he smelled like too many cigarettes. He could still taste beer, maybe whiskey, Scotch—who knew what else? As Ed made his way into the bathroom, he found that his breathing was difficult. He had to sit down against the wall. His lungs and heart felt as if they might come out of him. Had he smoked that much? Some sort of anatomical revolt was beginning. His stomach hurt, his eyes hurt, and his balls hurt. Ed didn’t remember getting home. He didn’t remember leaving the bar. He noticed then, feeling the hair on his arms beginning to stand on end, that the door to his apartment was ajar, his keys still in the lock.

Cold panic bolted through him, a feeling like touching an electric fence. It was the kind of panic that might seize the heart after days

of paranoia, of finally being found out for doing something horrible: murder or maybe incest.

He stood up, legs weak and trembling. Ed wondered if his car was in decent shape, making him wonder if he'd killed anyone in a booze-induced hit and run. Drinking, drinking, so drunk he didn't actually remember driving home. He hoped he hadn't driven. He hoped the bartender or one of the wait staff at Dillon's noticed he was decimated by the time he'd left.

Let's hope they stuck me in a taxi, Ed thought, a yellow taxi with old upholstery; a taxi with a vulgar driver discussing politics with a man too drunk to figure out if it was an election year.

He took the keys out of the door and thought about walking out to the parking lot to look for his car when the sick, hangover shakes hit him. The poisoned feeling took over. His lungs felt raw, he could taste only ashes, beer, and if he was not mistaken, the peaty grimace of neat Scotch whiskey. It made him feel worse and the shakes, the shakes, the shakes were going for his stomach and Ed had to make it fast to the bathroom.

He welcomed it when the nausea finally swept over him and made him vomit. He welcomed it until he realized he would have to remain prostrate before the toilet with dry heaves pulling his guts inside out and making his eyes feel as though they were tight in the maw of a pair of vice-grips unwilling to let go.

Ed thought he'd passed out at one point. He wasn't sure if he'd smacked his head on the toilet bowl or if the exertions of his body trying to expel the alcohol had finally overwhelmed him. Whatever had happened, there remained in Ed's memory a brief, dream-like feeling of peace where the sick feeling became non-existent. A moment of floating and warmth where he could see something just out of his reach. He knew if he could just reach it, whatever "it" might be, then the sickness would pass and everything would be all right. Even before he could consider what that something wonderful might be, it was gone, and Ed was heaving so that it felt as if his ribs might crack.

He felt like crying. There was nothing left for him to do except cry. Though the dry heaves had not hit him for several minutes, the nausea remained, and much to Ed's shame, he realized that at

some point he'd managed to shit himself. Quite involuntary, but there it was all the same. He didn't think he had the strength to get up and take care of it.

Ed wept quietly. The uncontrollable need to keep vomiting had passed. The awful sensation of the alcohol and nicotine poisoning that brought the shakes and vomiting was gone. The smell of the shit in his pants though, was overwhelming. He feared it would bring on a fresh bout of nausea.

"Oh hell," he said aloud. His voice sounded hoarse. "Christ, I hope I had fun last night!"

As if in response, the phone in the living room rang. It rang four times as Ed lay there, propped up by one elbow on a linoleum floor that hadn't seen a broom or a vacuum in weeks. The answering machine picked up and a feeling of cement in his aching guts told him it was the police calling to tell him that his car had been found wrapped around a tree somewhere in Meridian Township. No, that couldn't be it. The police would just come a-knockin'.

He heard the digital recording of his voice announce to the caller that he wasn't able to reach the phone. *Nope, not able to reach the phone at all*, thought Ed, *what with all of the kaka in my drawers. Would they please leave a message? Why, yes!*

It was Margaret. Margaret with the voice like cold water. The eyes and face that were so tired it made Ed want to yawn just thinking of her. Margaret, his older sister.

"Ed?" Margaret's voice dug at him. With the way he felt now, her voice was like a tick trying to sink its head beneath his skin. Definitely parasitic, definitely unwanted. "I know you're probably hard at work at the office doing your data entry, or whatever it is you do there." Ed thought he could hear her yawn. "Anyway, when you get back in this evening, give me and Mom a call. Well," she paused, her voice shaking, just enough to make Ed roll his eyes. That wasn't a yawn, she was on the verge of tears, here come the tears. Margaret's tears. Drip, drip. A river of tears. A lake. His sister's voice continued to speak, continued to be recorded for Ed to enjoy when he got back from doing "whatever it is" he did there.

"Get fired! That's what I do there," he muttered to the answering machine.

“. . . so just give us a call. Well, give me a call. Okay?”

Her voice grew silent, making Ed wonder if she'd hung up. No, he could hear his sister crying. He felt suddenly terrible for resenting her. She was doing more than he would have done. More than he could do, perhaps. And what had he done after Dad's funeral? He'd told Margaret to handle it, to do whatever she thought was best. Why? Because he couldn't do it, didn't want to do it. His mother was a burden he couldn't carry, and instead of pitching in, shouldering part of the burden until he and Margaret could figure something out, he'd simply refused any part of it. As far as he was concerned, Dad should have put Mom in a nursing home before she'd gotten this bad.

Ed waited, feeling and smelling the hangover lingering in his clothes, in his guts, in the stale and soiled air, in every wave of light from the five bulbs above the vanity.

“I can't do it, Ed,” Margaret had regained her voice. “I don't know how Dad did it for so long, but I can't. I don't blame you for staying away. I don't blame you at all, but if you could just call. I need to talk. We need to talk. You don't have to make any decisions. I'll do it all, but I just need to talk to you about it. She's your mother, too.”

There was another pause; Ed listened, waiting for her to end the message with a “Goodbye,” or “Talk to you later.” Instead, Margaret's voice reported what kept him away from home, what he didn't have the courage to face himself.

“She's getting worse. It doesn't seem possible for it to be worse, but I don't even know if Mom's in there anymore. She's gotten worse since the funeral. I just can't do it by myself. So give me a call,” Ed heard a snuffle, “okay?”

The answering machine beeped to signal it had received a message.

“Yeah,” Ed said, wishing for nothing more than to get cleaned up and then burn his clothes. If only that were the worst of his problems. Well, he'd been fired, hadn't he? Maybe that's enough of an excuse to give Margaret a hand. He was now officially unencumbered by the responsibilities of the duly employed. He could afford to make the drive to Port Grace and help Margaret with Mom.

It was Mansy Cribbins who found Mom at the end of the dock, staring into the water. He'd gone out to fill his bird feeders with black oil sunflower seeds. "I feed those damned squirrels just as much as I feed the chickadees and nuthatches," Ed had heard him comment on more than one occasion. Mom was found sitting in her wheelchair, eyelids drooping, mouth gaping, gazing into the water at the capsized aluminum fishing boat that Dad had used for fishing on Grace Lake ever since Ed could remember. That was August.

Almonzo had about twenty years on Ed's parents. Ed had known him all of his life. Almonzo's wife Laurie had given him the nickname 'Mansy'. 'Just like Little House on the Prairie,' she used to tell anyone who'd ask. 'Except I'm not Laura Ingalls and he's not Almonzo Wilder, so I can't call him 'Manly,' that's why he's Mansy.'

She'd been outside on the dock all night, Mansy told him. "God bless her," he said, "she stayed right out there with him, Ed. I feel just awful, and I hope you and Margaret can forgive me for not finding her sooner, for not being there to help your Dad. If she screamed for help, I didn't hear her, and neither did Laurie, I swear it. I'd have run out there in just my socks if I'd heard a thing."

Ed stuffed his soiled clothes into a trash bag and showered under water hot enough to hurt. He stood there with the water hitting the back of his neck until the shower grew tepid. The hot water had eased the throbbing in his guts and his head, but his mind became troubled with panic when he tried to remember how he'd gotten home.

What is the last thing I can remember? he thought.

He remembered euphoria and abandon upon lighting the last cigarette in his pack and having it taste like the first warm breeze of spring. He remembered that was when he decided he would start drinking the best single malt Scotch behind the bar. He couldn't remember what it was, save the bartender had said to him, "blahblahblah . . . sixteen year old . . . blahblah . . . very peaty . . . blah . . . Isle of Islay." Remembering he'd drunk Scotch brought the taste back to him. The nausea was gone, but it made him grimace all the same. The taste of it made him remember. He remembered drinking with an older guy. A businessman of some sort. An insurance agent? Stockbroker? No, something a little more esoteric.

There'd been something startling about the man. His eyes.

The man had stared at Ed as though he'd just discovered a winning lottery ticket on the men's room floor. A feeling of embarrassment dug at Ed's insides. The man had given him a ride home. He could only remember pieces of it. Ed remembered shivering, with his head resting against the passenger window of the man's car. He remembered trying to close his eyes, waiting to get home as everything spun. His vision surged and spun with his eyes open, accelerating beyond feverish proportions, so he'd closed them and made it worse.

Ed didn't remember getting home. He couldn't remember much more than that one moment on the ride to his apartment, but he remembered that the look in the man's eyes reminded him of his Uncle Dale. It was a hungry look, the kind of hunger that Ed imagined a starving man might have in his eyes.

Uncle Dale had looked a little spooky like that, spooky like there was some secret behind his crazy, hungry look, some secret that Ed might want to know, but would regret, wish he could give back upon finding out what it was. Colin Clive had the same look in *Frankenstein*. "The dead can walk again," the look said, "ask me how!"

When Ed was nine, Uncle Dale, his dad's older and only brother, had spent a week with them. It was the only time Ed could remember meeting him. Uncle Dale knew the Chinese alphabet. He could spin a quarter on his elbow and a dime on his nose (*learned how to do that in a bar in Winnipeg, Eddie*). His mother disliked Dale: "Bad habits! He's like a walking, talking poster for bad habits! Nothing but a jack-ass!" His mother had opinions then. His mother had a mind.

Ed had begged to go with them when his dad drove Uncle Dale back to his trailer in Standish. Uncle Dale had wrecked his own car on the way home from a bar the night before.

No one spoke during the five-hour drive. It was just Dad, Uncle Dale, and Ed; but no one spoke. Ed was afraid he'd be yelled at, his dad wasn't talking and that meant mad. He didn't think he was mad at Dale, not really. It was Mom he was mad at; he slammed the door when they left. They'd argued about why it couldn't wait another day-another day, just to see if Dale could get his car situation worked out.

When they'd gotten to Uncle Dale's, Dad helped Dale with his suitcases. He set them on the lawn next to the driveway and stood there looking up at the blue sky. Ed remembered looking up too-how blue and clear! It was as blue as forever. Grasshoppers buzzed in the tall weeds in the vacant lot next to Dale's trailer. Goldfinches lighted on bull thistles, twittering, the purple thistle wands bobbing under their weight. Uncle Dale smoked a cigarette and stared at the ground.

"Sure am sorry about all the trouble," Uncle Dale had said when his cigarette was done, flicked into the gravel driveway, smoldering out.

"Yeah," Ed's dad answered, still looking at the sky. "Maybe you'll come see us again when you get your shit together. Ed thinks he's got a new best friend."

"Sure. He's great. Your wife ain't never really liked me much, though. Guess I didn't change her opinion any."

Ed never saw Uncle Dale again. It was only a few weeks after they'd driven him home when his dad took a few days off work for Dale's funeral. But when it came time to leave, Martin Derringer decided he didn't want to see his brother laid out in a coffin and lowered into the ground.

"Do you remember your Uncle Dale?" his dad asked him later, when Ed was older, a teenager, fifteen maybe, fishing on the lake in the aluminum fishing boat. "Nothing slowed him down. Stupid sonofabitch. We all thought it was going to be the booze that'd take him." He remembered his dad shaking his head slowly and smiling. "You just never know, Ed. Who knew it was going to be a brain tumor? I guess Dale knew. Do you think he'd tell me?" His dad chuckled, a laugh completely absent of mirth. "You'd have thought he'd tell me."

Ed wondered now, as he stood in the shower rubbing his scalp through his hair with the tips of his fingers, if it was Dale's knowledge of his own life near its end that brought on the reckless drinking.

The water felt good. Sometimes Ed believed the shower was a trap, perhaps shrouding a hidden power lurking within the gallons of water spraying from the shower head, a power that waited to prey on the weakest bathers. "Stay with me," it said, "stay with me." The feeling of the hot shower on naked skin was mesmerizing, enticing in

the same way the syrupy beads of a carnivorous honeydew plant must seem to passing insects before being trapped and slowly digested with dissolving enzymes.

Ed imagined himself drowning. He imagined the struggle to hang on, hang on, before drawing water into his lungs for the final, suffocating end.

The boat capsized clean, smooth, and hit Dad square on the head. He didn't even know he'd drowned. He was already unconscious.

Mom had been there that night, out on the dock, enjoying the summer dark and evening breeze, keeping Dad company, as much as she could, as he fished some hundred yards or so off the dock.

"Mom heard a splash, Ed. You know how she goes in and out. That's as much as she could tell us," Margaret told him, "she thought it was a fish jumping. She couldn't even tell what happened; you know how her eyes are at night. You know how her mind is."

Yes, he knew his mom. He knew a side of his mom that no one else did. A side of his mother that visited in dreams. He knew the part of his mom that hid in a wheelchair, hiding behind careful eyes, eyes that seemed to not want to see as much as they could. Eyes stupid with senility—senility shadowed by the occasional passage of lucidity. In those dreams, Ed blamed her for his father's death. It couldn't possibly have been her fault, but the dreams lingered long after waking. In the dream, his mother sat in her wheelchair. The dementia clouding her face was nothing more than a mask. Her shadow cast on the floor from an unknown light source. The shadow that should have been a distorted and darkened silhouette of his mother cast quietly on the living room floor had awakened: a spider shape spinning a web around some newly trapped prey.

Premature senile dementia, her doctors labeled it, for lack of anything better. An unfortunate mental condition brought on from years of multiple sclerosis. They didn't know the pathology behind it, but that was their professional diagnosis. The best that a whole room full of specialists could say for certain was that it wasn't Alzheimer's. He'd spent the last years of high school growing ashamed as his mother's mind deteriorated. Ed had grown to hate her for it. He hated her dislocated and confusing speech. He hated her wheelchair.

Ed sighed. He did feel better after the shower. He'd need to get his car. Time to stop dwelling on Mom. Mother with the quick shadow. He'd taken a ride home with some guy that was probably the same age as his dad. A guy that had reminded him of Uncle Dale. Ed wondered if it was bad luck for a stranger to remind him of a dead person.

Was that a sign? What kind of a sign? Ed didn't believe in omens, but he considered them often.

He dressed and walked into the living room. He'd need to take a taxi back to Dillon's Bar so he could pick up his Grand Prix. He hoped it hadn't been towed. He doubted it, but bad luck had a tendency to be a frequent visitor once it found the right address.

Ed was surprised to see two messages on his answering machine. He knew that one was from Margaret. The other one? Perhaps left while he'd been in the shower. Ed pushed the playback button and the machine clicked twice as something in its digital memory retrieved information. He thought the first message would be Margaret, but it wasn't.

"Hello, Mr. Derringer," a man's voice said. "I hope this message finds you well. I can't recall seeing a young man toss back as much liquor as you did last night. It's 11 AM and I am calling to let you know, in case your memory is patchy, that a Mr. John Stanford gave you a ride home. That's me. I'm an Assurance Agent. I procure assurances. I occasionally give assurances, but that isn't the purpose of this call. You gave me your assurance that you would repay the favor of transportation home from a night of excess by giving me a moment of your time, something that might be easier when you were in a clearer state of mind. I trust the effects of the alcohol you consumed yesterday have worn off, in which case I'd like to take that moment from you this evening. I'll meet you at Dillon's when you get there to pickup your car. A taxi will be sent to pick you up at 7 o'clock this evening. The taxi will be paid for in advance by me, as your wallet is currently in my possession. Thank you, Mr. Derringer."

The message ended. Ed hit the stop button on the machine. He didn't want to hear Margaret's voice again.

Chapter Two

Ed spent the remainder of the afternoon drifting in and out of sleep on his sofa. He'd considered eating a couple of times, but didn't feel his stomach could take it. His sides felt torn and bruised from vomiting. His eyes hurt. So he lay there waiting for the taxi, drifting into a strange sort of half-sleep, and smoking the occasional cigarette. The man who'd given Ed a ride home (and nicked his wallet) was not an Assurance Agent. There was, after all, no such thing as an Assurance Agent. It was likely that the older gentleman who reminded him of his Uncle Dale was either an Amway salesman looking for another block in his distribution pyramid, or some kind of queer.

It was closing in on 7:30 when Ed finally got back to Dillon's Bar. His Grand Prix was parked where he'd left it. He'd arrived at Dillon's early enough yesterday to park beneath the purple neon above the front entrance. Ed opened the passenger side door in the back seat of the cab, double-checked for his keys (right-front pants pocket), and pulled out a cigarette. Walk in smoking. One tough hombre. Nobody messes with a man who walks into a bar smoking. Right.

The halogen parking lights buzzed above him, making the cold December night seem more frigid. December in Michigan, almost as bad as January. Ed braced himself, dragging on his cigarette.

When he walked in, he was greeted by a scowl from the bartender. Ah, yes! The bartender—Ed was bitten by an embarrassing recollection from the night before. He'd taken to calling the bartender "Bump" even though the nametag on his Rugby shirt clearly read "Skip." That made him remember the song he'd sang, a little too loudly, while waiting for Skip to make good with another neat single-malt: "Bump, bump-a-roo! Bump will give the drink to you!" It had seemed pretty funny and brimming with good-hearted barroom camaraderie last night. If there was any humor in it now, Ed couldn't see it. He decided it best to avoid Skip.

He scanned the room, taking in the obscure sports paraphernalia and old license plates hanging on the wall. There, at a table adjacent to the Addams' Family pinball, sat the Assurance Agent. John Stanford. He looked nothing like Uncle Dale. Ed chalked the mistaken familiarity off to drunkenness. Lord, he'd been drunk! This guy had a clean, new-looking, crew cut. Silver hair. His complexion was dark—either from tan or some parentage other than the typical European Caucasian. He wore an expensive sweater. Wool, with suede patches on the elbows. The man took a drag from a cigarette, then turned his head and glanced in Ed's direction. A smile flashed across the man's face. He reached into one of the pockets on the front of the sweater and pulled out a wallet, then placed it on the table. He reached into another pocket and pulled out a second wallet. They looked identical.

The Assurance Agent smiled and held up both of the wallets for Ed to see. "Mr. Derringer!" he said. The man's eyes were piercing. Ed felt the Agent's gaze as a pressure against his own eyes. "A moment of your time, please!"

Ed felt his knees fill with helium, a feeling that he might lose his legs. His face grew hot, and he felt a sick tugging sensation in his midsection. His peripheral vision began to dance a little. He felt the tug a little stronger at his belly. The man's eyes were doing it, Ed thought. For an instant, a moment that he couldn't say for sure had actually happened, Ed saw the man as a strange glowing shape. A shining coin spinning on its side. A man-sized egg, glowing. Humpty Dumpty infused with radium. *Goo goo goo job.*

Then it was gone. It had never been there. Ed knew that.

It was like the dream he kept having that his mother's shadow was actually a spider. It just wasn't so. Everything was as it should be. The man motioned for Ed to join him at the booth. Ed felt a tug (no, that's not it; the tugging sensation had never left) and he wanted to run. Run to his car and drive back to his apartment. Drive back to his apartment and sleep. Sleep with his head buried under the pillow. Under the pillow where silver-haired gentleman with crewcuts didn't turn into glowing eggs. And if they did, hell, he could just wake up and roll over, maybe fall back asleep and dream of nothing.

Ed made no effort to offer a handshake. He was relieved to see that the man across from him didn't offer to shake hands either. "You're John Stanford?" asked Ed. He still felt the weird pressure in his eyes, and the pulling at his gut. "I guess I was pretty drunk. You don't look like the way I remembered you, but my memory from last night's pretty sketchy." Ed made a nervous laugh. He was no good at chitchat and that had come out sounding reasonably stupid.

"That's right," the man said, "John Stanford. We won't waste time getting acquainted. How does that sound?" He didn't wait for Ed to answer. "You feel a pressure in your eyes and a pulling sensation in your guts. Yes?"

Ed opened his mouth to answer, but was startled as his vision began to distort once more. He thought he saw a large egg sitting across from him again.

"You want your wallet returned to you, and I will return it, after I have received a moment of your time. How does that sound to you, Mr. Derringer? Fine? Agreed!"

Ed put his hands up, a protest, a refusal to see the silver-haired man as a glowing egg, refusal to cooperate at all.

The Assurance Agent placed both wallets in the center of the table.

"Pick one," he said to Ed.

Ed felt the room spin a little.

"Go ahead," the Agent said, "one of them is yours."

Both wallets looked exactly like Ed's. He picked the one on the right, opened it, saw his driver's license, then stuffed the wallet in his back pocket.

The Assurance Agent picked up the remaining wallet and

opened it. He slid the driver's license out of the wallet and held it up for Ed to see.

"This one's yours Mr. Derringer."

Ed felt the tugging at his guts grow a little stronger. He pulled the wallet he'd chosen out of his back pocket, opened it, and looked at the license again. The picture on the I.D. was an ultrasound snapshot of the skull of a fetus. The photo looked grainy at first, but grew in clarity. Ed closed the wallet quickly and threw it back onto the table.

"Can I have my wallet?" Ed asked.

"I'm looking for something special from you, Ed Derringer. I have your assurance that I will get it. You assured me a moment of your time, and I will have it. I'm looking for *a moment between moments*. I want the Moment in sleep before dreams begin. I need the Moment between heartbeats."

The egg was buzzing. Ed guessed that was simply how glowing eggs talked. *Goo goo goo joob, Mrs. Robinson. Goo goo goo joob, Ed Derringer.* The egg floated up out of the seat across from him and started bobbing towards the door. Ed couldn't see the door, there were only silver filaments filling his sight, and those he refused to look at for they pierced his eyes. He closed his eyes but could still see them. Web-lines from the mother of all spiders, perhaps. Iktome the spider god. He knew the egg was floating toward the door, the luminous threads told him so. *Roll up; roll up for the Magical Mystery Tour! Step right this way!*

Ed stood up and followed. He wondered if he was an egg man, too. Possibly the walrus. *Goo goo goo joob.*

He felt himself dreaming, but he was not dreaming. Ed drove his car back to his apartment. John Stanford sat in the passenger seat smoking. In the dream that he was not dreaming, he wondered why he didn't just tell the Assurance Agent to get bent. Go dance on the head of a pin with a handful of angels. Go to hell. He didn't care.

He didn't say any of those things. He just drove. He knew that he was driving, but it felt like a dream, an airplane flying into a cloud. Something's on the other side of the cloud, something's always on the other side of the cloud. It turns into blue sky eventually. Ed flew into a cloud. The cloud was an Assurance Agent named John Stanford. A moment of his time.

They were at Ed's apartment. It happened the way things happen in a dream. There'd been no natural progression of moments, one action leading to the next. He'd been driving. The silver-haired, dark-skinned man sat in the passenger seat smoking. It wasn't a man. It was an egg, man. Great gosh almighty glowing Humpty Dumpty. Ed knew that he was an egg, too. I am he as you are me and we are all together. *Goo goo goo job. We are the egg men.*

Just one chance to snap out of this, Ed thought. Just one chance to wake up. It was a Dream. He felt the Moment approach, the Moment before it's too late to wake up. The Moment before the Dream becomes something else.

The Moment was gone and he was standing in his apartment with John Stanford. Ed wanted to light a cigarette, but he couldn't find his hands. It was a dream. A dream where all he needed to do was find his hands, hold them up in front of his face and look at them. He was submersed in the nonsensical plot of dreams, a story of no consequence that hummed with urgency; he just needed to find his hands. Ed looked at his hands, but his hands were not his hands, his hands were a dream and he couldn't see them.

"I'm going to take you into the Moment," John Stanford said. "This moment is the Moment between moments. It's where we Dream. We're going into the Moment together. You're special, Ed. You can get there while you're awake. You're like me; I can see it in you."

Ed nodded. He understood. No, he didn't understand. In the dream, he understood, but he wasn't dreaming.

"Do you know what a sorcerer is?"

Ed nodded again. In the Dream, he knew, even though he didn't think he could quite remember right now. It was like flying in a dream. He did it, and he knew he could do it, but the part of him that woke up in the morning knew it wasn't real.

"A sorcerer lives in a Dream. The Moment is sorcery. You assured me a moment of your time. I want the Moment between moments, Mr. Derringer."

Ed felt himself grow light. He heard the furnace in the hallway between his bedroom and the bathroom rumble as it prepared to heat the apartment.

"You didn't know you were a sorcerer, so you won't miss it.

None of the others have missed it. They just sleep. I apologize Mr. Derringer; I'm taking the Moment from you. I've had so many, but I'm sure that all I need is just this one more Moment added to my own. I've assured myself that yours is the one. My Dream. Imagine living a life in the Moment between moments. I could be the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost. Me, myself, and I. Think about that."

The man's chatter seemed loose and unformed to Ed. He thought there might be some sense in it, but whatever that might be escaped him. The Assurance Agent's attempts at an explanation made Ed's mind swim. The man seemed crazy, and Ed suddenly wondered, surprisingly for the first time, how he'd allowed himself to get into this situation.

John Stanford made a polite nod at Ed, then cocked his head to the left, toward Ed's TV. "This is my ally." Stanford gestured to his left. "It was born from a Dream. It's my link to the Moment. It's all I have left from a Dream that I can't remember. A Dream I shared with another. I was there once and I can feel it in my gut, behind my eyes. I want to get back. I can't tell you more, I don't remember. All I need is the Moment you assured me, and I'll leave you, I'll be complete again, this time my Dream will be whole. I need you to be lucid, awake. I need you to give it of your own free will."

The television in Ed's living room began to shine from within, as though it might turn on. A shape came out of the television. It was a small skeleton; the skeleton of an infant floating toward him, its skull white like sugar: eyeless, grinning, and toothless. Its body was drawn into a protective fetal curl. Tiny finger bones in a fist. Its eyeless gaze fixed Ed.

"Mohmaluk," John said. "My ally."

Something tugged at Ed's stomach and he noticed a luminous cord flowing out from just above his navel. Stanford, he saw, was now a glowing egg; a giant spinning coin with its own umbilical, which to Ed's horror, was connected to his own.

Dark spots began to float in front of Ed's eyes. He could no longer see the room around him; instead, he was standing amidst a web of luminous fibers, all of them the same type as the strands that still protruded from his midsection. The fibers criss-crossed in all directions. He tried to reach out with his right hand to touch one of

them but nothing happened; his arm, it seemed, was no longer a part of him. He strained his eyes to find something familiar, but there was nothing.

The infant skeleton drew closer to him. Mohmaluk. Stanford's ally. Ed saw movement in one of the thing's eyeless sockets as it got near. The movement inside the ally's eye became more distinct. Spider legs poked out from the thing's left eye; they groped in the air, inching farther out. The legs pulled a fat spider body from the socket.

Ed could still hear the furnace rumbling, louder than normal, it seemed. He thought he could see the faint outlines of a spider shape in front of him. The floor dropped and he was surrounded by milky gossamer. Everything had become a glowing web. He felt the tugging sensation at his abdomen again. It was, he thought, the closest thing to pain one could experience without actually feeling pain. The feeling was at him again, this time harder, it was not a sensation of discomfort so much as an overwhelming insistence to go in a direction he'd not chosen. He was a dog on a leash being heeled.

The cat's cradle architecture that filled his vision moments before vanished to darkness. A sensation overcame him; it was the feeling of sleep, that last moment of wakefulness before drifting into the deep of slumber. It was the Moment dividing dusk and night, the realization one has when it becomes apparent that the water is now too deep, and the arms are too tired to swim back, the Moment right before panic edges in behind the eyes. He felt a final tug at his abdomen, which seemed to lift him dreamily into the air and into the soft dark of sleep.

Chapter Three

Ed found himself facedown in icy water coughing, gasping. He'd swallowed some of the water and was now choking on it. He could taste it, stagnant and black on his tongue and the back of his throat. He opened his eyes to moonlight, darkness, and snow. His sides and gut still hurt from the vomiting spell earlier that day and the coughing tore at him some more.

He was in a ditch. The water was shallow underneath the broken layer of ice. The ditch had steep but short embankments, no more than three feet high on either side. The embankments were snow covered, moonlit.

Ed pulled himself up to his knees, trying to bring an end to the coughing fit, but succeeded only in bringing on the worst bout yet as he dragged air into his lungs. This, much to his dismay, made him retch. He screamed as he did it. His sides felt like they were tearing, soft taffy in a child's hands. Then it was over.

What had happened? He'd been in his apartment. A skull with a spider in its eye socket. Just a moment of his time. Tired old hang-over time. Take it now. Take this moment. A dream. No, this was real. His guts hurt. The Romans pierced Jesus' side with a sword; Ed drank too much, threw up for it and now he'd choked on ditch water. His sides felt bruised, kicked in. Jesus had it easy.

This moment, take this moment, thought Ed. *Give me back that other one, and take this moment.*

He clambered out of the ditch, his cold hands plunging into the snow on the embankments, pulling himself up and out. There were streaks of black muck clinging to the snow, a trail of decaying matter where he'd dragged himself. It made him feel sick all over again to think that he'd been choking on the stuff. Had it in his mouth. Black, gritty, and slimy all at once. Noxious. The length of his body, his entire front, was covered in the same black muck that clung to the snow. The air was filled with a stagnant smell. Leaves rotting in water. A moan made a weak effort to escape his throat but was cut off by his chattering teeth. He figured he'd freeze. He saw that he stood at the edge of a field. The field was snow glowing with soft moonlight.

That bastard Stanford. John Stanford, Assurance Agent. Just a moment of his time. He'd had no choice. The man dragged him along like a balloon charged with static sticking on a dog's back. Fine. *All good and fine*, thought Ed. *Paid in full*. Now the only thing left was for him to find his way back to his apartment before his ass froze and fell off his backside and busted on the ground. Once your ass busts on the ground, you're done. Ed wasn't ready to be done.

Beyond the ditch was a two-lane highway. On the other side of the highway was another field. Ed didn't feel sharp enough to get his bearings and determine whether or not the road was an east/west highway or the other kind. It wouldn't have mattered. He couldn't tell north by starlight if his ass depended on it. His ass probably did depend on it, but it didn't help him get his bearings. No, the road had to go somewhere—east? North?

Cold. Stanford had done something to him and then threw him face down in a ditch. Left him to die, even.

"Moment of my time, my eye," Ed muttered. "It's gonna take me all night to get back to my apartment." With soaked jeans, soaked shirt, socks, shoes, soaked hair, he didn't have all night. His clothes were already icy and it hurt his skin to move.

Ed felt humiliated. Stanford had screwed him good. Some kind of con he'd never heard of before, one for the books. He'd heard horror stories of guys who get picked up by attractive women in bars, only to wake-up in a bathtub filled with ice and a note pinned to their shirts and a phone at the side of the tub. "Call 9-1-1," the

notes invariably said, “your kidneys have been removed.” And sure enough, the poor bastards realize they had incisions in their backs where their kidneys had been. Some vicious, black market, kidney-stealing operation. An urban legend for the twenty-first century. How would the Assurance Agent’s tale go?

It was a dream. A moment of his time. The Moment between moments. It had felt like a dream. Ed felt scared. Not scared like in a nightmare though; there was no claustrophobic anxiety, no horror lurking just out of sight. He was cold, real-life cold. The kind of cold a person can only experience when the wind begins to bite into the skin and there is nowhere to go to get out of it. No shelter.

A wooded area bordered the far side of the field. The moon was bright enough—shimmers of pale light reflecting off of the snow, enough light for Ed to see that trees enclosed the entire field. The field on the other side of the highway was the same. He wondered what was on the other side of the fields. A farmhouse? Who’s got bets on a farmhouse? “Not me,” he said. His teeth chattered. Wind blew small drifts of snow across the ice-encrusted field. If he didn’t find a way into something warmer, he would freeze. His dad had drowned just a few months ago. His mother’s been living with dementia for nearly a decade. Yesterday he’d been fired. Freezing to death in the middle of nowhere would certainly fit in with the way things were going.

His best chance was the road. It might just be forest once he got into those trees. If he walked straight through the woods, he might find a house eventually, but he might get too cold and stop, just to think. Then he’d get turned around and walk in some other direction. He’d wander until he froze. Didn’t Jack Nicholson do just that in a maze of hedges in *The Shining*? *Oh, you know he did, sunshine.*

Ed turned to face the road. He’d have to jump across the ditch. He didn’t want to crawl back down, then back up the other side. That left too much room for wet all over again, sticking his hands in the snow all over again. It looked to be five feet across from the top of each embankment. He leapt, and slipped, then fell forward, hands out. His hands, already cold, smacked, stinging onto the crusted snow.

A moment of my time, thought Ed. You bet. Just a

moment. Just like letting those clean-cut folks from The Church of the Latter Day Saints into your living room. Just a moment, that's all. Ed wanted a cigarette. Even though his guts hurt and his lungs burned from coughing, he wanted a cigarette. When did smoking become such a part of him that a cigarette sounded like the best thing to have, even when faced with the possibility of freezing to death?

Ed pulled himself out of the ditch again and onto the two-lane highway that stretched quiet and cold into the night. East? West? North? South? It didn't matter which way the highway took him. He couldn't stop to think about it. His legs were already feeling leaden, sore. Positively Antarctic. His hands were still smarting from the failed jump. Ed looked in both directions; there were no headlights in either direction. A gust of wind blew at Ed's right side, cutting through him. That was all he needed to help him decide. He turned; he'd travel with the wind at his back. It was already cold enough, he didn't need it in his face.

Ed shuffled forward in the oncoming traffic lane. There was no oncoming traffic though, only darkness ahead. The wind blew, cutting through his jeans, his shirt. Ed's teeth chattered (had they ever stopped? he wasn't sure). He wrapped his arms around himself and walked on. As he walked, Ed noticed that the night was more vivid than recent memory could recall. Perhaps it was the starkness of it all, the frozen blankets of snow to either side of him, the empty road stretching before and behind him. More likely, it was the impending certainty of dying.

Now that the initial panic of finding himself in an irrigation ditch had passed, Ed noticed the sharpness, the vivid clarity of the night. He could hear his heart beating in his eardrums. He could feel even now the tugging at his midsection. He tried to remember what had happened in his apartment, but came up with nothing. The floating baby skeleton. A spider climbed from its eye socket. He'd felt a tug as he noticed that Stanford had become a glowing, luminous egg shape. *Goo goo goo joob*, he thought, *we are the eggmen*. Then he'd found himself coughing and puking in the ditch.

"Gonna call the police," Ed mumbled, "first thing I do, after I change my clothes." Press charges? Yes sir and/or madam, Ed Derringer, the most stupid man of the year, would most certainly press

charges against the Assurance Agent. *Nobody, and I mean nobody*, he thought, *tosses Ed Derringer in a ditch and gets away with it.*

“Oh, good Christ!” he said out loud, shouting it into the moonlight. He stopped walking, stomped his feet. Cold, very cold. His toes hurt; it was a burning, tingling feeling. He guessed it had been all of five minutes since waking facedown in the ditch to now. He was frozen through already.

“I don’t want to do this!” Ed muttered, looking around. In the sky ahead of him, a light winked on and off—red . . . white . . . Some airplane, satellite, something. His nose ran. It hurt his sides to do it, but Ed started jogging. He had to or he’d very likely succumb to exposure before he’d had a chance to find shelter, before he had a chance to call the police on one John Stanford, Assurance Agent. The wind cut into his water-soaked clothes, but as his legs pumped, his body began to feel warmer. If he could keep up the pace, he might just stay alive long enough to find shelter or a passing car. Before he’d made a quarter of a mile (A quarter of a mile? Ed gave himself the benefit of the doubt, it had to be close to a quarter-mile), his chest began to burn. The feeling was like a furnace getting stoked. Ed slowed his pace to a tired walk. He was winded already.

“Christ almighty!” He came to a stop, hands on his knees, his breath gasping, chest burning, sides aching. Cigarettes! “Christ almighty,” he gasped, “I can’t jog!” Ed forced himself to begin walking again, his hands clasped together behind his head. He felt stupid. He thought he was going to die. He was scared, but more than that he felt humiliated. Stanford had done something to him and then left him in a ditch. What had happened?

That spider climbed out of the dead baby’s eye. Now, now—that wasn’t really how it went, was it? That dead baby just had empty sockets for eyes. It was a skeleton. A floating skeleton. Stanford had become an egg, silver filaments crowding Ed’s vision. Now this. Ed could remember nothing between the luminous filaments, the floating skeleton, and waking up in the ditch.

The air in Ed’s lungs began to feel less jagged, less like inhaling fiberglass and more like the run-of-the-mill, standard issue air that he was used to breathing. Granted, there was usually a bit of cigarette smoke in that standard issue air, but this would do, thank you very

much. His breathing had downgraded from gasping to labored.

This was something you heard about from someone else and said, “bullshit,” to. An Assurance Agent. Only Martin and Janet Derringer’s son would fall victim to an Assurance Agent.

Ed saw the headlights in the distance before he heard the approaching vehicle. He stomped his feet, smiling, sure he’d have a ride. No way anyone could drive past him. Ed paced. The car/truck, whatever it was, seemed to be taking a long time. It occurred to him that there might be an intersection up there; the damned thing could turn off in another direction before it even got to him. It didn’t though.

The wind blew, bringing with it a cold thought that made the inside of Ed’s mouth feel awash with electricity. Panic. What if it was John Stanford coming back to finish him off? The certainty of it filled his gut and crowded his thoughts until he could think of nothing but jumping back in the ditch on the other side of the road to hide. He wondered if he could make it to the woods. Of course he could make it. No way Stanford could track him in there.

In Ed’s mind, Assurance Agent suddenly became synonymous with serial killer. Stanford had told him that he looked for people like him, like Ed, just to take a moment of their time. They didn’t need it, Stanford had said, but he needed it, needed assurances. That was serial killer talk. It meant dying miserably at the hands of a man in a nice suit.

Ed pounded his fists against his thighs. He felt it, he wasn’t too cold not to feel that, not yet. He forced himself to calm down. Stanford wasn’t coming back for him. He’d have killed him outright, not left him there in a ditch, leaving to chance the possible escape of his intended victim. No, not Stanford, those headlights had to belong to someone else.

Once the headlights were about a hundred yards off, Ed began jumping and waving, flapping, add a scissoring motion to his legs and he’d be doing jumping jacks. If it was Stanford, Ed would just try to overpower the guy and leave the bastard out in the snow.

The headlights soon became a pick-up truck with a camper atop its bed. The truck slowed and stopped. It was a new model Ford F150. He could hear the faint sound of some rock tune coming from the cab. The engine was quiet. Ed wasn’t sure from the light of the

moon what color the truck was—could have been wine, purple, brown . . . he didn't know. Dark-colored, that much was clear. The sides were gray from road salt and slush. Ed stayed where he stood, shivering, hopping from foot to foot with his arms wrapped around himself, waiting to be offered a ride. He couldn't quite make out the people in the cab of the truck, but he could tell that there were two of them. It wasn't Stanford, that much he knew. He noticed the glow of the brake lights shutting off as the driver put the transmission into park.