



Odd Thomas

Dean Koontz



DEAN
KOONTZ

ODD
THOMAS

B a n t a m B o o k s

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To the Old Girls:

Mary Crowe, Gerda Koontz,

Vicky Page, and Jana Prais.

We'll get together. We'll nosh.

We'll tipple. We'll dish, dish, dish.

Hope requires the contender

Who sees no virtue in
surrender.

From the cradle to the bier,

The heart must persevere.

—*The Book of Counted Joys*



ONE

MY NAME IS ODD THOMAS, THOUGH IN THIS AGE when fame is the altar at which most people worship, I am not sure why you should care who I am or that I exist.

I am not a celebrity. I am not the child of a celebrity. I have never been married to, never been abused by, and never provided a kidney for transplantation into any celebrity. Furthermore, I have no desire to be a celebrity.

In fact I am such a nonentity by the standards of our culture that *People* magazine not only will never feature a piece about me but might also reject my attempts to subscribe to their publication on the grounds that the black-hole gravity of my noncelebrity is powerful enough to suck their entire enterprise into oblivion.

I am twenty years old. To a world-wise adult, I am little more than a child. To any child, however, I'm old enough to be distrusted, to be excluded forever from the magical community of the short and beardless.

Consequently, a demographics expert might conclude that my sole audience is other young men and women currently adrift between their twentieth and twenty-first birthdays.

In truth, I have nothing to say to that narrow audience. In my experience, I don't care about most of the things that other twenty-year-old Americans care about. Except survival, of course.

I lead an unusual life.

By this I do not mean that my life is better than yours. I'm sure that your life is filled with as much happiness, charm, wonder, and abiding fear as anyone could wish. Like me, you are human, after all, and we know what a joy and terror *that* is.

I mean only that my life is not typical. Peculiar things happen to me that don't happen to other people with regularity, if ever.

For example, I would never have written this memoir if I had not been commanded to do so by a four-hundred-pound man with six fingers on his left hand.

His name is P. Oswald Boone. Everyone calls him Little Ozzie because his father, Big Ozzie, is still alive.

Little Ozzie has a cat named Terrible Chester. He loves that cat. In fact, if Terrible Chester were to use up his ninth life under the wheels of a Peterbilt, I am afraid that Little Ozzie's big heart would not survive the loss.

Personally, I do not have great affection for Terrible Chester because, for one thing, he has on several occasions peed on my shoes.

His reason for doing so, as explained by Ozzie, seems credible, but I am not convinced of his truthfulness. I mean to say that I am suspicious of Terrible Chester's veracity, not Ozzie's.

Besides, I simply cannot fully trust a cat who claims to be fifty-eight years old. Although photographic evidence exists to support this claim, I persist in believing that it's bogus.

For reasons that will become obvious, this manuscript cannot be published during my lifetime, and my effort will not be repaid with royalties while I'm alive. Little Ozzie suggests that I should leave my literary estate to the loving maintenance of Terrible Chester, who, according to him, will outlive all of us.

I will choose another charity. One that has not peed on me.

Anyway, I'm not writing this for money. I am writing it to save my sanity and to discover if I can convince myself that my life has purpose and meaning enough to justify continued existence.

Don't worry: These ramblings will not be insufferably gloomy. P. Oswald Boone has sternly instructed me to keep the tone light.

"If you don't keep it light," Ozzie said, "I'll sit my four-hundred-pound ass on you, and that's *not* the way you want to die."

Ozzie is bragging. His ass, while grand enough, probably weighs no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. The other two hundred fifty are distributed across the rest of his suffering skeleton.

When at first I proved unable to keep the tone light, Ozzie suggested that I be an unreliable narrator. "It worked for Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*," he said.

In that first-person mystery novel, the nice-guy narrator turns out to be the murderer of Roger Ackroyd, a fact he conceals from the reader until the end.

Understand, I am not a murderer. I have done nothing evil that I am concealing from you. My unreliability as a narrator has to do largely with the tense of certain verbs.

Don't worry about it. You'll know the truth soon enough.

Anyway, I'm getting ahead of my story. Little Ozzie and Terrible Chester do not enter the picture

until after the cow explodes.

This story began on a Tuesday.

For you, that is the day after Monday. For me, it is a day that, like the other six, brims with the potential for mystery, adventure, and terror.

You should not take this to mean that my life is romantic and magical. Too much mystery is merely an annoyance. Too much adventure is exhausting. And a little terror goes a long way.

Without the help of an alarm clock, I woke that Tuesday morning at five, from a dream about dead bowling-alley employees.

I never set the alarm because my internal clock is so reliable. If I wish to wake promptly at five, then before going to bed I tell myself three times that I must be awake sharply at 4:45.

While reliable, my internal alarm clock for some reason runs fifteen minutes slow. I learned this years ago and have adjusted to the problem.

The dream about the dead bowling-alley employees has troubled my sleep once or twice a month for three years. The details are not yet specific enough to act upon. I will have to wait and hope that clarification doesn't come to me too late.

So I woke at five, sat up in bed, and said, "Spare me that I may serve," which is the morning prayer that my Granny Sugars taught me to say when I was little.

Pearl Sugars was my mother's mother. If she had been my father's mother, my name would be Odie Sugars, further complicating my life.

Granny Sugars believed in bargaining with God. She called Him "that old rug merchant."

Before every poker game, she promised God to spread His holy word or to share her good fortune with orphans in return for a few unbeatable hands. Throughout her life, winnings from card games remained a significant source of income.

Being a hard-drinking woman with numerous interests in addition to poker, Granny Sugars didn't always spend as much time spreading God's word as she promised Him that she would. She believed that God expected to be conned more often than not and that He would be a good sport about it.

You can con God and get away with it, Granny said, if you do so with charm and wit. If you live your life with imagination and verve, God will play along just to see what outrageously entertaining thing you'll do next.

He'll also cut you some slack if you're astonishingly stupid in an amusing fashion. Granny claimed that this explains why uncountable millions of breathtakingly stupid people get along just fine in life.

Of course, in the process, you must never do harm to others in any serious way, or you'll cease to

amuse Him. Then payment comes due for the promises you didn't keep.

In spite of drinking lumberjacks under the table, regularly winning at poker with stone-hearted psychopaths who didn't like to lose, driving fast cars with utter contempt for the laws of physics (but never while intoxicated), and eating a diet rich in pork fat, Granny Sugars died peacefully in her sleep at the age of seventy-two. They found her with a nearly empty snifter of brandy on the nightstand, a book by her favorite novelist turned to the last page, and a smile on her face.

Judging by all available evidence, Granny and God understood each other pretty well.

Pleased to be alive that Tuesday morning, on the dark side of the dawn, I switched on my nightstar lamp and surveyed the chamber that served as my bedroom, living room, kitchen, and dining room. I never get out of bed until I know who, if anyone, is waiting for me.

If visitors either benign or malevolent had spent part of the night watching me sleep, they had not lingered for a breakfast chat. Sometimes simply getting from bed to bathroom can take the charm out of a new day.

Only Elvis was there, wearing the lei of orchids, smiling, and pointing one finger at me as if it were a cocked gun.

Although I enjoy living above this particular two-car garage, and though I find my quarters cozy, *Architectural Digest* will not be seeking an exclusive photo layout. If one of their glamour scouts saw my place, he'd probably note, with disdain, that the second word in the magazine's name is not, after all, *Indigestion*.

The life-size cardboard figure of Elvis, part of a theater-lobby display promoting *Blue Hawaii*, was where I'd left it. Occasionally, it moves—or is moved—during the night.

I showered with peach-scented soap and peach shampoo, which were given to me by Stormy Llewellyn. Her real first name is Bronwen, but she thinks that makes her sound like an elf.

My real name actually is Odd.

According to my mother, this is an uncorrected birth-certificate error. Sometimes she says they intended to name me Todd. Other times she says it was Dobb, after a Czechoslovakian uncle.

My father insists that they always intended to name me Odd, although he won't tell me why. He notes that I don't have a Czechoslovakian uncle.

My mother vigorously asserts the existence of the uncle, though she refuses to explain why I've never met either him or her sister, Cymry, to whom he is supposedly married.

Although my father acknowledges the existence of Cymry, he is adamant that she has never married. He says that she is a freak, but what he means by this I don't know, for he will say no more.

My mother becomes infuriated at the suggestion that her sister is any kind of freak. She calls

Cymry a gift from God but otherwise remains uncommunicative on the subject.

I find it easier to live with the name Odd than to contest it. By the time I was old enough to realize that it was an unusual name, I had grown comfortable with it.

Stormy Llewellyn and I are more than friends. We believe that we are soul mates.

For one thing, we have a card from a carnival fortune-telling machine that says we're destined to be together forever.

We also have matching birthmarks.

Cards and birthmarks aside, I love her intensely. I would throw myself off a high cliff for her if she asked me to jump. I would, of course, need to understand the reasoning behind her request.

Fortunately for me, Stormy is not the kind of person to ask such a thing lightly. She expects nothing of others that she herself would not do. In treacherous currents, she is kept steady by a moral anchor the size of a ship.

She once brooded for an entire day about whether to keep fifty cents that she found in the change-return slot of a pay phone. At last she mailed it to the telephone company.

Returning to the cliff for a moment, I don't mean to imply that I'm afraid of Death. I'm just not ready to go out on a date with him.

Smelling like a peach, as Stormy likes me, not afraid of Death, having eaten a blueberry muffin, saying good-bye to Elvis with the words "Taking care of business" in a lousy imitation of his voice, I set off for work at the Pico Mundo Grille.

Although the dawn had just broken, it had already flash-fried into a hard yellow yolk on the eastern horizon.

The town of Pico Mundo is in that part of southern California where you can never forget that in spite of all the water imported by the state aqueduct system, the true condition of the territory is desert. In March we bake. In August, which this was, we broil.

The ocean lay so far to the west that it was no more real to us than the Sea of Tranquility, that vast dark plain on the face of the moon.

Occasionally, when excavating for a new subdivision of tract homes on the outskirts of town, developers had struck rich veins of seashells in their deeper diggings. Once upon an ancient age, waves lapped these shores.

If you put one of those shells to your ear, you will not hear the surf breaking but only a dry mournful wind, as if the shell has forgotten its origins.

At the foot of the exterior steps that led down from my small apartment, in the early sun, Penny

Kallisto waited like a shell on a shore. She wore red sneakers, white shorts, and a sleeveless white blouse.

Ordinarily, Penny had none of that preadolescent despair to which some kids prove so susceptible these days. She was an ebullient twelve-year-old, outgoing and quick to laugh.

This morning, however, she looked solemn. Her blue eyes darkened as does the sea under the passage of a cloud.

I glanced toward the house, fifty feet away, where my landlady, Rosalia Sanchez, would be expecting me at any minute to confirm that she had not disappeared during the night. The sight of herself in a mirror was never sufficient to put her fear to rest.

Without a word, Penny turned away from the stairs. She walked toward the front of the property.

Like a pair of looms, using sunshine and their own silhouettes, two enormous California live oaks wove veils of gold and purple, which they flung across the driveway.

Penny appeared to shimmer and to darkle as she passed through this intricate lace of light and shade. A black mantilla of shadow dimmed the luster of her blond hair, its elaborate pattern changing as she moved.

Afraid of losing her, I hurried down the last of the steps and followed the girl. Mrs. Sanchez would have to wait, and worry.

Penny led me past the house, off the driveway, to a birdbath on the front lawn. Around the base of the pedestal that supported the basin, Rosalia Sanchez had arranged a collection of dozens of the seashells, all shapes and sizes, that had been scooped from the hills of Pico Mundo.

Penny stooped, selected a specimen about the size of an orange, stood once more, and held it out to me.

The architecture resembled that of a conch. The rough exterior was brown and white, the polished interior shone pearly pink.

Cupping her right hand as though she still held the shell, Penny brought it to her ear. She cocked her head to listen, thus indicating what she wanted me to do.

When I put the shell to my ear, I did not hear the sea. Neither did I hear the melancholy desert wind that I mentioned previously.

Instead, from the shell came the rough breathing of a beast. The urgent rhythm of a cruel need, the grunt of mad desire.

Here in the summer desert, winter found my blood.

When she saw from my expression that I had heard what she wished me to hear, Penny crossed the

lawn to the public sidewalk. She stood at the curb, gazing toward the west end of Marigold Lane.

I dropped the shell, went to her side, and waited with her.

Evil was coming. I wondered whose face it would be wearing.

Old Indian laurels line this street. Their great gnarled surface roots have in places cracked and buckled the concrete walkway.

Not a whisper of air moved through the trees. The morning lay as uncannily still as dawn on Judgment Day one breath before the sky would crack open.

Like Mrs. Sanchez's place, most houses in this neighborhood are Victorian in style, with varying degrees of gingerbread. When Pico Mundo was founded, in 1900, many residents were immigrants from the East Coast, and they preferred architectures better suited to that distant colder, damper shore.

Perhaps they thought they could bring to this valley only those things they loved, leaving behind all ugliness.

We are not, however, a species that can choose the baggage with which it must travel. In spite of our best intentions, we always find that we have brought along a suitcase or two of darkness, and misery.

For half a minute, the only movement was that of a hawk gliding high above, glimpsed between laurel branches.

The hawk and I were hunters this morning.

Penny Kallisto must have sensed my fear. She took my right hand in her left.

I was grateful for this kindness. Her grip proved firm, and her hand did not feel cold. I drew courage from her strong spirit.

Because the car was idling in gear, rolling at just a few miles per hour, I didn't hear anything until it turned the corner. When I recognized the vehicle, I knew a sadness equal to my fear.

This 1968 Pontiac Firebird 400 had been restored with loving care. The two-door, midnight-blue convertible appeared to glide toward us with all tires a fraction of an inch off the pavement, shimmering like a mirage in the morning heat.

Harlo Landerson and I had been in the same high-school class. During his junior and senior years, Harlo rebuilt this car from the axles up, until it looked as cherry as it had in the autumn of '67, when it had first stood on a showroom floor.

Self-effacing, somewhat shy, Harlo had not labored on the car with the hope either that it would be a babe magnet or that those who had thought of him as tepid would suddenly think he was cool enough to freeze the mercury in a thermometer. He'd had no social ambitions. He had suffered no illusions

about his chances of ever rising above the lower ranks of the high-school caste system.

With a 335-horsepower V-8 engine, the Firebird could sprint from zero to sixty miles per hour in under eight seconds. Yet Harlo wasn't a street racer; he took no special pride in having wheels of fury.

He devoted much time, labor, and money to the Firebird because the beauty of its design and function enchanted him. This was a labor of the heart, a passion almost spiritual in its purity and intensity.

I sometimes thought the Pontiac figured so large in Harlo's life because he had no one to whom he could give the love that he lavished on the car. His mom died when he was six. His dad was a mean drunk.

A car can't return the love you give it. But if you're lonely enough, maybe the sparkle of the chrome, the luster of the paint, and the purr of the engine can be mistaken for affection.

Harlo and I hadn't been buddies, just friendly. I liked the guy. He was quiet, but quiet was better than the boast and bluster with which many kids jockeyed for social position in high school.

With Penny Kallisto still at my side, I raised my left hand and waved at Harlo.

Since high school, he'd worked hard. Nine to five, he unloaded trucks at Super Food and moved stock from storeroom to shelves.

Before that, beginning at 4:00 A.M., he dropped hundreds of newspapers at homes on the east side of Pico Mundo. Once each week, he also delivered to *every* house a plastic bag full of advertising flyers and discount-coupon books.

This morning, he distributed only newspapers, tossing them with a snap of the wrist, as though they were boomerangs. Each folded and bagged copy of the Tuesday edition of the *Maravilla County Times* spun through the air and landed with a soft *thwop* on a driveway or a front walk, precisely where the subscriber preferred to have it.

Harlo was working the far side of the street. When he reached the house opposite me, he braked the coasting Pontiac to a stop.

Penny and I crossed to the car, and Harlo said, "Good mornin', Odd. How're you this fine day?"

"Bleak," I replied. "Sad. Confused."

He frowned with concern. "What's wrong? Anything I can do?"

"Something you've already done," I said.

Letting go of Penny's hand, I leaned into the Firebird from the passenger's side, switched off the engine, and plucked the key from the ignition.

Startled, Harlo grabbed for the keys but missed. "Hey, Odd, no foolin' around, okay? I have a tight

schedule.”

I never heard Penny’s voice, but in the rich yet silent language of the soul, she must have spoken to me.

What I said to Harlo Landerson was the essence of what the girl revealed: “You have her blood in your pocket.”

An innocent man would have been baffled by my statement. Harlo stared at me, his eyes suddenly owlish not with wisdom but with fear.

“On that night,” I said, “you took with you three small squares of white felt.”

One hand still on the wheel, Harlo looked away from me, through the windshield, as if willing the Pontiac to move.

“After using the girl, you collected some of her virgin blood with the squares of felt.”

Harlo shivered. His face flushed red, perhaps with shame.

Anguish thickened my voice. “They dried stiff and dark, brittle like crackers.”

His shivers swelled into violent tremors.

“You carry one of them with you at all times.” My voice shook with emotion. “You like to smell it. Oh, God, Harlo. Sometimes you put it between your teeth. And bite on it.”

He threw open the driver’s door and fled.

I’m not the law. I’m not vigilante justice. I’m not vengeance personified. I don’t really know what I am, or why.

In moments like these, however, I can’t restrain myself from action. A kind of madness comes over me, and I can no more turn away from what must be done than I can wish this fallen world back into a state of grace.

As Harlo burst from the Pontiac, I looked down at Penny Kallisto and saw the ligature marks on her throat, which had not been visible when she had first appeared to me. The depth to which the garrotting cloth had scored her flesh revealed the singular fury with which he had strangled her to death.

Pity tore at me, and I went after Harlo Landerson, for whom I had no pity whatsoever.

TWO

BLACKTOP TO CONCRETE, CONCRETE TO GRASS, alongside the house that lay across the street from Mrs. Sanchez's place, through the rear yard, to a wrought-iron fence and over, then across a narrow alleyway, up a slumpstone wall, Harlo Landerson ran and clambered and flung himself.

I wondered where he might be going. He couldn't outrun either me or justice, and he certainly couldn't outrun who he was.

Beyond the slumpstone wall lay a backyard, a swimming pool. Dappled with morning light and tree shadows, the water glimmered in shades of blue from sapphire to turquoise, as might a trove of jewels left by long-dead pirates who had sailed a sea since vanished.

On the farther side of the pool, behind a sliding glass door, a young woman stood in pajamas, holding a mug of whatever brew gave her the courage to face the day.

When he spotted this startled observer, Harlo changed directions toward her. Maybe he thought he needed a shield, a hostage. Whatever, he wasn't looking for coffee.

I closed on him, snared his shirt, hooked him off his feet. The two of us plunged into the deep end of the pool.

Having banked a summer's worth of desert heat, the water wasn't cold. Thousands of bubbles like shimmering showers of silver coins flipped across my eyes, rang against my ears.

Thrashing, we touched bottom, and on the way up, he kicked, he flailed. With elbow or knee, or foot, he struck my throat.

Although the impeding water robbed the blow of most of its force, I gasped, swallowed, choked on the taste of chlorine flavored with tanning oil. Losing my grip on Harlo, I tumbled in slow-mo through undulant curtains of green light, blue shadow, and broke the surface into spangles of sunshine.

I was in the middle of the pool, and Harlo was at the edge. He grabbed the coping and jacked himself onto the concrete deck.

Coughing, venting atomized water from both nostrils, I splashed noisily after him. As a swimmer, have less potential for Olympic competition than for drowning.

On a particularly dispiriting night when I was sixteen, I found myself chained to a pair of dead men and dumped off a boat in Malo Suerte Lake. Ever since then, I've had an aversion to aquatic sports.

That man-made lake lies beyond the city limits of Pico Mundo. Malo Suerte means "bad luck."

Constructed during the Great Depression as a project of the Works Progress Administration, the lake originally had been named after an obscure politician. Although they have a thousand stories about its treacherous waters, nobody around these parts can quite pin down when or why the place was officially renamed Malo Suerte.

All records relating to the lake burned in the courthouse fire of 1954, when a man named Mel Gibson protested the seizure of his property for nonpayment of taxes. Mr. Gibson's protest took the form of self-immolation.

He wasn't related to the Australian actor with the same name who would decades later become a movie star. Indeed, by all reports, he was neither talented nor physically attractive.

Now, because I hadn't been burdened on this occasion by a pair of men too dead to swim for themselves, I reached the edge of the pool in a few swift strokes. I levered myself out of the water.

Having arrived at the sliding door, Harlo Landerson found it locked.

The pajamaed woman had disappeared.

As I scrambled to my feet and started to move, Harlo backed away from the door far enough to get momentum. Then he ran at it, leading with his left shoulder, his head tucked down.

I winced in expectation of gouting blood, severed limbs, a head guillotined by a blade of glass.

Of course the safety pane shattered into cascades of tiny, gummy pieces. Harlo crashed into the house with all his limbs intact and his head still attached to his neck.

Glass crunched and clinked under my shoes when I entered in his wake. I smelled something burning.

We were in a family room. All the furniture was oriented toward a big-screen TV as large as a pair of refrigerators.

The gigantic head of the female host of the *Today* show was terrifying in such magnified detail. In these dimensions, her perky smile had the warmth of a barracuda's grin. Her twinkly eyes, here the size of lemons, seemed to glitter maniacally.

In this open floor plan, the family room flowed into the kitchen with only a breakfast bar intervening.

The woman had chosen to make a stand in the kitchen. She gripped a telephone in one hand and a butcher knife in the other.

Harlo stood at the threshold between rooms, trying to decide if a twentysomething housewife in too cute, sailor-suit pajamas would really have the nerve to gut him alive.

She brandished the knife as she shouted into the phone. “He’s inside, he’s right *here!*”

Past her, on a far counter, smoke poured from a toaster. Some kind of pop-up pastry had failed to pop. It smelled like strawberries and smoldering rubber. The lady was having a bad morning.

Harlo threw a bar stool at me and ran out of the family room, toward the front of the house.

Ducking the stool, I said, “Ma’am, I’m sorry about the mess,” and I went looking for Penny’s killer.

Behind me, the woman screamed, “*Stevie, lock your door! Stevie, lock your door!*”

By the time I reached the foot of the open stairs in the foyer, Harlo had climbed to the landing.

I saw why he had been drawn upward instead of fleeing the house: At the second floor stood a wide-eyed little boy, about five years old, wearing only undershorts. Holding a blue teddy bear by one of its feet, the kid looked as vulnerable as a puppy stranded in the middle of a busy freeway.

Prime hostage material.

“*Stevie, lock your door!*”

Dropping the blue bear, the kid bolted for his room.

Harlo charged up the second flight of stairs.

Sneezing out the tickle of chlorine and the tang of burning strawberry jam, dripping, squishing, I ascended with somewhat less heroic flair than John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

I was more scared than my quarry because *I* had something to lose, not least of all Stormy Llewellyn and our future together that the fortune-telling machine had seemed to promise. If I encountered a husband with a handgun, he’d shoot me as unhesitatingly as he would Harlo.

Overhead, a door slammed hard. Stevie had done as his mother instructed.

If he’d had a pot of boiling lead, in the tradition of Quasimodo, Harlo Landerson would have poured it on me. Instead came a sideboard that evidently had stood in the second-floor hall, opposite the head of the stairs.

Surprised to discover that I had the agility and the balance of a monkey, albeit a wet monkey, I scrambled off the stairs, onto the railing. The deadfall rocked past step by step, drawers gaping open and snapping shut repeatedly, as if the furniture were possessed by the spirit of a crocodile.

Off the railing, up the stairs, I reached the second-floor hall as Harlo began to break down the kid's bedroom door.

Aware that I was coming, he kicked harder. Wood splintered with a dry crack, and the door flew inward.

Harlo flew with it, as if he'd been sucked out of the hall by an energy vortex.

Rushing across the threshold, pushing aside the rebounding door, I saw the boy trying to wriggle under the bed. Harlo had seized him by the left foot.

I snatched a smiling panda-bear lamp off the red nightstand and smashed it over Harlo's head. A ceramic carnage of perky black ears, fractured white face, black paws, and chunks of white belly exploded across the room.

In a world where biological systems and the laws of physics functioned with the absolute dependability that scientists claim for them, Harlo would have dropped stone-cold unconscious as surely as the lamp shattered. Unfortunately, this isn't such a world.

As love empowers some frantic mothers to find the superhuman strength to lift overturned cars to free their trapped children, so depravity gave Harlo the will to endure a panda pounding without significant effect. He let go of Stevie and rounded on me.

Although his eyes lacked elliptical pupils, they reminded me of the eyes of a snake, keen with venomous intent, and though his bared teeth included no hooked or dramatically elongated canines, the rage of a rabid jackal gleamed in his silent snarl.

This wasn't the person whom I had known in high school so few years ago, not the shy kid who found magic and meaning in the patient restoration of a Pontiac Firebird.

Here was a diseased and twisted bramble of a soul, thorny and cankerous, which perhaps until recently had been imprisoned in a deep turning of Harlo's mental labyrinth. It had broken down the bars of its cell and climbed up through the castle keep, deposing the man who had been Harlo; and now it ruled.

Released, Stevie squirmed all the way under his bed, but no bed offered shelter to me, and I had no blankets to pull over my head.

I can't pretend that I remember the next minute with clarity. We struck at each other when we saw an opening. We grabbed anything that might serve as a weapon, swung it, flung it. A flurry of blows staggered both of us into a clinch, and I felt his hot breath on my face, a spray of spittle, and heard his teeth snapping, snapping at my right ear, as panic pressed upon him the tactics of a beast.

I broke the clinch, shoved him away with an elbow under the chin and with a knee that missed the crotch for which it was intended.

Sirens arose in the distance just as Stevie's mom appeared at the open door, butcher knife glinting

and ready: two cavalries, one in pajamas, the other in the blue-and-black uniform of the Pico Mundo Police Department.

Harlo couldn't get past both me and the armed woman. He couldn't reach Stevie, his longed-for shield, under the bed. If he threw open a window and climbed onto the front-porch roof, he would be fleeing directly into the arms of the arriving cops.

As the sirens swelled louder, nearer, Harlo backed into a corner where he stood gasping, shuddering. Wringing his hands, his face gray with anguish, he looked at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, not in the manner of a trapped man assessing the dimensions of his cage, but with bewilderment, as though he could not recall how he had come to be in this place and predicament.

Unlike the beasts of the wild, the many cruel varieties of human monsters, when at last cornered, seldom fight with greater ferocity. Instead, they reveal the cowardice at the core of their brutality.

Harlo's wringing hands twisted free of each other and covered his face. Through the chinks in that ten-fingered armor, I could see his eyes twitching with bright terror.

Back jammed into the corner, he slid down the junction of walls and sat on the floor with his legs splayed in front of him, hiding behind his hands as though they were a mask of invisibility that would allow him to escape the attention of justice.

The sirens reached a peak of volume half a block away, and then subsided from squeal to growl to waning groan in front of the house.

The day had dawned less than an hour ago, and I had spent every minute of the morning living up to my name.

THREE

THE DEAD DON'T TALK. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

Harlo Landerson had been taken away by the authorities. In his wallet they had found two Polaroid photos of Penny Kallisto. In the first, she was naked and alive. In the second, she was dead.

Stevie was downstairs, in his mother's arms.

Wyatt Porter, chief of the Pico Mundo Police Department, had asked me to wait in Stevie's room. I sat on the edge of the boy's unmade bed.

I had not been alone long when Penny Kallisto walked through a wall and sat beside me. The ligature marks were gone from her neck. She looked as though she had never been strangled, had never died.

As before, she remained mute.

I tend to believe in the traditional architecture of life and the afterlife. This world is a journey of discovery and purification. The next world consists of two destinations: One is a palace for the spirit and an endless kingdom of wonder, while the other is cold and dark and unthinkable.

Call me simple-minded. Others do.

Stormy Llewellyn, a woman of unconventional views, believes instead that our passage through this world is intended to toughen us for the next life. She says that our honesty, integrity, courage, and determined resistance to evil are evaluated at the end of our days here, and that if we come up to muster, we will be conscripted into an army of souls engaged in some great mission in the next world. Those who fail the test simply cease to exist.

In short, Stormy sees this life as boot camp. She calls the next life "service."

I sure hope she's wrong, because one of the implications of her cosmology is that the many terrors we know here are an inoculation against worse in the world to come.

Stormy says that whatever's expected of us in the next life will be worth enduring, partly for the

sheer adventure of it but primarily because the reward for service comes in our third life.

Personally, I'd prefer to receive my reward one life sooner than she foresees.

Stormy, however, is into delayed gratification. If on Monday she thirsts for a root-beer float, she'll wait until Tuesday or Wednesday to treat herself to one. She insists that the wait makes the float taste better.

My point of view is this: If you like root-beer floats so much, have one on Monday, another on Tuesday, and a third on Wednesday.

According to Stormy, if I live by this philosophy too long, I'm going to be one of those eight-hundred-pound men who, when they fall ill, must be extracted from their homes by construction crew and cranes.

"If you want to suffer the humiliation of being hauled to the hospital on a flatbed truck," she once said, "don't expect me to sit on your great bloated gut like Jiminy Cricket on the brow of the whale, singing 'When You Wish Upon a Star.'"

I'm reasonably sure that in Disney's *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket never sits on the brow of the whale. In fact I'm not convinced that he himself encounters the whale.

If I were to make this observation to Stormy, however, she would favor me with one of those wry looks that means *Are you hopelessly stupid or just being pissy?* This is a look to be avoided if not dreaded.

As I waited there on the edge of the boy's bed, even thinking about Stormy couldn't lift my spirits. Indeed, if the grinning images of Scooby-Doo, imprinted on the sheets, didn't cheer me, perhaps nothing could.

I kept thinking about Harlo losing his mother at six, about how his life might have been a memorial to her, about how instead he had shamed her memory.

And I thought about Penny, of course: her life brought to such an early end, the terrible loss to her family, the enduring pain that had changed their lives forever.

Penny put her left hand in my right and squeezed reassuringly.

Her hand felt as real as that of a living child, as firm, as warm. I didn't understand how she could be this real to me and yet walk through walls, this real to me and yet invisible to others.

I wept a little. Sometimes I do. I'm not embarrassed by tears. At times like this, tears exorcise emotions that would otherwise haunt me and, by their haunting, embitter me.

Even as my vision blurred at the first shimmer of tears not yet spent, Penny clasped my hand in both of hers. She smiled, and winked as if to say, *It's all right, Odd Thomas. Get it out, be rid of it.*

The dead are sensitive to the living. They have walked this path ahead of us and know our fears, our failings, our desperate hopes, and how much we cherish what cannot last. They pity us, I think, and no doubt they should.

When my tears dried, Penny rose to her feet, smiled again, and with one hand smoothed the hair back from my brow. *Good-bye*, this gesture seemed to say. *Thank you, and good-bye.*

She walked across the room, through the wall, into the August morning one story above the front yard—or into another realm even brighter than a Pico Mundo summer.

A moment later, Wyatt Porter appeared in the bedroom doorway.

Our chief of police is a big man, but he isn't threatening in appearance. With basset eyes and bloodhound jowls, his face has been affected by Earth's gravity more than has the rest of him. I've seen him move fast and decisively, but in action and in repose he seems to carry a great weight on his beefy, rounded shoulders.

Over the years, as the low hills encircling our town have been sculpted into neighborhoods of tract houses, swelling our population, and as the meanness of an ever crueler world has crept into the last havens of civility, like Pico Mundo, perhaps Chief Porter has seen too much of human treachery. Perhaps the weight he carries is a load of memories that he would prefer to shed, but can't.

"So here we are again," he said, entering the room.

"Here we are," I agreed.

"Busted patio door, busted furniture."

"Didn't bust most of it myself. Except the lamp."

"But you created the situation that led to it."

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you come to me, give me a chance to figure a way Harlo could entrap himself?"

We had worked together in that fashion in the past.

"My feeling," I said, "was that he needed to be confronted right away, that maybe he was going to do it again real soon."

"Your feeling."

"Yes, sir. That's what I think Penny wanted to convey. There was a quiet urgency about her."

"Penny Kallisto."

"Yes, sir."

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