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PENNSYLVANIA DRAGON

By Stephen Chambers

“Shine’s next Friday?” Matt asked Paul. “Mandy don’t mind?”

Mandy don’t know, Paul thought, and he said, “Yeah.”

They were working the old warehouse on 8th and Oak. Place had been closed dark fourteen years, since almost before the mine closure in ’92 so it didn’t have the same excuse as the rest of Pakard, Pennsylvania. Paul couldn’t remember ever seeing this two story rathouse open for anything other than kids with ten dollar whiskey flasks. Wasn’t much left of it now. They’d opened the roof, hacked up the second floor wrap-around wearing vent masks, and were now breaking down the ground wall. By tomorrow night, the factory would be a shabby lot surrounded by run-down apartments, liquor corners, and the five and dime over on Maple that was still going, though God only knew how. In two weeks, they had another tear-down—the sheriff’s wife wanted that flophouse near Blue River gone before the holidays. No sweat.

“Hey,” Matt called, “turn that radio up already.”

Bruce Springsteen drowned out their conversation, and as he attacked the wall, Paul wondered what Mandy would say about Shine’s. Sure, it was a strip club, but Matt’s bachelor party was supposed to—

“Don’t feed me that line,” Mandy said. They were driving north on state road 6, the F-150’s headlights fuzzy in the nighttime fog. “I know what happens at those parties—you go in for a few drinks, and you come out with some whore on your—”

“It’s a bachelor party, where are we supposed to throw it, at Saint Mark’s?”

At Redhorn Road, Paul turned right, deeper into evergreen forest. He glimpsed a deer through the brush and switched to a lower gear down the slope and around the corner near the Fisher’s Lake. This Ford pick-up knew these roads; Paul could drive ‘em in his sleep.

“So go,” Mandy said, and she squeezed Paul’s hand. “Only don’t catch nothing.”

The crucifix on the rearview swayed as they banked back around the bend of rusted car frames at Bete Smith’s trailer.

Paul smiled. “I was at the bank, after I got off. I think next summer, maybe.” He counted on his fingers at the top of the steering wheel. “You got the house, the wedding, and I know we talked about Atlantic City, but what if we waited? The money’ll be there next May.”

Mandy thought about it. “We’d still be married, in our own place . . .” She kissed him. “Before I’m twenty-five. You sure we can do it?”

“Yeah . . .” He swallowed as they neared a Chevy truck parked in front of his parents’ house. “The hell is this?”

The chicken-man was just leaving. Paul’s Pop watched from the front door of the one level ranch as the chicken-man—wearing a corduroy coat and faded jeans—returned to his red pick-up. Paul eased into the gravel drive, and the chicken-man waved. “How

you doing, Paul? You been working out—we got James Bond over here or what? Hear that son-of-a-bitch Matt is finally getting hitched. That true?”

“Looks like,” Paul said.

The chicken-man hopped into his truck. “You have a good one, Paul. I’ll see your dad next week.”

Next week? Paul and Mandy went to the front door.

“Next week, Pop?”

Pop waved the words away and limped into the den, where Paul’s Ma said, “He was at the tables again today when he should have been running those air conditioners for Mr. Adams.”

“Ah, the way you tell it, I’m always wrong,” Pop said.

Ma noticed Mandy and smiled. “I’m sorry, dear, I didn’t even see you there.”

“Any fool could see she’s with him,” Pop said.

Ma and Mandy went into the kitchen to finish dinner. Loud commercials sang on a grainy television at the far wall. They still hadn’t gotten a set with a remote, so Paul went to twist the dial to silence the volume.

“Now you want to bust my balls?” Pop said.

Everybody paid the chicken-man. Back in the 1930’s, when Pakard started up, the first chicken-man had collected semi-annual dues from the miners along the Blue River, and when they couldn’t pay in cash, he took livestock—‘s where the name came from. Some places maybe he still collected chickens. People who didn’t pay had accidents, lost their houses to fire and flood and twisters that somehow missed the whole rest of Pakard. Without the chicken-man, cars skidded on January ice and those spots on

your cheeks became cancer, and so it had never mattered to Paul who the chicken-man worked for—Pop gave him envelopes once in June, once in December, and sometimes the chicken-man left presents for Paul or honey-baked hams for Ma, and that was that.

“You lose a lot?” Paul asked.

“Nah, I had worse runs. Turn it back up, my show’s starting.”

Paul lowered his voice. “We’re getting married next year.”

Pop stared distantly at the TV. “That’s great, she’s a good girl, ‘cept how are you going to . . .”

“I got it counted out. The money from the jobs—next May will be eight years, and we’ll get that house over on Culbertson.”

Ma and Mandy came in.

“Did he tell you?” Ma asked Pop. “Get up, you old fart. We got to celebrate.”

“Sure we do,” Pop said and took Paul’s shoulder. “Help me get the scotch.”

They went back to Pop’s workroom. Cluttered with flood-soiled boxes and walls of dangling tools—hammers and nails and saws and thirty-eight sized screwdrivers—Pop’s room never felt as rumble tumble as it looked, not to Paul.

Pop found a key on the wall hook and knelt to open the glass corner cabinet where he kept old bottles of anniversary liquors, baseball cards grandpa had left him, and the heavy .45 six-shooter that Paul still thought of as a cowboy gun. Sure, Pop had the twelve gauge at the top of his closet, over the waterheater, alongside the strongbox with the Lugar grandpa brought back from France in 1945, but that six-shooter was the shit. A hand cannon, Pop called it. A peacemaker.

Without looking up from the cabinet, Pop said, “She ain’t pregnant, is she?”

“Nah, we’re waiting.”

“Sure.” Pop barked a laugh, stared at the .45 and bullet boxes. “When’s the last time you went hunting?”

“What?”

“You out of practice?”

“Nah,” Paul said. “With Matt, back in deer season . . .”

“A year ago?”

“Yeah, why?”

Pop rolled up his left sleeve to expose the hairless sheen of puckered scar tissue that snarled from his forearm up to his shoulder. “’s itching me today.”

“Pop, how much you lose?”

“Too much,” Pop said. “You know, that bastard’s going to want more than another arm.”

Paul’s chest shrank a little on his lungs, made it harder to breathe. There’d been an accident in the mine back before he was born. Three other guys died, he’d been told. Pop had escaped with a puffy arm he had to keep out of the sun. But then, twelve hours a day in an Anthracite mine, dragging coal to the breakers, was no way to live safe. Guys had died down there all the time—came with the territory, didn’t it?

Paul said, “Was an accident—”

“Yeah, sure.” Pop shook his sleeve down. “Some accident. Should’ve known he’d want to take more after-later . . .”

“What, the chicken-man—”

“Fuck the chicken-man. You think he’d bury three guys down there and do this shit to me? He lives in Robertsville, your grandpa played bridge with his uncle. Before he was the chicken-man, his name was ‘Ron’, little Ronnie—you think he’d do that when he’s a Goddamn ten year-old? Use your head, numbnuts.” Pop grabbed the scotch, limped for the hall. “Who do you think he collects for?”

The mob, Paul thought. Or for some crooked state police or politicians in Philly. “I don’t know—who?”

“Ah.” Pop snorted. “You’re lucky you ain’t had to grow up yet.”

“Fuck you.”

Pop stopped in the doorway. “What?”

“‘Ain’t had to grow up’? What do you think I been doing?”

“When I was your age,” Pop said, “we had our own place and two cars already.”

“And the mine was open, wasn’t it?”

Ma and Mandy came down the hall.

“What are you boys shouting about?” Ma said. “Come on now—”

“So go somewhere where there’s work then,” Pop said. “You think I’d a sat around in some dumbshit town banging out walls for a living? Sleeping in my old man’s house?”

“Hey,” Ma said. “What are you saying to the boy—you stop that, come in here.”

“Don’t handle me, woman. Get your hand off.” Pop pulled away again, and when Ma reached for him—“Just come in—”—he smacked her into the wall with the back of his hand.

Stunned, Ma slipped to the floor. “You . . .”

“Ah.” Pop stepped over her, and Mandy backed out of his way. “She’s got the right idea. You—” He pointed the scotch bottle at Paul. “—out of my house. I don’t want to know where you go, got it?” He slammed the door behind him.

Paul said, “What . . .”

“I don’t know,” Ma said. “I ain’t never seen him—”

The front door banged open again, and Pop called in, “Paul, move your lemon fucking truck! You blocked me in!”

After spending the night on Mandy’s too-small waterbed in her parents’ finished basement, Paul was back at the warehouse site by daybreak. Pop’s moods were rough sometimes, Paul thought, but he must’a lost bad at the tables. Across the grass median that separated the parking lot from the factory knock-down, there were dry grass holes in the early morning frost. Burning hot today. Since it had closed up in 1992, there’d been a minefire under Pakard. Nobody knew how bad it was, and back in ‘96, when they’d brought out state inspectors, there’d been an official safety notice in the Pakard Times-Journal, and some folks whose houses or backyards stank of sulphur and coal smoke had had to move on account of their kids. The hotspots changed from year to year, and in the wintertime, there were funny-looking bald spots in the eighteen inch snow-drifts that stuck around until late-March.

Back in the 1950’s, when the interstates had side-swiped and split the Pennsylvania hills, they’d missed Pakard by a good twenty miles, and sure, the railroad line still cut through the woods alongside state highway 6 into the center of town, but

when the mine closed up, all those shops and motels and restaurants along Market Street had closed or traded homemade pancakes for \$9.99 liquor. There was only one Shell station on Market and Maple—with a twenty cent mark-up from the gas pumps along the interstate. Too far from Philly or Pittsburgh to attract industry, too distant from the fast-lane highways to draw tourists, Pakard was like a fern brought inside for the winter, slowly dying in the gray light, shedding leaves of rusted cars and barren storefronts.

Most nobody lived downtown in the wood-hill valley now. Amid the parking lots and Blue River bridge still topped by a sign that read Jesus: Coming Soon the only draws were the tables at Sawyer's Restaurant, the discount grocery store, laundromat, post office—closed on Sunday, Monday and Wednesday—Saint Mark's Catholic Church and Shine's Girls on the north-side. Houses and trailers were all upland or in the East Hollow. The closest schools and paychecks were a good thirty miles southeast along interstate 81. Every five years, when the Pakard Times-Journal—a three page weekly pamphlet—sent out housing questionnaires, they revised the local population: most recently, it'd been 781 and falling.

“There he is,” Matt said.

“My old man lost bad at the tables,” Paul said.

“He say how much?”

“Nah.”

That night, Paul called to ask his mother.

“I don't know, Paulie. You know your Pop—stubborn like a mule sometimes.”

She tried to laugh.

The next week was the same. Mandy's parents didn't complain, but on Wednesday night in bed, she asked, "How much longer you think he's going to do this?"

"How should I know?"

The upstairs phone rang. A long heartbeat, it rang again, and they heard Mandy's mom through the ceiling, "Hello?" A pause. "I am so sorry. Yes, if there's anything Yes, we understand. My heart just goes out to you, it really does. Sure, just one second . . ." The door at the top of the basement stairs opened, and Mandy's mother called, "Paul, come up here a minute."

He didn't move, and Mandy nudged him.

"Paul?"

So long as I don't get up, I don't know, Paul thought.

"Yeah ma, he's coming," Mandy said. "Go on, lazy ass."

"Yeah."

At the wake on Thursday, most everybody cried, and at the funeral on Friday, Ma clenched Paul's hand as Pop's casket went into the ground, and three gunners in full uniform fired into the air while bagpipes played. They folded the American flag, gave it to Ma on behalf of a grateful nation—Pop got bit in the right thigh by a quarter-size shrapnel flake in Vietnam. Ma just quietly wept throughout. Paul was okay until the gunfire—for some reason, the moment they raised those rifles and snapped off the shots all the numb disbelief folded right over and spilled down his cheeks. When the ceremony ended, they left the little cemetery-tent, and Paul drove them home. More flowers and fruitbaskets were tucked behind the screen door.

The wake had been closed casket: the wreck had been a bad one. Without a seat belt on, he'd been thrown straight through the front windshield. He'd been doing eighty-five at least, the police said, hit that big pine tree head-on, so that it split the '95 Ford Escort straight down the middle, like a knife through a piece of bread.

"I think I need to sleep," Ma said after Paul shut the front door. "You done good, both of you. Go out and get a bite."

Reluctantly, they left her, and back in the truck, Mandy said, "Want you to go to that titty party tonight?"

He'd forgotten. "Nah."

As Paul backed out, she said, "It ain't your fault."

He switched gears. "Never thought it was."

"Hey sweetie, I'm Rose." She shook her hair onto her chest in golden curls and held the back of his chair to lean close enough that he smelled her sweat and woodfire perfume, felt the heat of her skin through the half-open shirt, saw a string of silver mardi gras beads above the pearl-curl of her breasts in that red bikini top loop-tied with long, fabric-ears dangling down her suntanned belly to a checkered miniskirt riding high on her hips; she eased onto his lap, rolled her hips with the bouncing, stringy music. A voice whispered a Spanish phrase behind the underwater drums and hypnotic guitar.

Shine's was dark, the red and purple lights tracking the girls onstage. It was late; Paul was drunk, and he'd lost sight of Matt and the guys in the smoky haze. Rose slipped her shirt off her shoulders, let it fall so he could look at her breasts and the bead-necklace. "You ain't John Schmidt's boy, are you?"

“Yeah,” he said.

“I thought you looked like him.” She untied her bikini, and it fell away from hard, perfect nipples.

“My Pop . . .”

“Yeah, he comes in here all the time. What’s wrong, honey?”

Paul swallowed. The room was spinning. “He’s—he came in here?”

“Sure he does,” she said.

As far as Paul knew, Pop had never been to a strip club, spent his time away from the hardware store with old Phil and a few brews, or at the tables over on 6th—always at those fucking tables, except maybe he hadn’t been. He’d been here instead. Rose’s nails bit into Paul’s wrist—she was staring past him, at a man in a coat.

“You can’t come in here,” Rose murmured. “’s my territory.”

The Mexican song rattled and throbbed over the man’s voice, and she released Paul’s hand, said, “Your father’s dead?”

Paul turned: the chicken-man was smiling.

“Yeah,” Paul said.

“I’m sorry,” Rose said. “I didn’t know.”

“Thanks honey,” the chicken-man said. “I won’t be long with your pal here. Move along now.”

She picked up her clothes and gave Paul a final, uncomfortable look—the look folks use when they leave their dog at the vet’s.

The chicken-man pulled up a chair. “You want a beer?”

Paul told the nervous pulse in his chest to calm down. “Nah, ‘s fine.”

“Sorry about your dad—that was too bad. Stand-up guy, your dad. Sometimes though, ah hell, I don’t need to tell you—sometimes your dad could be a real ball-buster, you know? Thing is, Paul, much as I loved your dad, not everything was settled between us. Guess he told you he’d been losing at the tables, right? Still has a tab, you know, and if it were me, I’d say, ‘God rest his soul. What’s done is done, right?’ But, problem is, Paul, it ain’t just me. You understand? Thought you would. You’re a smart fucking guy. Your dad got in over his head—it happens to lots of good people, and so we just got to go from here, right?”

“How much did he owe?” Paul asked.

“Hey,” the chicken-man called to a waitress in lingerie. “Get us some Buds over here, would you beautiful?”

“How much?” Paul asked again.

The chicken-man shrugged. “Fifteen grand.”

Paul’s stomach clenched. He was going to be sick, and the chicken-man saw it coming. “Hey, hey—don’t you fall over on me.”

By the end of the year, Paul would have eleven thousand dollars in his savings account. He’d have twelve by next May. Eight years of stashing and storing and staying home at night because every restaurant bill, every new shirt was ten, fifteen bucks they could be saving. Twelve grand would be enough for the wedding and a fat down payment on the house on Culbertson, it was enough to start a new life, to start a family.

“Your beers,” the waitress said.

“Thanks, you keep that.” The chicken-man gave her a ten. “Sounds like a lot,” he told Paul. “But it ain’t—not really.”

Paul wondered how many chickens fifteen grand could buy. “I don’t believe you. How could he run up that big a tab?”

The chicken-man smiled. “He did, Paul. Don’t do no good to wonder why he did what he did. Your mom still has the Buick, don’t she? That’s a 2001, only a few years. You got a savings account? Maybe for you and Mandy—planning for the future, that’s good.” The chicken-man lowered his voice, his eyes empty and disinterested, as if Paul were a stuck door handle. “I told him you’d be smart, that you understand consequences. I didn’t lie, did I Paul?”

Paul shivered, looked away. “Nah.”

“Okay.” The chicken-man clapped Paul’s knee and stood. “I’ll let you get back to your pussy show or whatever, and I’ll see you tomorrow. For two grand, let’s say. So’s he knows the rest is coming. Enjoy the beer.”

When he left, the song ended, and Matt sat beside Paul.

“There he is. Where’ve you been, asshole?”

“Right here,” Paul said.

“You get a lapdance yet?”

“Yeah.”

“Good for you—‘s good you fucking get out. That was some shit with your pop, huh? Six hours in a fucking ditch with birds pecking your eyes and rooting through your guts. Most guys would have died going through the glass is what Andy’s cop friends say, but not your old man—he hung on until they got him in the back of the fucking ambulance. You imagine that? Jesus Christ, I’m fucking drunk, can’t believe I’m getting married tomorrow. Ready to go?”

Paul didn't see Rose anywhere. "Yeah."

"Six hours in the mud—you believe it?"

"No," Paul said. "I can't."

Mandy swirled her morning coffee. "Wish you'd sit down—didn't you sleep none?"

Paul shook his head, hovered behind a kitchen chair. He felt weaker somehow—as if the lack of sleep had sucked some of the marrow from his bones—and he'd sobered up, sure, but that only made things worse. "Fifteen—"

"So maybe it won't be so bad." Mandy didn't look surprised, as if she'd expected something to come along, yank the rug out from under their future. "Just like a loan we got to pay off."

"He wants two today."

"Don't shout unless you want to wake your Ma," Mandy said. "Hey. Look at me—you don't look good. Drank too much, huh? We got the two. My dress is picked out for this afternoon."

The wedding was scheduled for two-o'clock. I feel different, Paul thought. Cold—except I ain't cold. After he put on the rented wedding suit, Paul drove out to the crash site, his fingers jumpy on the wheel as he searched the treeline. He pulled over, hopped out. Should be here, right? He looked up and down the empty woods. Yeah, this was it. There. One of the trees near the road was checked with narrow gashes, like somebody'd taken a bowey knife to it. The cuts weren't deep: tough fucking tree. Paul stepped to the lip of a ditch with a dry creekbed at the bottom. He'd known he wouldn't

find nothing; police had done their job and cleared it all away, but a part of him had hoped to discover something—a glass sliver, shirt-shred, something he could pick out of the pine needle-mud and take home. Some proof that Pop had died here. Not going to happen, though.

Wait. He knelt, cleared a patch of crumbly leaves and found a silver pellet, a bead. Was heavier than it looked. Huh. So Pop did visit . . .

A Chevy truck came around the bend, slowed on the shoulder. Smiling, the chicken-man killed the engine, and stepped out.

“Hey Paul, you got something for me?”

“Nah,” Paul said. “Ain’t had time yet.”

“What are you doing here so dressed up?” The chicken-man walked to the back of his truck. “Give me a hand with this.”

Paul joined him, and the chicken-man pulled down the rear guard: Matt was tied up in his tuxedo, duct tape over his mouth. When the chicken-man hopped into the flat-bed, Matt looked wide-eyed at Paul, trembling and shaking his head.

“The fuck is this?” Paul said.

“Nothing,” the chicken-man said, and he grabbed Matt by the armpits.

“Let him go . . .”

The chicken-man kicked Matt out the back to the hard gravel, jumped down.

“What’s that in your hand?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” the chicken-man repeated, and he sat Matt up. “Don’t look like nothing. Looks like a titty-bead to me.” He went to the passenger door, returned with a

red gasoline can. His tuxedo scuffed and dirt-streaked, Matt murmured into the tape, tears on his cheeks.

“Jesus,” Paul said. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Where’s the two grand I asked for?”

“I didn’t—”

“Didn’t get it. Yeah, I see that. You think you’re James Bond, think you can go at the boss with a fucking titty bead?” The chicken-man uncorked the gas can and dumped it on Matt’s head.

“No . . .” Paul checked the road. Where were the fucking cars?

The chicken-man tossed away the empty can, and as Matt hunched forward in terrified sobs, dripping with gasoline, the chicken-man said, “I asked you for two. Look at me, Paul. I told him how smart you are, and do you bring me the money? No, you bring a bead.” He slapped it out of Paul’s hand—the bead disappeared into the woods. “You talk to the virgin again—you take anything from her—and that won’t be your jerk-off drinking buddy . . .” He indicated gas-drenched Matt. “It’ll be Mandy or your Ma, understand?”

“Don’t threaten—”

“Shut up.” The chicken-man snapped his fingers, and Matt burst into yellow flame, convulsing.

“Oh Jesus.”

The chicken-man snapped again, and tree roots snared Paul’s boots. “I only want two,” the chicken-man said. “You didn’t have time this morning, I understand.”

Paul's stomach heaved, and his knees bucked. He wanted to swing at the chicken-man, but he couldn't move for the roots on his ankles—impossible, but there they were. Paul closed his eyes, smelled cooking hair.

The chicken-man said, "Get in your truck."

The roots released his ankles, and Paul stumbled into the road, as his best friend burned alive. Not armed, Paul thought. The chicken-man ain't—

"Just get in the truck, Paul."

Paul did as he was told, hands heavy on the steering wheel. He couldn't move, couldn't start to think. That's the chicken-man. You don't—the chicken-man knocked on the window, and Paul cranked it down.

"Tonight at six," the chicken-man said. "Sound good?"

"Yeah."

"Drive safe."

Hands shaking—Matt was still burning in the rear view—Paul keyed the ignition, pulled away. When the road was empty behind him, Paul jerked onto the shoulder and fell on his knees to vomit. What's wrong with me? Go back. Go—but he couldn't. He drove north, found a spot in front of Shine's, and when he slapped down the ten dollar entry fee, asked the bouncer for Rose.

At midday, Shine's was empty except for the girl onstage and a few old-timers on stools. They brought Rose out of the back, and when she saw Paul, she paled. "You shouldn't be here."

"The fuck is going on?" Paul said.

The bouncer pushed him. “Watch your mouth.”

Rose said, “Buy me a drink.” Paul did, and she straightened his hair. “You seen something bad?”

“Why’s he care about your beads?”

She pulled her hand back. “Who?”

“Yeah, who,” Paul said. “He called you ‘the virgin’—the hell were you doing with my Pop?”

“Lower your voice.”

“I found one of those beads where my Pop died—he have it with him when he crashed?”

“Maybe,” she said.

“Why?”

“I gave it to him. Your dad lost a lot at the tables.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. Drink your beer, honey.” She touched his hand, and even that—even now—made him hard. “Your Pop was a good man,” she said. “Lousy at poker, though.”

“What’d my Pop lose? You said—”

“His soul, honey.” She sipped her beer. “That enough for you?”

Paul stared at the waves of cigarette smoke in the lights and said, “Don’t fuck with me.”

“I ain’t,” she said. “The boss came over from the old country, and yeah, maybe your dad wasn’t exactly clean, but a soul’s a soul. It’s how he’s still alive, as old as he

is—just like me.” Rose smiled. “Honey, we both eat life, each in our own way—it’s the bit of him I got from our time together.”

“You and the chicken-man—”

“Not the chicken-man—the big guy.” She rubbed his arm. “You’re a sweetie, ain’t you? Little dense, but you’re a man like your dad. You shouldn’t come here, I took enough of you already.”

“What?”

“Think you weighed the same after you left yesterday? I can’t help it—it’s what happens, what I got from him.”

“I don’t—”

“I suck your soul, dear.”

He fidgeted with the beer bottle. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. So does he, but it ain’t the same. They offered me to him in the old country, you understand, back when things were different.” She jiggled her bead necklace. “What do you think these are—plastic? We’re like that chink diagram, what is it—yin yang? Light and dark; same thing, different shades. He’s changed so much, and I—nobody—can reason with him now. You understand?”

“No.”

“He’s a demon, honey—well, not really, but you get the idea, and his livelihood went south with the rest of this one-horse town. They used to lose miners every other year. Where do you think they went—what do you think he eats?”

Paul stared at her. Made about as much sense as everything else, didn’t it?

“Here.” She took off her necklace, unhooked the latch and gave him one of the beads. “You lose that, like your Pop did, and . . . look, just don’t lose it.”

“This’ll—what, protect me?”

She put her necklace back on, shrugged. “Yeah, maybe. But I’d carry a gun too. You should go, sweetie. You’ll need everything you got—I don’t want to take more than I have to.”

“Why’d he call you ‘the virgin’?”

She smiled. “Why do you think?”

It was almost six-o-clock. After Matt was a no-show at the wedding ceremony—the parents were furious, the bride hysterical, but Paul kept his mouth shut—Paul quietly took out the two thousand from his savings in a wad of fifties and twenties. He found a manila envelope in Pop’s workroom and stuffed the cash inside.

“I’m fine, Ma,” Paul said.

“So who’re you seeing?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody is who that’s for?” The doorbell rang. “That’s him?” Ma said, starting for the door.

“Ma, no—come on,” Mandy said, but she couldn’t stop her.

Ma opened the door and paled. “Oh.”

“Mrs. Schmidt, you feeling well? This is for you.” The chicken-man handed her a basket of chocolates. “Best kind you can get ‘round here—my wife swears by ‘em.”

“Thank you,” Ma said. “You want to see my son?”

Paul came out, and Ma backed away, saying, “We’ll leave you boys alone.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

When the front door closed, Paul said, “Was nice—about the chocolates.”

“Your mom eat chocolates? Didn’t know. Some broads can’t eat ‘em on account of the sugar or something.” The chicken-man nodded. “That for me?” Paul gave him the envelope, and the chicken-man eyed the cash, shut it again. “Told him you were smart, Paul. How much you figure you can afford—a grand a month too much? Won’t be easy, but you can keep it up so as the boss is convinced not to add no interest. That’s fair, right? That way you keep your savings, your mom keeps the Buick, and in thirteen months, you’re clean, back to zero.”

Paul looked up from the envelope. He wanted to say that there would be no more payments—even that two grand there was too much, more than he should ever pay. Get off my lawn and drive away, chicken-man, or I call the cops.

“That sound good, Paul?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought it would.”

“Where’s Matt?”

The chicken-man started back for his truck. “Tell your mom to enjoy those chocolates, all right? I’ll see you on the fifteenth.”

As the chicken-man climbed in, Paul went back inside. Mandy and Ma got up in the den.

“He gone?” Mandy asked.

Paul nodded, and Ma said, “Everything all right, Paulie? If you’re in some kind of trouble, you tell me.”

Paul went back to Pop’s workroom, grabbed the keyring from its wall hook, and opened the side cabinet.

“Paul.” Mandy came over as he grabbed the .45 six-shooter and a box of bullets. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” he said and pocketed the bullets. The gun was heavy in his right hand. “Go on.”

There were frightened tears in her eyes, but she didn’t cry. He kissed her.

“Come on baby,” she murmured. “Please put it back.”

“Can’t.” He jerked away, toward the door. “Won’t be long.”

He slipped the unloaded pistol into the front of his jeans under his t-shirt, then stopped at the front door. Ma was watching from the den.

“Paul?” she said.

“Yeah Ma, I’ll be back soon. Just going out for some air.”

“Mandy going with you?”

He opened the door. “Nah, she’s tired.”

“I love you, boy.”

“Love you too, Ma.”

He went to his truck, set the gun and bullet-box on the passenger seat, and backed out. Down state road 6, Paul switched off the brights when he passed a state trooper heading up. Without moving his hand from the wheel, the cop waved with two fingers,

and Paul waved back. He glanced at the gun and turned onto the curl that took him into town.

Sawyer's Restaurant was lit up, the parking lot full. There was the chicken-man's Chevy, tucked in the center of the lot, between more pick-ups. When a little Jap car pulled away at the back, Paul took the spot, switched off the engine, but he didn't get out. He rolled the window down and took a breath of clean air, told his pulse to slow. Couples filtered out of Sawyer's laughing or smoking, driving off in red tail lights. He watched people leave for hours, until only the chicken-man's truck remained. Perfect.

Finally, the chicken-man came out, locked up the back exit. His hands suddenly shaking again, Paul jammed bullets into each of the six-shooter's chamber holes. One bullet, two. The chicken-man started for his truck, hunched against the late-night chill. Three, four, five. He hadn't noticed Paul. Six bullets. Paul weighed the pistol in his right hand, opened the door, and slammed it—the chicken-man looked up, thirty feet from his own truck, fifty feet from Paul.

“Who's that?” the chicken-man called.

“Just me,” Paul said, and he walked fast across the lot.

“Paul? What you got there?”

Paul walked past the pick-up, and now the chicken-man backed up a step, eyes on the .45.

“Paul—”

“Stay right there.” Paul stopped out of arm's length, the gun aimed at the chicken-man's face. “Where's the envelope?”

“Money's long-gone, Paul. You're smart, I told him—”

“Nah, I ain’t that smart,” Paul said. “Where’s Matt?”

“Ain’t here neither.”

“Let’s see.”

As the chicken-man watched the pistol, Paul could see the traps and switches catching inside his head. “You know what a mistake this is?” the chicken-man said. “Put it down, drive away, and I’ll forget this. Just go back to your truck.”

Paul gestured to Sawyer’s rear exit. “Walk.”

“Paul—”

“You want to get shot?” Paul said. “Let’s go—move!”

The chicken-man’s expression slackened again with that apathetic edge Paul told himself he’d imagined at Shine’s. “Been talking to the virgin, huh? Thought you were smarter than that.”

“Hands up.”

The chicken-man whistled. “Look at you. Watched too many movies, right? It’s all about strength, Paul—muscle. Ain’t got shit to do with good and evil, no matter what she told you. You don’t know your own strength. You’re weak.”

They went inside, and Paul flipped the wall switch: a closed restaurant-bar with upturned stools and chairs. Somebody’d left a mop near a door marked Private—
Employees Only.

“So—what now?” the chicken-man said. “Get that gun out of my face already.”

Paul didn’t lower the gun. “Let’s go in there.”

“Ain’t nothing—”

Paul walked him to the door. “Open it anyway.”

The chicken-man did: they were at the top of a carpeted staircase that dropped between cement walls to a thicker Private door.

“Go on,” Paul said.

At the bottom, the chicken-man glanced back, sorting through the key-ring.

“Really think your money’s down here? Go back, Paul.”

No, too late now. “Open it up,” Paul said.

The chicken-man watched him. “You sure?”

“What’s in there?”

“Not your money.”

“Let’s see.”

The chicken man pressed the door wide, and something rustled in the darkness.

“Hit the light,” Paul said.

“Yeah,” the chicken-man said, and he clicked a wall switch. Phosphorescent strips buzzed in white hospital light: the office floor was carpeted yellow, the walls and ceiling were bomb shelter cement, there was an elevator on the opposite wall, behind the desk, and there were ceramic lamps on the tables and two on the desk with old newspapers, folders, a typewriter, a leather whip, and . . . Jesus—

“The fuck is this?” Paul said.

Two nude women slumped in the far corners, duct tape over their eyes, red ball gags in their mouths, their wrists handcuffed to wall-chains. The women shifted when they heard Paul’s voice—the brunette on the left was young with small breasts and bruised legs, the woman on the right was big, her pale body criss-crossed with red stripes and cigarette burns.

“You . . .”

“Turn around,” the chicken-man said. “Walk out.”

There were framed photographs on every wall. The chicken-man posed in all of them, grinning, sometimes in sunglasses, sometimes in sweat-stained muscle shirts. He posed over a ditch of disfigured corpses, over a woman in a bathtub with bloody stumps for hands, over a rack of fly-covered heads.

Straining to keep the pistol steady, Paul said, “Let ‘em go.”

“Suppose I unlock them . . .” The chicken-man led Paul around the desk. “Where they going?”

“Shit.”

Neither of the women had feet. Their ankle-stumps were wrapped with tight bandages and tape. The younger girl started to tremble and murmur through her gag.

“It’s all right,” the chicken-man told her. “Nothing’s going to happen.” He turned to Paul. “You want to go back now.” Not a question.

“Unlock ‘em.”

The chicken-man knelt over the girl and ran a hand through her hair. “Not good and evil, Paul. Just muscle is all.” He clicked a key into her handcuff to open the clamp. The girl’s wrists were discolored, swollen.

“Her mouth . . .”

The chicken-man untied her ballgag, and when it came out, she yelped—she didn’t have any teeth and no tongue.

“Get that tape off her.”

As the chicken-man pulled at the edge of her eye-tape, she moaned, but she didn't try to get up. The tape peeled off to expose two scabby holes.

“Happy?” the chicken-man said.

“What did you do . . . ?”

The chicken-man laughed, startled. “You think I did this? Come on, what kind of sick bastard you think I am?”

“Those pictures—”

“Think I'm self-employed?” The chicken-man glanced at the elevator door. “You and I—and them—we live by his fucking grace, understand? He's older than this shit town, than this shit country. There's worse things can happen than death. You thought about your mom, 'bout Mandy?”

That did it.

Paul whipped his pistol across the chicken-man's forehead, and the girl giggled in a hideous curl of bloody gums and eyesockets. Paul lowered the gun to the chicken-man's face.

“Wait Paul . . .”

The girl shrieked in a jolt that knocked Paul backwards to the edge of the desk, a hand to his skull. His forehead cracked and bleeding, the chicken-man went for the elevator: the doors dinged open, and as Paul staggered against the wailing—“Stop screaming . . .”—the elevator closed. The girl quieted. The big woman rattled and fought with her chains, and Paul jabbed the elevator button. The doors opened again: empty. He got in, tapped the lower button marked B, and the doors shut. The room

shuddered and dropped. Paul tapped the pistol. The doors opened. A rock-wall mine shaft curled away in the flicker of wall lamps. Go back, Paul told himself. Chicken-man's gone. Leave him. No: I walk away, and he comes for Mandy or Ma like he did with Matt—no. Paul stepped off, the elevator shut behind him. Box speakers were rigged beside the wall lamps—an intercom?

Gun raised, Paul crept down the mine shaft, slowed as he neared a corner, and spun around—nothing. He pivoted around another corner, and as he crept deeper, the air tightened, smelled of smoke. Go back. Paul reached a two-way intersection: left or right. Both paths were lit, no way to know. He went left, and, gun still ready, Paul turned another corner—the chicken-man lunged from the shadows, and Paul jerked the pistol up—“Don't you—”—and blasted a hole in the chicken-man's chest. The .45 bucked hard enough to twist Paul's wrist, and in the acrid smoke, the chicken-man sprawled with the ends of his wet ribs gaping through his shirt. The walls, the floor, Christ, even the ceiling was slick with blood.

Paul caught the rock-wall, arms tingly with adrenaline. That was it—it was over. I shot him. Paul shook his arms to loosen the muscles, told his heart to slow down. The lamps went black, came back on.

“. . . what is your name? is your name?”

Paul looked. Nobody there, but the lamps sputtered again. The speakers? There were shadows inside the walls. He started back—but what were those . . . there were people in the rock. A grim, bearded man, his nude body emaciated, watched from inside the stone, and as Paul ran faster, he passed another man, and now a boy with sad eyes, and an elderly woman with her hands raised, reaching for him. Not real, just get out.

“What is your name? is your name?” the voice echoed again.

Paul slowed, raised the pistol. Shriveled people—a woman frozen in tears; a shrunken man covering his face with both hands; a screaming toddler—surrounded him, just inside the walls, as if the rock were translucent plastic.

“What’s your name?” Paul said.

Something laughed in an earthquake-shudder. Matt was locked inside the rock, his features shadowed with famine. The lamps stayed on.

“You will work for me? for me?” the voice said. “His room will be yours, you will collect. collect. You will be paid whatever you ask. you ask.”

“I ain’t no chicken-man.”

“You refuse? refuse?”

Paul took another step, and something shuddered—it jump-started the speakers, and music came on: an electronic beat and a woman’s hushed voice: “For your eyes only, can see me through the night . . .”

Around another corner, the tunnel opened into a cavern of wooden wall supports and mounds of gold. Wrong turn.

“For your eyes only, I never need to hide . . .”

Wads of dollar bills were piled aside mountains of gold coins and geometric gold-bar towers; there were diamond-piles; Middle Eastern statues of kings and lions and cat-beasts with human heads, all gold. Paul stared. The music echoed; the lights went out.

“You can see so much in me, so much in me that’s new . . .” Piano taps: tan! tan!

He turned: flames flared in the tunnel, back-lighting a thick, animal-shape. Paul fired, the pistol kicked, but the monster crept closer.

“I never felt until I looked at youuuuu . . .” Crescendo.

The monster lunged in a blur of scales and muscle and meathook claws—Paul blasted into the mass, and it broke him against the wall.

“For your eyes onlyyyyyy!”

Somehow, he still had the pistol, smelled sulfur, felt heat-breath on his face, raised the gun.

“Only for youuuuu!”

Flames roiled at both ends of the tunnel, the bonfire-heat sharp on his skin. The pistol flashed at the dragon’s belly.

“You see what no one else can see, now I’m breaking free . . .”

The dragon huffed smoke from its nostrils, and its metallic eyes shone like angry gems in the firelight.

“For your eyes onlyyyyyy!”

Paul fired at its head.

“Only for youuuuu!”

As it came at him again, he fired into its face at point blank range—the muzzle-flash lit alligator jaws—and it pinned him to the wall, claws deep in his shoulders. Paul’s face jammed to the rock: Pop was on the other side.

“The love I know you need in me, there to see you freed in me . . .”

Paul wedged the .45 up, pressed to the dragon’s scales and fired—the gun clicked. No—never six fucking shots. No.

The dragon whispered, “Your fear tastes like sugar. sugar . . .”

“Only for youuuuu . . .”

“Wait. wait,” it said. “I know your scent. your scent.” Its claws twisted in his shoulders until his vision blotted. “You are the son of my meal, just there. just there.”

The dragon’s lipless jaws curled into a wolf-smile as it eyed Pop.

“Only for youuuuu . . .”

“He did not know the rules, he thought my pet—the virgin I kept in the Cold Times—could protect him. protect him.”

A long pause of hushed electronic beats mimicking ‘For your eyes only’ . . .

“You are a soft, monkey race. monkey race. Without your tongues and toys, you are cattle. But I do enjoy your pain. pain.”

“For your eyes only . . .”

Paul shifted against the heavy press. Can’t move, and the weight was making it harder to breathe.

“The nights are never cold, you really know me . . .”

“You won’t die. die,” the dragon said. “Not until I have cleaned the last flecks of your soul from your bones. your bones.”

“That’s all I need to know . . .”

It settled back, and Paul felt the swell of furnace-heat through its belly-scales, rising.

“Maybe I’m an open book . . .”

Sulfur-stench washed over him. The dragon smiled again.

“Because I know you’re mine . . .” tan! tan!

Hand down to his pocket—more bullets, maybe . . . It opened its jaws.

“But you won’t need to read between the liiiiiines!”

A silver bead—as the firebreath started, he forced his fist into the dragon’s mouth.

“For your eyes onlyyyyyy!”

It gulped back the flame in a confused snort and sucked the bead down its gullet—the lamps came on, and Paul dropped.

“Only for youuuuu!”

Paul crawled away—the tunnel flames retreated—and the dragon thrashed, foaming, talons splitting the stone.

“You see what no one else can see . . .”

It choked and thrashed. It was wingless, and now, as the color drained, its scales looked dull brown, almost ordinary. The rock walls were blank, the ghosts gone.

“Now I’m breaking free—for your eyes onlyyyyyy!”

Finally, it collapsed, heaving and snorting fire.

“Only for youuuuu!”

Paul stumbled around the corner: there was the elevator.

“The passions that collide in me . . .”

He tapped the button, nothing happened.

“Wild, abandoned side of me . . .”

Limping, his arm already swelling from the dragon’s breath—going to leave a fucking scar—he jammed the button again. Pop smiled from the end of the tunnel.

“Only for youuuuu!”

Pop was gone, never there. The elevator door opened.

“For your eyes onlyyyyyy . . .”

The song thumped and, as the doors closed, the music slowly—mercifully—faded out.

Sawyer's would be Paul's last job. He staggered into the chicken-man's office, helped the tortured women outside to his truck, bought six gallons of gasoline at the Shell station and went back until the place was drenched. Then, as he drove away, burned and bloody—women sleeping in the backseat—he watched Sawyer's explode in the rearview. In front of Shine's, on the way to state road 6, Rose was hunched on the front stoop, head in her hands. Paul didn't slow, heard beads crunch under the tires. She laughing or crying? Didn't matter. He smacked the steering wheel, tasted tears, and drove on.

THE END